

Anti-Christian Violence in Orissa State, India

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CSW conducted a fact-finding visit to Orissa in September 2008. The assessment made in this briefing is based on interviews with victims and eyewitnesses of the violence, NGO leaders from the region, church leaders and members of Hindu civil society.

Current situation in brief

Orissa state has witnessed the worst spate of 'communal violence' ever faced by the Christian community since India gained independence in 1947, including brutal murders, widespread destruction of churches and Christian property and forcible conversions to Hinduism. It has been centred in Kandhamal district, even though it spread to ten districts of the state. The attacks were catalysed by the assassination of Swami Lakhmananda Saraswati, the local figurehead of the radical Hindu nationalist group, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) on 23 August by unknown assailants (believed to be Maoists). By 24 August, mobs were rampaging around the district, setting up roadblocks, shouting Hindu nationalist and anti-Christian slogans, and openly blaming Christians for the killing of Saraswati and calling for revenge, as they launched attacks on Christian targets. The violence continued for at least eight weeks, but has now largely subsided.

It is estimated that at least 50,000 have been displaced. The Catholic church, which has closely monitored the violence, currently reports at least 57 have been killed.¹ The nature of the violence has been extremely brutal, including murders by burning alive and retributive rape. Christians returning to their villages are continuing to face coercion to convert to Hinduism.

Police responses to the violence have been widely criticised, with police refusing to register First Information Reports (FIRs), failing to intervene to stop violence, or in some cases arresting victims instead of the perpetrators.

Root causes of the violence

1. This is the second outbreak of violence against the Christian community in Kandhamal district in a period of nine months. There was no effective prosecutorial or remedial action taken after the attacks in December 2007, despite recommendations made by the National Commission for Minorities. Impunity laid the foundations for this second, more serious outbreak of violence, which has effectively sought the eradication of the Christian community from Kandhamal district. Consistent reports have emerged during the recent violence of chronic police failures to protect the victims from the attacks.
2. The violence should not be construed as the product of natural animosity between Hindus and Christians, but it is the systematic targeting of Christians by proponents of an extremist, nationalist strain of Hinduism, known as Hindutva.² This ideology is propounded by a family of influential Hindu nationalist organisations in India, known as the Sangh Parivar, of which the VHP is effectively an agency for grassroots mobilisation, the national opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the political front, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is the ideological mentor. The development of this ideology drew heavily on early twentieth-century German ethnic nationalism, and is based on the proposition that to be an Indian citizen is to be Hindu.
3. Proponents of Hindutva have portrayed the violence in part as a response to alleged conversions by 'force' or 'inducement' carried out by Christians in the region, and Catholic social services for the poor have been targeted using this rhetoric. However, no evidence has been adduced in support of these allegations, and many who fled have indicated that they are at least third-generation Christians, not recent converts. Despite the fact that Article 25 of the Indian Constitution protects the freedom to 'profess, practise and propagate religion', a senior spokesman of the BJP has indicated that restrictions on conversions are the solution to this

¹ At least one Hindu is known to have died in the violence: this was a young female employee at a Catholic orphanage, who died in the arson attack on that institution. The exact number of deaths is unknown as yet, owing largely to disappearances and allegations of killings which cannot be verified.

² Prominent Hindus committed to a secular, multi-faith society in India have strongly decried the violence.

problem. Conversely, Christians remaining in or returning to their villages have faced coercive conversions to Hinduism. On 27 August, a Catholic catechist was forcibly converted by members of a mob, holding an axe to his neck, and he has since been repeatedly escorted to a Hindu temple for worship. A large number of reports of forced conversions to Hinduism have subsequently emerged, and continue to emerge.

4. Although ethnic and economic factors played a role in the violence, we do not consider these to be the primary causes. Academic studies on the transmission of Hindu nationalism in rural areas have indicated that two of the most successful strategies include the portrayal of Muslims or Christians as a 'threatening other', and the attachment of local issues or grievances to a wider nationalist agenda. This analysis is consistent with the verdict given by the government-appointed National Commission for Minorities in its report after the December 2007 anti-Christian violence in the region. As such, the violence is not primarily ethnic tension between Scheduled Castes (SCs or Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), as suggested by some analyses: although the majority of Christians belong to the Dalit Pana community, the attacks carried out after the assassination of Saraswati were systematically targeted at Christians in both communities and the relief camps are populated by Christians (including church leaders) representing both communities. Neither was the violence primarily born out of economic disenfranchisement: although Kandhamal is a highly impoverished district, the poverty simply provided a context for the radicalisation of one community against another.

Reactions of international governments

The quickest reaction of any foreign government came within a week from Italy: Prime Minister Berlusconi described the attacks as 'unacceptable'. On 24 September, a European Parliament resolution was passed, expressing 'deep concern at the recent attacks on Christians in Orissa' and calling on the state and national authorities 'to do all in their power fully to protect the Christian minority'. President Sarkozy criticised the Indian government over the violence at the EU-India Summit on 29 September, describing it as a 'massacre' of Christians. A resolution was introduced in the US House of Representatives on 26 September, 'Condemning the recent religious and calling on the Government of India to stop the violence and address its root causes'.

Recommended actions

1. With reference to the ruling of the Supreme Court in Writ Petition no. 68 of 2008, police should unfailingly assist victims of violence to submit FIRs, and reports of police officers failing to register cases should be prosecuted;
2. The State government should supply a substantial number of investigating officers and public prosecutors, and a fast-track court should expedite prosecutions and convictions;
3. Ongoing forcible conversions of Christians to Hinduism should be publicly condemned in a government statement, and should be investigated and prosecuted under the provisions of the Indian Penal Code;
4. An investigation into the assassination of Swami Lakhmananda Saraswati and the subsequent anti-Christian violence should be carried out by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), paying specific attention to the root causes of this violence, including the propagation of anti-Christian hatred;
5. Extremist groups found guilty of the incitement and perpetration of the violence should be banned;
6. A more comprehensive package of compensation should be announced for those who have been displaced, including covering the loss of crops, livestock and employment;
7. Independent humanitarian relief agencies should be invited into the region and guaranteed security to assist with the relief effort;
8. Permission and security should be granted to lawyers and priests to visit relief camps in Kandhamal.