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Indian Christians charged with 'hurting religious sentiments' by handing out Easter tracts



The Christians were released on bail late in the evening on 3 April, two days after their arrest on Easter Sunday (World Watch Monitor)

By Tejaswi Ravinder

World Watch Monitor (05.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2HkBfKl> - Four Christians, including the wife of a church leader, have been charged with "hurting religious sentiments" after they handed out Christian tracts during an Easter procession in India's southern Telangana state.

Rayapuri Jyothi, 38, Meena Kumari, 52, Mahima Kumari, 35 and Bagadam Sudhakar, 45, were taken into custody by police in the state capital, Hyderabad, at around 5.30 pm on Easter Sunday following a complaint by the leader of a local group affiliated with the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. They were later charged and released on bail on Tuesday, 3 April.

Jakkula Vinay Kumar, the patron of the Hindu Jana Shakti group, alleged the 20-25 Christians taking part in the march had entered the slum in the Dayarguda area of the city and attempted to convert the uneducated people there to Christianity.

But the Christians' lawyer, Sudheer Kumar, told World Watch Monitor his complaint was only lodged after the Christians had already gone to the police to file their own complaint against Hindu Jana Shakti members, whom they accused of abusing them as they handed out the gospel tracts, which they were given permission to do by the local police.

Assistant Commissioner of Police Bhujanga Rao confirmed to local media that the Christians – members of New Blessings Church – had been given permission to hand out the tracts as part of their Easter procession.

"On the eve of Easter, yesterday, Christian brethren celebrating Easter in Dayarguda area were opposed by some men from distributing gospel tracts," he told local media on Easter Monday.

"With permission from the police, we [the church] took out a peaceful procession, singing hymns, distributing tracts around our area," one female church member said in a video that circulated on social media. "When we were about to wind up and return back to the church premises, in the last moment, they [Hindu Jana Shakti members] attacked four Christians, and we went running back to their rescue.

"[The men] physically attacked the Christian youth and misbehaved with the women, and even tried to apply vermilion [a cosmetic powder] to the pastor's wife." (Vermillion is traditionally worn by married Hindu women, and only their husbands are permitted to apply it for them.)

She added that when she told the men they had obtained permission from the police, they grabbed her hand and ripped the bangles from it, shouting at her: "Do you know the law?" She said they then tore up the letter of permission she showed them, and started beating up some of the young Christian men in the group.

Some of the other church members told World Watch Monitor the men had said to them: "How dare you promote a religion! Will you also accept if we apply vermilion [a Hindu custom] to your forehead?"

"When we [Christians] resisted, they [Hindu Jana Shakti] paid no heed," the church members told World Watch Monitor. "They called the women prostitutes and the Christians 'children born out of prostitution', and many such extremely foul words in the Telugu language spoken in the area."

"We submitted a complaint to the police narrating the incident," the leader of the church, who wished only to be identified as Andrew, told World Watch Monitor. "But they [Hindu Jana Shakti] ran ahead of us, to try to be first to give a complaint."

In the First Information Report (FIR) lodged by the Christians, the Hindus were accused of assault, criminal intimidation, promoting enmity between classes and using force against a woman with the intention to “outrage” her modesty.

“The Hindutva elements are targeting small churches because we are weak, with less members, and also we don’t usually get the high level support from Christian leaders from all frontiers.”

The police assistant commissioner confirmed that three of the Hindu Jana Shakti members had been arrested, including its president Lalith Kumar.

A local source, who requested anonymity, told World Watch Monitor that several politicians from the Hindu nationalist BJP – Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s party – came to the police station to give their support to Kumar and pressure police to file a counter-FIR against the Christians.

“The police filed the FIR against the Christians without any evidence, but only because of the pressure,” the source said.

“What happens is the accused side will now try to silence the voice of witnesses, by threatening them, and, by hook or crook, they will see that no witness appears before the court during the trials, and with no witnesses or evidence, the benefit of doubt goes in the favour of the accused, resulting in their acquittal,” a legal expert, who did not wish to be named, told World Watch Monitor.

Police Inspector Prasanna Kumar remained unavailable for comment.

“Since the Christians were arrested post the court hours, I went to the magistrate’s house to release them on bail on 3 April,” the Christians’ lawyer, Sudheer Kumar, explained.

“The next day [4 April], we furnished the bail procedure. To safeguard themselves from the accusations, [the Hindus] filed a complaint against the Christians. All the BJP top cadre were at the police station, and have ensured the registration of [the] FIR.

“That evening after their [Hindu Jana Shakti] leaders were released on bail, they went to the church and threatened the Christians; I rushed to the police station and filed another FIR against them [which included charges on outraging the modesty of women].

He said they had used their contacts within the BJP to file the charges.

Pastor Andrew told World Watch Monitor that he and his church members were being spied on by members of the Hindu group and that he had received death threats. He said he is “very scared”, that he fears his phone is tapped and that he was told he would be killed “soon”.

“The Hindutva [hardline Hindu] elements are targeting small churches because we are weak, with less members, and also we don’t usually get the high level support from Christian leaders from all frontiers,” Pastor Andrew said.

“The reason the pastor and the church members are being threatened is they don’t want anyone to speak up when the matter is presented before the court,” lawyer Kumar added.

Six Christians injured following Hindu attack over baby's burial

World Watch Monitor (05.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2FhEdxc> - Six Christians were badly injured and a house torched in an attack by Hindu extremists in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, following the death and burial of a Christian baby.

The incident occurred on 27 February in Tangaguda, a town in Malkangiri District, where three Christian families live alongside 35 Hindu families, a local source told World Watch Monitor.

After one of the Christian families lost their two-year-old daughter, they prepared for her burial but were opposed by Hindus who demanded that the girl be buried outside the village, the source said.

The bereaved family explained to them that they would bury the child on land they owned, the source said, but the Hindus reportedly only allowed them go ahead after they paid them the equivalent of around US \$80.

'Hatred and discrimination'



A child was among those injured (Photo: World Watch Monitor)

World Watch Monitor was told that that same night, after they had buried the little girl, approximately 30 Hindu extremists arrived at their home and set it on fire. While the mother, Debe Nande, was able to escape, her husband, Sukra Markhami, and their other daughter, 12-year-old Savitha, were beaten and left unconscious. Savitha sustained a critical head injury.

The source reported that some of the other Christian families who came to help were also attacked. Jaga Markhami, 52, was left with a broken hand while another neighbour, Danga Markhami, 45, sustained a broken leg as he tried to fight off the attackers. Two others were also injured and taken to hospital.

Catholic priest Manoj Kumar Nayak told Agenzia Fides: "In Orissa [the former name for Odisha] there is still hatred and discrimination against Christians, and there are failings to meet the legitimate needs of Christian minorities."

While those injured are being treated in hospital, the other Christians have been taken to a safe place elsewhere, India-based Christian watchdog Persecution Relief reported.

It also said a complaint was filed with the police, who tried to mediate and establish a 'Peace Agreement' between the two parties.

'Deteriorating rapidly'

Christian charity Open Doors International reported that in January 2018 alone there were 78 reports of hate crimes against Christians in India. The recorded cases included one of murder, eight cases of physical violence, six cases of damage to church property and seven cases of forced expulsion from homes.

General secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, Rev. Vijayesh Lal, told World Watch Monitor last month that the situation for Indian Christians was "deteriorating pretty rapidly". He said he feared that "the worst will unfold in 2019", suggesting that there could be a further escalation in anti-Christian violence around the spring elections, stigmatising Christians as a threat to 'Hindu India'.

Last year EFI recorded 352 verified incidences of hate crimes against Indian Christians, making 2017 "one of the most traumatic" years for them in a decade. EFI noted that India's Hindu-nationalist government had acknowledged in Parliament that "communal violence", the term used to define clashes between religious groups, increased 28 per cent over three years to 2017.

It also said that the actual number of incidences was likely to be higher as many cases are not reported because the victims are afraid or the police refuses to register a complaint.

Tamil Nadu continues to lead the way in violent attacks on Christians

By Tejaswi Ravinder

World Watch Monitor (02.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2I3JhXJ> - After a year in which hate crimes against Indian Christians happened at a rate of almost one *verified* incident per day, the state which registered the most incidents in 2017 (over 50) - Tamil Nadu - continues to see outbreaks of violence.

In the first two months of 2018, the United Christian Forum has already counted nine incidents in the southern state, including the mysterious death of Pastor in Kanchipuram District.

Two weeks after that incident, on 4 February, a "house church" in the town of Suleeswaranpatti, in Pollachi Coimbatore District, where Christians had been gathering for 20 years, was attacked by Hindu Munnani activists. Hindu Munnani is a religious and cultural organisation based in the state, formed to defend Hinduism and protect its religious monuments.

A group of ten extremists forced their way into a hall where Christians were holding a Sunday service.

"They shouted slogans demanding us to stop running the church," Pastor Chalamuthu Stephen told World Watch Monitor.

"They damaged the roof of the church and every object in their sight, and issued threats that if we continue gathering as a church, they will kill us," Stephen said. "The Christians got frightened and scattered from there."

"They damaged the roof of the church and every object in their sight, and issued threats that if we continue gathering as a church, they will kill us."

He continued: "The extremists warned us, 'This area is dominated by Hindus. How dare you run a church here! You can go to America or any foreign land and serve your Christ there!'

"Police arrived and asked the Hindu activists to leave, but once the police were gone, they came back again and continued shouting at us."

About four years ago, Stephen was brutally attacked by activists, including, he claims, one of those who was also part of the most recent attack – a man identified only as Armugam, but who has yet to be charged for either incident.

"They tried to kill me," Stephen said of that incident. "I was hospitalised but the police refused to register a case against Hindu Munnani activists."

Immediately after the most recent attack, Stephen, with others from the church, went to the police station to file a case. But the police refused to file an official report – known in the Indian subcontinent as a First Information Report.

After Christians pestered the police, they eventually filed a case against four men – Puffs Shiva, Gopala Krishnan, Sabareeswaran and Karunakaran – but only on minor charges under Section 448 of India's Penal Code, relating to "trespassing", "reciting obscene songs in public places", or "mischief causing damage", with the potential punishment being a fine equivalent to less than one US dollar.

"The case doesn't stand as serious in connection with the incident," Stephen told World Watch Monitor.

Meeting hall closed

Following another attack by Hindu extremists on Christians, before Christmas, Tamil Nadu police closed another private property used for study of the Bible and Christian worship.

Again, a mob of about 20 Hindu Munnani activists barged into the church premises, where a pre-Christmas charity event was being organised, on 9 December. "The assailants came with steel rods and stones, and started beating us," Pastor Karthik Chandran told local media.

"Pastor Karthik, two other men and a 55-year-old female church member were injured," Pastor Vinodh Kumar told World Watch Monitor, adding: "The police detained me instead of arresting the attackers. I was released at around 1.30am.

"Without any official notice, the church remains sealed, since the key is with the officials of the Revenue Department. We don't exactly know in whose possession it is right now, but the police are telling us it is with the Revenue office."

"They [police] had deployed five personnel to guard the property for one month to 9 January, and none of us, including Karthik, were allowed in the premises," Kumar added. "We tried all we could: meeting the police, revenue officials – but to no avail."

"The case is under investigation, and the investigating officer is taking care of all the matters," Gunasekaran told World Watch Monitor. "The property is not under the custody of police, the matter is taken to the revenue authorities."

When asked if the Revenue Department had ordered the police to take the property into custody, Gunasekaran denied it, saying: "Revenue Authorities cannot order the police. It was some concerned people who advised us to take necessary steps."

The Christians have still not received any official permission from the concerned district authorities to conduct worship services, Gunasekaran said.

In 2017, in October alone, as many as 30 Christian prayer halls received "show-cause notices" –notices demanding that the Christians provide a reason why action should not be taken against them – from District authorities. But in response to writ petitions filed by three churches from the Sular area in Coimbatore, the high court of Madras stayed the notices issued by the jurisdictional revenue officials.

According to the Tamil Nadu Panchayat and Buildings Act, a private gathering for worship is not subject to registration, and hence the churches need not appeal to the District authorities for permission to assemble and pray.

However, just two days ago, on 28 February, another 11 churches were ordered to close in Nilgiris District, without being issued any legal notice. This morning, 2 March, they were told they could reopen, but their case is yet another example of the challenges Christians face in Tamil Nadu.

2017 'one of the most traumatic years for Indian Christians'

By Anto Akkara

World Watch Monitor (19.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2sBSlzm> - The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) has described 2017 as "one of the most traumatic" years for Indian Christians in a decade after it recorded 351 verified incidences of hate crimes against Christians during the year.

The Religious Liberty Commission of the EFI, which brings together Christians from more than 50 Protestant denominations, said the government needed to restore Christians' trust in its ability to protect them.



Hindu radicals burn a dummy replica of Cardinal Telesphore Toppo of Ranchi. (Photo: Catholic Bishops' Conference of India)

The figure of 351 in the commission's annual report, 'Hate and Targeted violence against Christians in India', was not exhaustive, the authors added. "Most cases go unreported either because the victim is terrified, or the police, especially in the northern states, just turn a blind eye and refuse to record the mandatory First Information Report [criminal complaint registered by the police]."

The report, which was published on 16 February, said the commission had said that non-Hindu communities were being targeted "with impunity" and urged the Indian government to punish those who were "spreading hatred" against them.

The report's authors drew parallels with the scale of violence experienced last year and what they termed the "pogrom" that took place in Kandhamal in 2008, when nearly 100 Christians were killed, 6,000 Christian houses and 300 churches were plundered, leaving 56,000 Christians homeless.

The number of recorded hate crimes against Christians in India shows a rise in recent years from 147 in 2014, to 177 in 2015, to 134 in the first six months of 2016.

The new report listed four murders, 110 incidences of "physical violence/arrest", 70 of "threats and harassment", 64 occasions when worship was forcibly stopped, and 49 cases of Christians being falsely accused and arrested.

The report noted that India's Hindu-nationalist government had acknowledged in Parliament that "communal violence", the term used to define clashes between religious groups, "increased 28 per cent over three years to 2017".

EFI's general secretary, Rev. Vijayesh Lal, told World Watch Monitor today (19 February) the situation for Indian Christians "is deteriorating pretty rapidly".

He suggested that the rise in anti-Christian violence was eroding Christians' trust in their government. "The confidence of the community in the government needs to be restored. We are presenting this report to the government to take necessary corrective action," Rev. Lal said.

"I am afraid the worst will unfold in 2019," Rev. Lal added, suggesting that there could be an escalation in anti-Christian violence around next spring's elections, to stigmatise Christians as threat to "Hindu India".

The report suggests the violence is focused on Sunday worship and Lent and Christmas. Many incidents targeted church services and 54 cases were recorded in April, and 40 in December, both above the monthly average of 29.

"It is distressing to see even private worship being attacked by Hindu right-wing activists violating the privacy and sanctity of an individual or a family and trampling upon their constitutional rights," the report noted.

It also recorded new ways in which Christians were targeted. "Christian children going to attend Bible camps with their parents' permission, being taken into custody [by police] and detained for days on suspicion of conversion is bizarre and unheard of," the report noted.

Except for the southern state of Tamil Nadu, which reported the highest number incidents (52), most of the other incidents reported took place in central Indian states ruled by the BJP – Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, which is known for pursuing a Hindu-nationalist agenda.

The violence in Tamil Nadu, the report noted, has "a disturbing overlay of caste discrimination". Victims generally come from the so-called "lower castes" in villages where the dominant groups object to prayer houses and even the entry of missionaries, it added.

In the states run by the BJP, which include Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, the report said "the Sangh [Hindu nationalist] cadres have free hand, with the police and administration either looking the other way, or complicit".

The report claimed that the criminal justice system at the village- and small towns-level "routinely ignores or violates provisions in the law" and said constitutional provisions for religious freedom, right to life and freedom needed to be "available to the poorest person in the most remote village".

While focusing on the targeting of Christians, the report said the commission is "alive to the persecution of, and pressure on, other religious minorities, caste discrimination against Dalits, and the situation of women".

The report accused some state governments and their heads of using public money "to denounce Christianity publicly".

It warned that the political environment had begun "heating up" ahead of general elections in spring 2019. "Foot soldiers of the BJP ... have shifted into high gear in hate campaigns and targeted violence against individuals and groups, mainly religious minorities and Dalits," it added.

Statistics revealed in India's parliament on 6 February confirmed a long-standing allegation by rights groups that religious-based violence is growing under the premiership of Narendra Modi.

The figures contradict the assertion by Alphons Kannanthanam, a member of the BJP and the first Indian Christian in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cabinet, who said: "There has not been even one instance when a church was burnt or Christians attacked anywhere in the country after Modi came to power," Kannanthanam said.

India: Catholic bishops warn against Hindu nationalism as religious hate crimes rise

World Watch Monitor (15.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2CyeqyH> - An acknowledgement by India's BJP-led government that there has been a rise in religion-based hate crime has coincided with a warning from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) about the dangers to the country of a Hindu-nationalist agenda.

Statistics revealed in India's parliament on 6 February confirmed a long-standing allegation by rights groups that religious-based violence is growing, as UCA News reported.

The data presented by the government showed that 111 people were killed in sectarian violence in 2017, compared to 86 in 2016, and that there were 822 recorded incidents of violence in 2017 compared to 703 in 2016. The highest number of sectarian incidents last year were in Uttar Pradesh, one of five BJP-governed states, where there were 44 deaths and 195 violent incidents.

Blame for the rise in violence was levelled at Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a 2017 report co-written by the Mumbai-based Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, and the UK-based Minority Rights Group. The report said: "In recent years there has been rising hostility against India's religious minorities, particularly since the current right-wing BJP government, promoting Hindu nationalism, took power at the national level after its election in May 2014."

Bishops voice concerns

Meeting for their biennial assembly in Bangalore, the CBCI cautioned that attempts to impose Hindu nationalism could imperil the cultural and religious diversity of India.

"Any attempt to promote nationalism based on any one particular culture or religion is a dangerous position. It may lead to uniformity but never to genuine unity. Such misconceived efforts can only lead our nation on the path of self-annihilation," the bishops warned during the eight-day assembly.

"Mono-culturalism has never been and can never be the right answer to the question for peace in a country like ours that has a rich diversity of culture, language, region, race and religion. True nationalism can lead our motherland to genuine peace, harmony, progress and prosperity," their closing-day press statement said.

"In a climate of violence," the bishops appealed in their statement "to all fellow citizens to shun mob culture and vigilantism in favour of peace".

"An assault on human life can never be inspired by God nor justified because of the diverse beliefs and practices," the bishops continued. "Human life of every individual person in our beloved motherland needs to be valued and defended."

While addressing a news conference on the final day, Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai, who was elected CBCI president at the conference, said "intolerance is causing a certain amount of anxiety to us".

His remarks echoed concerns raised in many quarters after the BJP government revealed that hate crimes and attacks on religious minorities had been on the rise since the BJP won the 2014 election.

"Diversity is one of the strengths of India. It is known the world over for its diversity of culture, language and religion. Any attempt to divide people by certain sections will be harmful for the nation," cautioned Cardinal Gracias.

The outgoing CBCI President, Cardinal Baselios Cleemis, called for upholding the "constitutional guarantees" amid religion being used as a "biased factor to separate people".

"The country is facing different challenges, like making sure the constitution is really [observed] in the life of the citizens. Constitutional guarantees should not be blocked from any corner," he said.

When asked about a minister in the federal cabinet, Ananth Kumar Hegde, demanding that the constitution should be amended to curtail the rights of religious minorities, Cardinal Cleemis said: "People in responsible positions should not side-line the sacredness of the constitution."

Cardinal Cleemis also cited the recent attack on carol singers and the attack on a children's hostel owned by the Catholic church, both in Madhya Pradesh state, as "examples" of the violation of the freedom of religion guaranteed by the constitution.

Similarly, he severely criticised the controversial decisions of the Modi government to observe Good Governance Day on Christmas Day, and Digital India Day on Good Friday 2017.

"Any other date could have been fixed to launch such programmes. Why hurt the feelings of a community?" Cardinal Cleemis said.

'Loyalty to the nation'

The closing-day statement from the CBCI assembly stated: "No-one should doubt our loyalty or our commitment to the nation," despite some Hindu nationalists branding Muslims and Christians as foreigners.

The statement included an action-plan to make India's constitution more widely known in all sectors of Church and society, highlighting equality and religious freedom.

The CBCI also made a commitment to make its core activities – the provision of education and healthcare – more affordable to the poor, and more accessible by Dalits, many of whom are Christian, and other oppressed tribal groups.

Christians advised to resist alliance with BJP

Meanwhile, the general secretary of the Baptist Churches Council in the north-eastern state of Nagaland has cautioned Christians not to associate with the BJP ahead of state-assembly election day on 27 February.

In a letter addressed to the mostly Christian leaders of all political parties in the state, Rev. Aelhou Keyho advised against surrendering “your Christian principles and, above all, your faith for the sake of money and development”. His letter made an apparent reference to attempts by the BJP to forge an electoral alliance to capture power in Nagaland with the support of Christians, reported Matters India.

Nagaland is one of three Christian-majority states in India. More than 88 per cent of the state’s population registered as Christians in the 2011 census.

Indian pastors arrested for forced conversion



British Pakistani Christian Association (10.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2BnyGGo> - Two Pastors were arrested in the city of Amroha in Uttar Pradesh under charges of forcible conversion despite many who claimed to have converted quite openly declaring that they chose to change their faith and would not return to Hinduism.

Pastor Maan Singh (40 Yrs) from Delhi and **Brahmanand (30 Yrs)** a local man where arrested from the home of Brahamand in Mandi Samti after a local BJP activist lodged a First Incident report against the duo on 30th December 2017, at Hasanpur Police station. Three other unidentified men have also been charged and remain at large while a search continues.

The men were booked under IPC sections 295A (deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings by insulting religion or religious beliefs) and 153A (promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, language, etc).

Later, the two men were produced before a magistrate and were sent to jail.

According to the complaint registered by Shivkumar Singh, who claims to be an RSS member and is a resident of Rajpoot Colony in the local area, the five accused men

gathered local people to a public meeting on the pretext of informing them about “social issues and awakening.”

Shivkumar however states that at the meeting anti-Hindu propaganda was being spoken and the five men revealed themselves to be Christian missionaries whose desire it was to convert Hindus to Christianity. In the FIR, he alleged:

“They said that with money funded from abroad, those who convert can lead a better life if they convert to Christianity. They abused Hinduism, our Hindu Gods and used objectionable language while trying to lure people for conversion.”

“They also used objectionable language for CM Yogi Adityanath and PM Narendra Modi,” his statement read.

Shivkumar claimed that some families in the locality “fell into their trap” and have converted to Christianity but failed to say how many.

“I had information about these people advertising conversion for a long time — for the last year, at least. On Saturday, I called some friends and caught them red-handed. Then I filed an FIR against them,” Singh said.

The arrested men have denied all charges and have asked local police to produce any audio or video footage to prove the charges against them. They have said that the charges are contrived by extremists intent on oppressing minorities.

Nepalese Christians arrested in India for blasphemy

Three Men from the Neighboring Hindu Nation Were Arrested for Allegedly Insulting Hinduism

World Religion News (15.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2EoHLNI> - Three Christians from the country of Nepal have been arrested and jailed for allegedly trying to convert locals in India. According to officials, the group was booked under IPC Section 295A, which outlaws the “deliberate and malicious” act of hurting the religious sentiments of any individual or group. The trio was presented to the court last week, after which they were immediately jailed.

The accused, Shukra Rai, Indra Bahadur Tamad, and Mekh Bahadur, were reported to have come to Shahjahanpur city with the goal of distributing religious Christian literature among the locals. They had even rented a house in the Town Hall area, indicating that they had plans to stay for an extended period of time.

On Wednesday, the three were arrested while interacting with a crowd in a location called Tareen Bahadurganj. The issue is said to have sparked off when the trio got into an argument with two individuals named Vimal Pandey and Prakash Dikshit. The latter duo alleged that the trio insulted Hindu gods.

However, according to one of the residents in the area, the trio is innocent. The resident, who chose to remain anonymous, stated that the men were only sharing messages about Christianity and that it was a standard practice for years. The resident added that neither of them mentioned anything bad about Hinduism or its deities.

Even so, DC Sharma, the SHO at the Sadar Bazaar Police Station, told the media that the three had been booked. He also pointed out that the trio was linked to the World Council of Churches and was spreading Christianity.

However, Rajendra Saluja, a local intelligence head at Shahjahanpur claimed that there is no evidence to suggest that the trio committed a crime. He pointed out that nothing could be attributed to the group except for the fact that they possessed Christian literature, which isn't a crime.

Nepalese citizens are allowed to enter India without a visa or Passport and therefore, are treated as Indian citizens, which means they are subject to the local laws. However, if a crime is committed, the Nepal High Commission must be informed. Since a crime cannot be proven here, it is not known whether the Nepal High Commission will be informed.

Incidents involving the arrest of Christian pastors and ministers have increased in India in recent years. Especially in Uttar Pradesh where seven pastors were arrested last year for similar reasons.

Kandhamal Christians back in jail after temporary Christmas release

World Watch Monitor (08.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2FjLeOi> - Two of seven Indian Christians who have spent nearly a decade in prison - convicted of murdering a Hindu leader whose death sparked the worst case of anti-Christian violence in India's history - were granted temporary parole over the Christmas period to spend time with their families. Evidence seems to be mounting that their convictions may be false. Six of the seven are illiterate, and they all continue to maintain their innocence.

Gornath Chalanseth and Bijay Kumar Sanseth returned to prison on Saturday (6 January), after two weeks on parole. It was the third time Chalanseth has been granted temporary release, but a first for Sanseth, who was accused of masterminding the Hindu leader's murder in August 2008.

His death had been preceded over Christmas 2007 by violent attacks against Christians orchestrated by extremist Hindu nationalists.

None of the five others convicted have spent a day outside prison since their arrest in 2008.

Indian Christians have demanded their release, and Catholic journalist Anto Akkara has written a book, 'Who Killed Swami Laxmanananda?', outlining the reasons he believes they are innocent. At its launch in the Odisha capital, Bhubaneswar, last week, the President of a People's Forum campaigning for human rights, Prafulla Samantara, challenged local media: "Is there anyone to challenge the findings of this book?" Independent Indian news service The Wire has also covered the findings of Akkara's book.

Brinda Karat, a senior leader of the Communist Party of India, speaking during the 28 December launch in New Delhi, said: "Akkara's book has brought out the absurdities and discrepancies of the judgement convicting seven persons in the case wherein a resolution

of a church, that later turned out to be fudged, is the only evidence. The judgement based on manufactured evidences is the most outrageous travesty of justice. This judgement will be known as 'what a judgement should not be'."

Akkara was also involved in the creation of a website, which urges readers to sign a petition for the release of the seven. Each online signature generates instant emails to India's President, the Chief Justice of India's Supreme Court and the Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission.

Background

Nearly 100 Christians were killed and 300 churches and 6,000 Christian homes damaged in the Kandhamal district of Odisha, after the killing of Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati on 23 August 2008.

By the end of that year, the seven - Chalanseth, Sanseth, Durjo Sunamajhi, Bhaskar Sunamajhi, Budhadeb Nayak, Munda Badamajhi and Sanatan Badamajhi - had been arrested. In 2013, they were found guilty of the murder by the trial court and each sentenced to life imprisonment.

The convictions shocked India's Christian community, which was still reeling after the deadly attacks, and Christian advocates have been fighting for their release ever since.

"There is absolutely no shred of evidence that links these people to the murder, so my question is: why are these people in jail?" asked Anto Akkara after Chalanseth was granted temporary release for the first time in March 2016. "The whole case is a blot on the face of India's judicial system - why have these illiterate, innocent people been convicted? If it goes on like this, these poor people will die like convicts in jail and history will say Christians killed the Swami."

Fifty-six thousand Christians were displaced after the violence in Kandhamal in August 2008. Since then, the local community has struggled to receive adequate compensation from the government, which has been a source of much contention.

A conspiracy?

The website release7innocents.com outlines the major discrepancies and apparent injustices in the case against the Christians.

"The trial court convicted the seven accused and sentenced them to life imprisonment on the basis of a fabricated Christian conspiracy theory despite hardly any credible evidence brought before the court," it states.

It then adds that in June 2015 "two top police officials - who had relied upon the same conspiracy theory to ensure the conviction of the innocent Christians - have testified before the Kandhamal judicial inquiry commission that the allegations were false." However, the website notes that the appeal hearing has since been "repeatedly" postponed.

The website complains that discrepancies within the case against the seven were apparent right from the start, when Hindu fundamentalists blamed Christians for the Swami's murder.

In the days that followed his murder, the Swami's body was taken across Kandhamal, "accompanied by thousands of Hindus ... to incite the primordial passion of revenge among Hindus in one of the least developed districts of Odisha", notes the website.

"They wanted to make a spectacle of it, and were prepared - as events were to prove - to take full advantage of the passions that would arise. They did not even go by the shortest route, but meandered across [Kandhamal]," noted a report by a group of human-rights organisations. (See route below.)



Three-quarters of the damage done to Christian homes took place along the route of the funeral procession, the website reports. Among the slogans shouted was, "Kill Christians and destroy their institutions."

"It was obvious that public reaction to the murder of a prominent religious leader like the Swami would be extreme. Yet when options to be followed after the murder were being considered, there is little evidence that high-level political and official leadership offered guidance and support to the local district administration," said the National Commission for Minorities, after its September 2008 visit to Kandhamal.

1. Sanatan Badamajhi



Sanatan Badamajhi's wife Badusi said that a few days before her husband's arrest, on 4 October, 2008, some of the Hindu village leaders had warned him that he would soon be arrested.

But on the day of the Swami's murder, Badamajhi, 36, had been tending cattle and sheep, according to a Hindu neighbour, Nakula Mallick.

"Police never came to investigate or ask anything about him. If we had been called, we would have testified for him in the court," said Mallick.

The judge said a gun was seized from Badamajhi's house, but his wife says they never owned a gun.

Police also claimed to have seized an axe from the house, but his wife said the police brought the axe from the house of Mukantho Mallick, a Hindu neighbour, who had accompanied the police to identify the house.

"Later, Mukantho has been repeatedly complaining that the police took away the axe. I had only one axe and it is still in my house," she said.

2. Munda Badamajhi



Munda Badamajhi, 34, was arrested on the night of 4 October, 2008, at his home in the village of Duringpodi.

The prosecution said it recovered a gun from Badamajhi's home, but his wife, Bandigudali, said her husband did not even know how to use a gun.

"We never had a gun and my husband could not even use a gun," she said. "This is shocking."

3. Durjo Sunamajhi



Durjo Sunamajhi, 35, was woken up on the night of 4 October, 2008, when police barged into his house in Budapada village and took him away, as well as the barrel of a broken gun that they found in his house.

His wife Gumili said her husband was on a train towards Kerala on the day of the Swami's murder and had never touched the gun, which she said was an old and broken hunting rifle last used by her husband's grandfather.

"The government claim is that they recovered two guns [from the houses of these people], but actually only one barrel of a broken gun, which has not been used for years, had been picked up," said Akkara. "[Gumili] says her husband never used it, her husband's father never used it; only her husband's grandfather used it. Imagine! And there was only a barrel of the hunting gun. Now, the government claims to have recovered two guns from two houses, but in the judgment the judge says he has got the three guns, and he names the three! How is that possible?"

4. Bijay Kumar Sanseth



Sanseth's wife, Pabitra, said police phoned her on 12 December, 2008, and told him to report to the police station the next day. He did so, and has been detained ever since.

However, police recorded events differently, saying that on 12 December Sanseth met three of the other accused Christians at a Maoist meeting in a jungle near the village of Sartuli. They added that Sanseth, 42, had been overheard discussing plans to murder the

Swami outside Kotagarh High School. This claim was attributed to a witness, Mahasingh Kanhar, who initially denied the claim, but eventually endorsed it during a retrial.

"Wherever I go, people tell me: 'He was a good man. Why he is in jail?'" said Sanseth's father, Salei. "The popularity of my son and his high contacts with government officials have led to this tragedy. Many were jealous of him."

5. Bhaskar Sunamajhi



Bhaskar Sunamajhi, 32, was playing cards with his friends in the village of Kutiguda when police came to collect him on 13 December, 2008.

"You can return tomorrow," his wife heard them say, when they took him away. But after more than seven years, Sunamajhi has not returned home.

The judge said Sunamajhi was "hand in gloves" with the Maoists and had undergone several weeks of training at a Maoist camp. However, his wife Debaki said he "never ventured [far] from home".

Biracha Paraseth, a neighbour, added: "This is a total lie. He was with us on the day [the Swami was killed]".

Pavitra Sanseth, another neighbour, added: "He is a good man. He will not do such a crime like killing of a Hindu leader. All of us feel very bad about this. Sir, if we all could have gone [to court] and explained his innocence, please tell us how we can help and ask for his release."

6. Budhadeb Nayak



Before his arrest, one of the village elders urged Nayak, 42, to go into hiding, but he refused, saying he had done nothing wrong.

Police later came to his house, threatening his eldest son, 20-year-old Lingaraj, that they would soon arrest his father.

On the night of 13 December, 2008, they came back and Nayak was arrested.

"He was wearing only a [sarong]. They tied his hands to take him away. He asked for clothes and I gave him a shawl," recalled his wife, Nilandri.

Three days later, the family visited him in Balliguda jail. The police said he had been with Maoists in the jungle on 12 December, alongside three of the others accused.

7. Gornath Chalanseth



Chalanseth, 41, was taken into police custody on 13 December 2008, but initially suspected nothing as he was active in politics.

His cousin, a pastor, accompanied him to the police station, and saw him taken away.

A couple of days later, after his cousin had not returned, he went back to the station and heard he had been charged with murder.