

INDIA: HINDU TEENAGER IS ARRESTED FOR ARSON ATTACK ON PRIESTS CAR

British Pakistani Christians (19.12.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2krHMsp> – All 32 Indian Christians from Madhya Pradesh who were arrested for blasphemy and false conversions on Thursday 14th December whilst singing carols were set free from Satna Jail on Friday after intense police questioning. Eight priests who were sent to help release the 32 victims from prison on Friday morning were also arrested despite being victims of violence that resulted in their vehicle being torched.

They have now also been released, however 6 of the 8 priests have been placed on bail with an impending court hearing regarding an alleged forced conversion.

In more promising news an 18-year-old was arrested on Saturday 16th December for setting fire to the vehicle of the 8 priests who were accused by rightwing group Bajrang Dal (Hindu Nationalist Group) of forcing religious conversions.

The incident all began after a group of men linked to Bajrang Dal stormed the venue of a pre-Christmas celebration at Bhoomkar village on Thursday evening, and alleged that religious conversions was being organised there. The event, had been organised for children by the Syro-Malabar Church and had been a tradition for over 30 years.

A mob of over 100 Bajrang Dal activists allegedly assaulted the Christian groups outside the police station and inside the station right before the eyes of local police officers, but no arrests have taken place for any of the attackers.

A case has been filed against an elderly priest named M George, who teaches at St Ephrem's Theological College and 5 others, following a

complaint by a local, Dharmendra Dohar, who alleged that he was illegally converted on December 10 and was paid Rs. 5,000 for it. They were booked under the Freedom of Religion Act and Sections 153-B (disharmony) and 295-A (religious blasphemy) of the Indian Penal Code.

“He was given a holy dip in a pond and his name was changed to Dharmendra Thomas, the complainant said. They also asked him to pray to Lord Christ,” Superintendent of Police DD Pandey told press on Friday. A surprising comment considering Catholics do not practice full water immersion for the ritual of Baptism – a practice common in protestant churches.

In an interview on India’s NDTV Dharmendra Dohar was asked if he had, indeed, changed his religion, Dharmendra Dohar – who claimed to have been a member of the Bajrang Dal for a year – told reporters, “I can’t speak on this... If I do, I will get embroiled in the issue... it will be said that I’m changing my statement”. The “group”, he said, doesn’t want “such people (Christians) to come in here”. The comment was noted to be a stark change to his original adamant behaviour and comment at the time of the arrests and Mr Dohar could be seen looking sheepish throughout the interview.

Madhya Pradesh is ruled by the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and has strict religious conversion laws. The central Indian state is one of five Indian states where missionaries need permission to try and convert individuals. In order to change religions, citizens must give a formal notice to local administrators at least one month before changing their faith officially.

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the BPCA, said:

“These fortunate Carol singers have been released from prison before Christmas and can now spend time with their families and with God, as

they put the nightmare persecution they faced behind them.

“Father George and the other 5 accused under overtly false allegations must now face a trial despite the change of stance from the original material witness, who described a ritual practice that is not pertinent to the Catholic faith. This legal faux pas emphasises the pathetic nature of India’s judicial process.

“The teenager caught being involved in the arson attack must be prosecuted with the utmost severity that is possible. It is the aura of impunity that exacerbates zealot passion and this can only be curbed through the rule of law.

“It raises my ire that no other members of the violent mob have been arrested, the innocent Christian men were brutalised by a mob in excess of 100 hysterical Hindus, who seemed intent on extra-judicial murder. The attack occurred before police yet they were unable to identify any of the perpetrators. I have to summarise, that it probably did not help the investigation when some eyewitnesses noticed that some of the police were complicit with the crime.

“I will be praying for the brave Indian and Pakistani Christians who continue to uphold God and practise their faith, despite the overt persecution they suffer. Their brave example is a reminder to us all that nothing on this earth can terminate God. No man can defeat our sovereign Lord who reigns eternally.”