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For Uighur exiles, Kashmir is heaven

A second and third generation of Uighurs far removed from their Chinese homeland find home in Jammu and Kashmir.

Al Jazeera (18.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2ifmkaj> - On a wintry November morning in Srinagar, the largest city in Indian-administered Kashmir, Mohammad Abdullah sits on the carpeted floor in his living room, with a black and white portrait of his father, Haji Abdullah Karem, hanging on the wall.

My father was among the last Silk Route traders, says Abdullah. Karem, an ethnic Uighur Muslim from the Chinese province of Xinjiang, would undertake the perilous mountainous route that stretches from Kashgar to Ladakh through the Karakoram mountain pass that divides China and India.

Abdullah says his forefathers had trekked the same route, travelling in caravans on top of horses and double humped camels, stopping at the sarais - resting stations for travellers - on the way, bartering silk, spices and pashmina fine cashmere wool.

One such journey to Ladakh located in Indian-administered Kashmir in the 1940s would turn fateful when Karem could not return home after the People's Republic of China took over Xinjiang in 1949. The Communist government blocked the mountain pass, eventually choking off trade.

Karem had left behind a wife and a young son whom he would never see again, said Abdullah, adding that his father lived out the rest of his life in India, married a local Ladakhi woman and fathered four sons and four daughters.

Abdullah, 60, who works for the regional government, lives with his family members in the Rajbagh area of Srinagar, which has remained untouched by the months of deadly anti-India protests that gripped the Muslim-majority Himalayan region.

Uighur heritage

A cluster of identical houses built in the traditional Kashmiri style with low-hanging roofs and a wooden exterior is occupied by his brothers and extended family.

One of the few relics of the past left with the family is Karem's portrait - an imposing looking man wearing a doppa - a Uighur skullcap, squinting his eyes as if shielding himself from the sun.

In 2014, a devastating flood ravaged Srinagar. Their house, along with others, was not spared. The deluge swept away precious memories, but they managed to save Karem's original passport issued by the Republic of China, along with a woollen Khotan traditional rug and a copper vessel used by the caravan on the Silk Road to cook mantou steamed dumplings, both of which have been in the family's possessions for nearly two centuries.

Of all his brothers and sisters, Abdullah is the one the most in touch with his Uighur heritage. For most of the family, it was a matter of surprise that their Uighur heritage could evoke curiosity.

"In our hearts we are as Indian as can be. Although, we would really like to visit Xinjiang once to see our ancestral land," says Abdullah's son, 32-year-old Wasim. He spends part of the year in Leh, where he is building a resort, and part of it in Srinagar.

But with renewed hostility between India and China and the crackdown on Uighurs in Xinjiang, there is little possibility of procuring a visa, though both sides of the family have been trying for a few years.

Seven years ago, Abdullah made his first visit to Hotan in Xinjiang to meet his half-brother.

Abdullah's dialect is a mix of Urdu, Ladakhi and Kashmiri, with a sprinkling of Uighur words that trace their origin to the Turkish language. Before visiting his brother, he worked on learning the language he inherited from his father and he thinks that he is now one of the only two Uighur language speakers in India.

"All the people that I met in Xinjiang wanted the freedom we have in India. The sort of protests we see in Kashmir would not be possible there at all. The state would repress it immediately," he says.

Arrival in India

Most of the Uighur community is disengaged from both the Kashmiri separatist movement and the Uighur cause.

As second and third generation Uighurs who have grown up in India, the Uighur cause is too far removed, and as refugees who found a home here, they are non-critical of the state.

Abdullah though, has taken up the cause of three Uighur men who have been held in jail in Ladakh after crossing over illegally into India three years ago.

"They landed without a visa, with the hope of reaching Mumbai to meet [Bollywood star] Shah Rukh Khan and become rich like Indian movie stars," says Abdullah shaking his head, his expression a blend of amusement and concern.

The Uighur community in India is not large and mostly second and third generation citizens whose parents or grandparents came here as refugees. Those who spoke with Al Jazeera estimate that there are less than 30 families located mainly in Leh, Kargil and Srinagar.

For most people, even in Kashmir, it is a revelation that people of Uighur origin live in India at all, as they are often mistaken for people from Ladakh or Tibet with similar facial features.

"Kashmir has a long history of trans-Himalayan migration, because of its connection to the Silk Route," said Abid Ahmed, editor at the cultural institution, Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, in Srinagar. The best documented of these migrations is that of the Tibetan Muslims of Srinagar, who settled in Kashmir after the 1959 Tibetan uprising.

The Uighurs came in two waves. In the first, they came through trade and cultural exchanges between India and Xinjiang province .

Most Uighurs, who came during the 1930s and 1940s, were traders and stayed behind in India after China clamped down on independence movements from the province.

Mohammad Rahim, 58, works as a construction contractor in Srinagar and Leh, the capital of Ladakh. His father Haji Abdul Rahim was from the Uighur town of Karghilik and settled in India in the 1940s.

Rahim's mother is from Ladakh and he himself has married a Ladakhi. "I try to keep the Uighur culture alive for my children, but it is not easy," he says, with a tiny shrug.

He acknowledges a sense of loss. "The only thing we have preserved is the Uighur food which we eat on special occasions, laghman [pulled noodles] and polo [rice pilaf]."

The second wave

The second wave of nearly 1,000 Uighur refugees arrived in India to escape the communist regime in 1949.

The Indian government initially hosted them, but after increasing pressure from Beijing, refused to provide them with asylum.

The group under the leadership of the most prominent Uighur politician of the time, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, was forced to leave India in 1954.

They appealed to Saudi Arabia and Egypt first, each of which turned them away, until they found refuge in Turkey.

Erkin Alptekin, a Uighur nationalist and the son of Isa Yusuf Alptekin, who was 10 years old at the time, recalls the flight to India.

"It was a hard trip. There were no streets. The highest mountain passages in the world are here. Sometimes you had to sit for hours in the snow and wait for the fog to dissolve," he told Al Jazeera in an email.

"We were warned not to fall asleep, because the body loses heat and then one dies."

The journey took them nearly a month and a half, during which his sister succumbed to frostbite.

"When we met human civilisation in Ladakh, in Kashmir, we thought as children that we were in paradise on earth," said Alptekin, who currently lives in Germany, where he runs World Uyghur Congress, an organisation of exiled Uighurs and is one of the most well-known activists for Uighur independence.

Alptekin's family found a temporary home at Yarkand Sarai, in Srinagar - once a rest house and an international trading hub for traders from Central Asia - Yarkand, Samarkand, Kazakhstan, Bukhara - and Gilgit which is located in Pakistan.

So popular was the trading route that Central Asian people are still widely referred to as Yarkandi in Kashmir.

The sarai, which local historians date to the late 19th century, had been lying desolate following the end of the Silk Route trade until it became the home of the political exiles of 1949.

"When we arrived in Srinagar, there were a couple of older Uighur families already living in that area," said Alptekin, who visited Yarkand Sarai again last year.

The ramshackle exterior of Yarkand Sarai, a closed set of buildings with small houses that overlook the River Jhelum in downtown Srinagar, gives no evidence of its storied past as a flourishing centre of trade and shelter for Uighur exiles.

Across the street on a small patch of land sheltered under a shrine, sits a graveyard where the Uighur people of Srinagar are buried.

Abdul Hakim's family is one of the two Uighur families still living near the cemetery. His father, who was from Karghilik, traded in carpets and settled in Kashmir in the 1940s.

He, too, had a family from which he was separated across the border. He talked to Al Jazeera over the phone from Ladakh where he was visiting his relatives. "I heard from my mother that he had two children there and a wife and brothers and sisters and he could never meet any of them again," says Hakim, who works with the state police department.

In 1976, the family was granted asylum in Turkey.

"Our passports were stamped and bags were packed. And we thought we would live with our people there. But, we couldn't bring ourselves to leave. Our roots are here," Hakim says.

Kerala chief minister calls for new investigation into Christians' Kandhamal convictions

World Watch Monitor (16.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2ijp6HC> - The chief minister of the south Indian state of Kerala has called for a new investigation into the 2008 murder of a

Hindu leader, which sparked months of rioting, in which almost 100 Christians were killed.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan was speaking on Tuesday (13 Dec.) at the launch of the Malayalam translation of 'Who killed Swami Laxmanananda?', an investigative book by Catholic journalist Anto Akkara.

Seven Christian men, six of whom are illiterate, were convicted in 2013 of the swami's murder in Kandhamal, in the north-eastern state of Odisha. The men – three of whom are Dalits, the other four tribals – pleaded not guilty, and in his book Akkara sets out to prove their innocence.

Mr. Vijayan, a senior member of the Communist Party of India who heads a left-wing coalition in Kerala, said: "The book forcefully shows that the allegation that Christians killed the swami is itself a concocted conspiracy. Yet seven innocent Christians have been convicted to life imprisonment for Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati's murder.

"Anto Akkara has brought out [a] lot of evidences. On the basis of those, a fresh probe must be held into who killed the swami. It is necessary to save the innocents and punish the real culprits."

India's communists have frequently clashed with Hindu nationalists, whom they accuse of not respecting India's diversity. In such issues as the Kandhamal riots, Communists often support harassed minority groups.

With his call for a "fresh probe" into the riots, the Kerala Chief Minister has taken a bold step in support of the Christian minority.

After the swami's murder in August 2008, a rumour circulated that Christians were responsible, although Maoists claimed the killing soon after it took place. Hindu mobs began rioting, ransacking 300 churches and some 6,000 homes. More than 50,000 Christians were displaced.

Mr. Vijayan said that Hindu mobs had been "incited to attack the Christians" and that the three months of violence that followed the murder had been orchestrated.

Alexander Jacob, former Director General of Police of Kerala, said: "My only prayer is that these things should not be true – that police, who were supposed to protect the victims, played a role in the conviction of innocents."

In August, India's Supreme Court Chief Justice, T. S. Thakur, said it was "very disturbing" that many of the perpetrators of the riots had not been brought to justice .

An investigation noted that of the 827 criminal cases registered, 315 cases were not pursued, while of the 362 cases in which a verdict was given, "only 78 [trials] resulted in [a] conviction". Although 6,495 people were arrested, just 150 cases are still ongoing. The Supreme Court ordered Odisha State to investigate "wherever acquittals were not justified on facts". He also said that compensation paid to the victims had been "inadequate".

Last year, two senior police officials testified before the Kandhamal judicial inquiry commission that the allegations against the seven accused were false, according to a website seeking to free the men. The website also notes that their appeal hearing has since been repeatedly postponed.

Ravivarma Kumar, the Advocate-General of Karnataka, another southern Indian state, has said the Christians were given life terms despite the fact there was "no eyewitness to the [swami's] murder and hardly any evidence".

Muslims and Christians facing challenges to religious freedom

Freedom Declared (07.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2geyLQ6> - Fifty religious leaders from the Christian and Muslim minorities in India met together in September to discuss the religious freedom challenges facing both groups under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

Christians are "facing physical, symbolic and structural violence" from Hindu extremists across the country, said Father Z. Devasagaya Raj at the conference in New Delhi.

A recent article in *The Economist* on Muslims in India was headed *An Uncertain Community: India's biggest minority grows anxious about its future*. It stated that "since India's independence in 1947, the estrangement of Muslims has slowly grown."

"India's Muslims have not, it is true, been officially persecuted, hounded into exile or systematically targeted by terrorists, as have minorities in other parts of the subcontinent, such as the Ahmadi sect in Pakistan. But although violence against them has been only sporadic, they have struggled in other ways. In 2006 a hefty report detailed Muslims' growing disadvantages. It found that very few army officers were Muslim; their share in the higher ranks of the police was "minuscule". Muslims were in general poorer, more prone to sex discrimination and less literate than the general population (see chart). At postgraduate level in elite universities, Muslims were a scant 2% of students.

"A decade later, with most of the committee's recommendations quietly shelved, those numbers are unlikely to have improved. Indeed, since the landslide election win by the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014, some gaps have widened. There are fewer Muslim ministers now in the national government—just two out of 75—than at any time since independence, even though the Muslim share of the population has grown.

"India remains a secular country, yet some laws proposed by the BJP bear a disturbingly sectarian tint. One bill would allow immigrants from nearby countries who happen to be Hindu, Sikh, Christian or Buddhist to apply for citizenship, while specifically barring Muslims. Another would retroactively block any legal challenge to past seizures of property from people deemed Pakistani "enemies", even if their descendants have nothing to do with Pakistan and are Indian citizens. Courts have repeatedly ruled in favour of such claimants—all of them Muslim—but their families could now be stripped of any rights in perpetuity.

"Far more than such legislative slights, what frightens ordinary Muslims is the government's silence in the face of starker assaults. A year ago many were shocked when a mob in a village near Delhi, the capital, beat to death a Muslim father of three on mere suspicion that he had eaten beef. Earlier this month, after one of his alleged killers died of disease while in police custody, a BJP minister attended the suspect's funeral, at which the casket was draped, like a hero's, with the Indian flag.

"Earlier this month, too, newspapers reported a disturbing discrepancy between the fates of two men arrested for allegedly spreading religiously insulting material via social media. One of the men, a member of a right-wing Hindu group in the BJP-run state of Madhya

Pradesh, was quickly released from custody after the customary beating. The arresting officers have been charged with assault; their superiors up to the district level transferred. In the other case, in the state of Jharkhand, a Muslim villager was arrested for posting pictures implying he had slaughtered a cow. Police claimed he died of encephalitis following his arrest. A court-ordered autopsy revealed he had been beaten to death. To date, no police officers have been charged."

"The fact is that India's Muslims are divided, not only between dominant Sunnis and a large Shia minority but also between starkly different social classes and regions: a Muslim in Bengal is likely to share no language and few traditions with a co-religionist far to the south in steamy Kerala. The divisions may soon get deeper. Both India's supreme court and the national law commission, a state body charged with legal reform, are deliberating whether laws governing such things as divorce and inheritance should remain different for different religious groups, or should be harmonised in a uniform national code, as the constitution urges. Spotting another "Muslim issue", past governments have let conservative clerics control family law. As a result India, unlike most Muslim-majority countries, still allows men to divorce simply by pronouncing the word three times.

"The BJP, however, is calling for sweeping reform, with Narendra Modi, the prime minister, painting the issue as a straightforward question of women's rights. Much as many Muslims heartily agree that change is long overdue, suspicions linger that the BJP's aim is less to generate reform than to spark inevitable protests by Muslim conservatives, so uniting Hindus in opposition to Muslim "backwardness".

"This question may play out in elections this winter in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, nearly 40m of whose 200m people are Muslim. The state has witnessed repeated communal clashes since the destruction by Hindu activists, in 1992, of a medieval mosque said to have been built over an ancient temple marking the birthplace of Rama, a Hindu deity. Many expect the BJP to play the "Muslim card" in an effort to rally Hindu votes."

'A worrying trend'

A recent report from the Evangelical Fellowship of India's Religious Liberty Commission recorded 134 attacks on Christians or their churches in the first half of 2016 – already almost as many as the annual totals for both 2014 and 2015.

Pointing out that the cases chronicled from 1 January to 30 June were just a "fraction of the violence on the ground" (only "carefully corroborated" incidents were included), the EFI report made several recommendations to Mr. Modi's government, including the repeal of the controversial "anti-conversion laws".

These laws – named "Freedom of Religion Acts" – are officially there to prevent religious conversions being made by "force", "fraud" or "allurement". But Christians and rights groups say that in reality the laws obstruct conversions generally, as Hindu nationalists invoke them to harass Christians with spurious arrests and incarcerations. Such laws are currently in force in five states – Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh – although they have been discussed in several others, such as in Maharashtra last year.

Nearly one fifth of the reported incidents of anti-Christian violence (25) occurred in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (India's most populous, with over 200 million people). The second and third highest frequency of attacks took place in states with anti-conversion laws: Madhya Pradesh (17 incidents) and Chhattisgarh (15).

Tamil Nadu was the other high scorer (14). In 2002, this state passed its own "Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Bill", but it was repealed in 2004 after the defeat of the BJP-led coalition. The BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, Prime Minister Modi's party) is known for espousing a Hindu nationalist agenda and currently rules several states in central and western India, as well as controlling the federal government. The EFI report notes that Tamil Nadu is now governed by a Modi "ally".

Last year, two BJP members – one in the Lower and one in the Upper House of the national Parliament – planned to introduce a Private Members' Bill, each in their respective House, to introduce a national law against conversion from Hinduism, which would then force a debate in the Parliament.

The MP in the Upper House, Tarun Vijay, said the recently released census had indicated that, "For the first time, the population of Hindus has been reported to be less than 80 per cent. We have to take measures to arrest the decline. It is very important to keep the Hindus in majority in the country.

"My argument is that religion must remain a matter of personal choice. But in India, it has become a political tool in the hands of foreign powers, who are targeting Hindus to fragment our nation again on communal lines. This has to be resisted in national interest and in the interest of all minorities in India," he added.

The MP in the Lower House, Yogi Adityanath, a senior BJP legislator, Hindu head priest and founder of Hindu Yuva Vahini, a social, cultural and nationalist group of youths who seek to provide a right-wing Hindu platform.

In June 2015, Adityanath declared that those opposing yoga and Surya Namaskar, a Hindu salutation to the sun god within yoga, "should leave India or drown themselves in the ocean".

Christians account for around 5% of India's population, according to the World Christian Database, though the official 2011 census figure was just 2.3% (with Muslims at 14.2% and Hindus 79.8%).

Last month, Tomson Thomas of Persecution Relief told World Watch Monitor attacks on Christians were at an "alarming level", with more than 30 incidents a month being reported.

Meanwhile, the Mumbai-based Catholic Secular Forum said that in 2015 attacks on Christians had been reported on an almost daily basis.

Recent figures from Christian charity Open Doors, which works on such issues, suggest an even greater number of incidents (closer to 250) occurred in the first six months of this year. But whatever the precise figure, Rolf Zeegers from Open Doors' World Watch Research says "a worrying trend is emerging".

"It is very alarming," he said. "Violence against Christians in India seems to be increasing and becoming more frequent. And yet President Modi's administration does nothing. Isn't it about time that Western countries offer the Christian community help by using diplomatic channels to directly put pressure on the Indian government to stop these violent radicals?"

The furore surrounding Mother Theresa's canonisation on 4 Sep. was another reminder of the difficulties faced by India's Christian minority. A roadside crucifix in Mumbai was reportedly desecrated on the same day, while Hindu nationalists continued to accuse the Catholic nun of having forcibly converted others. MP Yogi Adityanath said in June she had

been on a mission to "Christianise India". Meanwhile, an online petition was circulated in which she was labelled a "soul harvester" who proselytised the poor.

But perhaps there is a glimmer of hope in the conciliatory language used during the recent Supreme Court ruling, in which it was concluded that Christians had received "inadequate" compensation for the worst case of anti-Christian violence in India's history – the 2008 Kandhamal rampage, during which around 100 Christians were killed, 300 churches and 6,000 Christian homes damaged and 56,000 people displaced after the killing of a Hindu leader.

The EFI report begins with a statement made by Chief Justice T.S. Thakur during that judgment: "The minorities are as much children of the soil as the majority and the approach has been to ensure that nothing should be done, as might deprive the minorities of a sense of belonging, of a feeling of security, of a consciousness of equality and of the awareness that the conservation of their religion, culture, language and script as also the protection of their educational institutions is a fundamental right enshrined in the Constitution..."

"It can, indeed, be said to be an index of the level of civilization and catholicity of a nation as to how far their minorities feel secure and are not subject to any discrimination or suppression."

Yet conciliation will mean little if what the report refers to as the "ominous and all-permeating impunity and occasional complicity of the administrative and police personnel" is not addressed.

The All India People's Forum is quoted in the report as saying: "It is evident from the testimonies that the role of the police and administration is extremely lax. On some occasions the police have openly sided with the Bajrang Dal [a militant Hindu group], refusing to protect the Christians.

"On one occasion the police and administration even failed to turn up, having convened a gathering of Hindus and Christians, and possibly informed the Bajrang Dal that they would not turn up, thus setting the scene for organized mob violence against the Christians. On the occasions where the district administration and police have intervened, it has not been to enforce the rule of law and uphold the Constitution and arrest the Bajrang Dal mischief-makers; rather the ineffectual mode of 'dispute resolution' has been adopted."

Anti-Christian motives for pastor's death in Andhra Pradesh, India surface

Morning Start News (02.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fi3OIp> - Contrary to the reasons communist guerrillas in India gave for murdering a pastor in July, area church leaders said he was killed for carrying out his Christian calling.

Communist Party of India (Maoist) guerrillas known as Naxalites killed Pastor Yohan Marayya in East Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh state on July 29, leaving a note near his body stating that he was killed for being "very friendly" with police (an informant), accumulating wealth and "exploiting the poor." The note also warned that 10 more people would be killed, including six pastors.

Area church leaders, however, said the accusations were untrue and told Morning Star News that Pastor Marayya was killed for the thriving ministries he and his brothers were carrying out, which threatened the communists' influence in the area.

"The real reason behind the brutal killing of pastor Yohan was because of their ministries, and the churches being where the interests of the area people lie," a church leader told Morning Star News on condition of anonymity. "They lost control of the people who now believed in Christ rather than in weapons, and they chose to handle the matter in this way."

Christian leaders told Morning Star News that the death of the 45-year-old father of four came six months after the Naxalites abducted his nephew and tried to kill Pastor Marayya's older brother, pastor Elia Kannayya, who had led the whole family to Christ, as the Naxalites were upset at the Christians for encouraging people to put their trust in God rather than join the rebel movement.

About 150 Naxalites had broken into the house of Pastor Kannayya in their attempt to kill him, but he was not home, so they abducted his teenage son, holding him hostage and demanding Pastor Kannayya be handed over to them, the church leaders said. Negotiations led to them releasing the boy after 14 days.

Pastor Kannayya had begun the healing and evangelistic ministry 15 years ago, and Pastor Marayya and other brothers helped it to flourish as they planted 60 churches in the tri-state border areas of Chhattisgarh, Orissa (now Odisha) and Andhra Pradesh. The life transforming ministries led area young people to hold the Bible rather than weapons, and as the Naxalites saw fewer recruits they began to oppose the brothers, church leaders said.

"Over the 15 years, Pastor Yohan and his brothers were doing cultivation work on 40 acres of land where many church members were also being employed," said a church leader who visited the area as part of a fact-finding team. "Around these areas, they have about 5,000 church members, and the ministries support 60 evangelists and 40 orphans."

Prior to the murder of Pastor Marayya, the Naxalites had warned Pastor Kannayya to leave the area several times, the church leaders said. As part of the Naxalites' effort to frighten Pastor Kannayya away and get rid of his ministries, they killed his younger brother, an easier target as he lived deep in the wilderness, according to church leaders.

On July 29 Pastor Marayya and his wife, Manama, woke at about 11 p.m. to the sound of barking dogs; when the pastor rose to investigate, he found about 100 armed Naxalites around his home in Lachigudem village. They pulled the pastor out and beat him with sticks. His wife came out and started crying for help, and the assailants pushed her back inside and began beating her as well, church leaders said.

Taking the pastor farther away and continuing to beat him, the Naxalites took off his lungi (garment wrapped around the waist) and used it to tie his hands behind his back. They beat him for several minutes before stabbing him and cutting his neck with a sharp axe.

The assailants left their note near the body. Besides accusing the church leader of being a police informant, it accused Pastor Kannayya of converting people through deceit and claimed both pastors deceived "our innocent people" to accumulate wealth for themselves through "criminal activities," according to researchers from aid group The Voice of the Martyrs.

"Pastor Yohan's wife and other Christian workers in the area said that the two pastors are not involved in criminal activities," the organization reported on Aug. 26. "Pastor Yohan and his brother have ministered to the poor and indigenous tribes in the area for more than 15 years and lived simple, humble lifestyles."

The same night that Pastor Marayya was killed in Lachigudem – and his church building reportedly set on fire – the attackers went to a neighboring village and abducted a member of his church, identified only as Raju, area church leaders said.

After three hours of walking in thick jungle, the kidnappers stopped and began severely beating the Christian and warned him to stop going to church, church leaders said. Raju told them that he had been on the verge of dying from illness when Pastor Marayya had prayed for him and taken him to the fellowship, where he had met Jesus and received new life, and that therefore he could not stop going to church.

Further enraged, the attackers crushed his hands and fingers with their boots, asking again whether he would return to the church. When he said he would, they threatened to kill him, the church leaders said.

“Raju said, ‘Okay, it is in your hands to kill me; go ahead, I will go to heaven even if you kill me,’” a church leader said.

The Naxalites told him to go to the village of his pastor, Yohan Marayya, and decide whether he still wanted to go to church, and then released him, the church leaders said. When he reached the village at dawn, he found hundreds of church members mourning over the pastor’s body.

As of this writing, Naxalites continue to issue threats to Pastor Kannayya to leave the area or be killed as his younger brother was.

Indian Supreme Court rules compensation for worst-ever anti-Christian violence ‘not enough’



World Watch Monitor (04.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bBloID> - India’s Supreme Court Chief Justice has ordered that adequate compensation has not yet been paid to the victims - in 2008 - of religiously-motivated violence by Hindus against Christians in the Kandhamal district of Odisha (formerly Orissa), eastern India.

The success of the petition, brought by Raphael Cheenath, the local Catholic Archbishop in 2008, means that Chief Justice Thakur has ordered that the Odisha government should now arrange extra compensation for those affected.

About 100 Christians were killed, 300 churches and 6,000 Christian homes damaged and 56,000 people displaced (many until now) after the killing of a Hindu leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, on 23 August, 2008. His death sparked the worst case of anti-Christian violence in India's history, as Hindu fundamentalists blamed Christians for the Swami's murder.



Campaigners say the National Human Rights Commission has been "sitting for years" on the plea for enhanced compensation for the Christians - who were paid token interim compensation of \$150-750 for completely damaged houses.

Despite over 25 visits to government offices, Obseswar Nayak in Borimunda village, for instance, was denied the maximum compensation of Rs 50,000 (US\$ 750) for a "fully damaged house" because "part of the wall was intact", so he was entitled to only compensation for "partial damage".

Another "partially damaged house" - with its first and second floor ceilings burnt - was John Pradhan's home in Gurkapia village. Government officials listed it as "partially damaged", adamant that "part of the wall was intact".

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 a website set up to ensure justice for the minority Christians affected.

"The [Hindu extremists] wanted to make a spectacle of [the body], 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.

After the violence, the local community has struggled to receive adequate compensation from the government, a source of much contention. In June 2013, according to *The Hindu*, a report recommended that the Odisha State government "take immediate measures to adequately rehabilitate and resettle the victim-survivors of the Kandhamal violence". The report further urged the government to "ensure full reparation to those whose livelihoods were affected due to violence and strife".

Sajan K. George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, told Fides news agency: "It is a step forward in justice for the victims of Kandhamal. It is a positive sign

that the Supreme Court of India recognised as unjust compensation paid. The justice procedure is slow and inadequate, but this is a sign of hope.”

Anto Akkara, who has written a book about the Kandhamal events, “Who killed Laxmanananda?”, wrote in it that Chief Justice Thakur, on appointment as the 43rd Chief Justice of India in December 2015, had declared: “People of [India] need not live in fear until the time the judiciary is independent. When the Constitution guarantees Rule of Law to those who are not our citizens, there is no question that citizens of India, no matter of what religion or faith, should feel unprotected.”

His appointment, said Akkara, had been “like a beacon of hope for those living in fear” because Thakur also assured: “We [the Supreme Court] have no reluctance to protect the beliefs of our fellow citizens. As long as Rule of Law prevails, no-one has to be afraid.”

Akkara also started a petition to outline the major discrepancies and apparent injustices in the case against seven Christians who were eventually convicted of the Swami’s murder in 2013, and each sentenced to life imprisonment.

At least one other tragedy could be said to have emerged from this failure of compensation to adequately re-build the Christian community.

Father Ajaya Kumar Singh, director of the Odisha Forum for Social Action, told Asia News in April 2016: “After the violence of 2008, young people migrated to other states in search of work.”

One such oldest son, Rahul Nayak, 25, was talking to his parents back in Kandhamal on his mobile phone a year ago because he had left for work in Thrissur (in the southern state of Kerala thousands of miles away). Both his parents, who had climbed to the top of a hill because it was the only place to get phone signal, were shot and killed by India’s largest federal paramilitary force, the Central Reserve Police Force, who were patrolling for Maoist rebels. Almost one year on, human rights activists say “no official has visited the village nor has any meaningful investigation taken place”. They say public protests forced the government to give some compensation to the orphans (including two teenage sons), but that there has been no investigation of the police involved.

Three evangelical Christians arrested in Madhya Pradesh for "forced conversions"

Rev V A Anthony V, his wife Prabha and another woman are arrested after police and Hindu radicals stopped them and took them into custody. Extremists waited until the court rejected the accused’s request for bail. For Christian leaders, religious freedom is at risk under Hindu nationalist rule.

By Nirmala Carvalho

Asianews.it (23.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1sAvm2t> - Police in Satna, Madhya Pradesh, arrested on Sunday three evangelical Christians for forced conversion and insulting Hindu religious sentiment.

Rev V A Anthony, of the Brethren Assembly Church, his wife Prabha and another woman were taken into custody as they returned from Aber, where they go every week to lead prayers. They were jailed after their demand for bail was turned down.

Sajan K George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC), slammed the arrests. He told AsiaNews that the three Christians are innocent people "who were detained based on false allegations of forced conversions."

The three accused were arrested yesterday but the fact that is alleged goes back to two weeks ago. Their accusers are Rambhan Adivasis, Hemraj Varma and Prashant Gupta, all residents in the village of Goraiya.

The trio filed a complaint in which they claim that the Christians asked them to convert by promising them a secure job. The three men changed their mind after the Christians ripped up the image of Hindu deities. According to local police, this "offended their religious feelings".

Satna Police Superintendent Mithilesh Shukla said that the Christians have been charged under three articles, namely Section 295 A of the Indian Penal Code (deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings) and Sections 3 and 4 of the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, the state's anti-conversion law.

Some villagers have reported that at the time of the arrest, the police were accompanied by Hindu extremists. Laxmi Yadav, a member of the Madhya Pradesh State Backward Classes Commission, is one of them. He remained with the police until the court decided to deny bail, and placed the Christians in state custody.

Three weeks ago, he had filed a complaint against Rev Sam Samuel. Along with activists of the Bajrang Dal* and the police, Yadav also stopped a wedding in the city of Kolgawan, claiming that bride was underage.

Rev Samuel said that the car on which the three Christians were travelling was stopped by Hindu extremists, who then beat up Rev Anthony.

Sajan K George noted that "this is the second incident in a month." For the GCIC president, "Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians live in an atmosphere of fear in Madhya Pradesh. Here, the anti-conversion law is used to harass and intimidate. Ruled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the state is seriously jeopardising freedom of religion."

* Youth wing of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, a Hindu ultra-nationalist organisation.

Police, Hindu hardliners storm church wedding in India

MalayMail Online (28.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1T6YtAb> - A group of hardline Hindu activists and police stormed a church in central India and stopped a wedding midway after accusing the pastor of forcefully converting the bride to Christianity, an official said today.

It comes as India's Christian minority has sounded the alarm over a recent rise in attacks on churches and members of the faith, fuelling tensions over religious freedom in the diverse, secular country.

As the wedding got underway at the Church of God in India in Madhya Pradesh state, men belonging to the fringe Hindu outfit Bajrang Dal barged in accompanied by police, who arrested ten people, a church spokesman said.

Right-wing Hindu groups accuse churches and missionaries of targeting tribal people and other poor groups with the aim of converting them to Christianity, claims denied by the clergy.

"They said it is a matter of forceful conversion and arrested the bride, the groom, their parents as well as pastors of two churches who were present there," Mariyosh Joseph, a spokesman for the church in Satna district told AFP.

"How can you storm into a religious place and stop a ceremony like this? You will never see such a thing happening at a temple or a mosque," he said.

The area police superintendent said the wedding was stopped because the girl was a Hindu and not yet 18, the legal age for women to marry in India.

"The girl is a Hindu and she is 17. We acted on a complaint made by the bride's uncle. The matter is under investigation," Mithilesh Shukla told AFP.

The Indian Express daily said the couple had converted to Christianity four years ago, but district authorities were not informed — a crime under state laws.

The church insisted the couple were Christians and accused the police of "hiding behind excuses" to justify their conduct.

It follows a series of attacks on Christian religious sites. In March, three men were arrested in neighbouring Chhattisgarh state after they vandalised a church during Sunday mass.

Last year, vandals wrapped a dog chain around the neck of a statue of the Virgin Mary in the northern tourist city of Agra.

Priests and other Christian leaders have blamed the attacks on religious hardliners, who they say have become emboldened since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's right-wing government swept to power in 2014.

A series of mass conversions of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism, allegedly influenced by Hindu hardliners sometimes promising financial incentives, have also raised concern.

Around 80 per cent of India's 1.2 billion population is Hindu, but it is also home to large numbers of Muslims, Christians and Buddhists.

Indian villagers block women activists from Hindu temple

Kuwait Times (02.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1YcRRof> - Angry villagers blocked a group of women activists from entering the inner sanctum of a temple in western India yesterday, despite a court order mandating Hindu women's right to worship.

The high court in Mumbai said Friday women had a fundamental right to enter temples and directed authorities not to bar them from any Hindu place of worship across the state of Maharashtra. Buoyed by the high court order, a group of about 30 women activists tried to enter the shrine of Shani Shingnapur temple in Ahmednagar district on Saturday, television footage showed.

But hundreds of villagers—both male and female—who believe in the centuries-old tradition of barring women from entering the shrine formed a human wall, forcing the female

protesters to retreat. "The honorable court has recognized our right to pray. Police must provide us protection and allow us to enter the shrine," Trupti Desai, the activists' leader, told TV channels.

"We will not leave without entering the platform (where the Shani idol is kept)," she said amid chaotic scenes on the temple grounds. A few Hindu temples in India ban women from entering the inner sanctum, with Kerala's famous Sabarimala temple barring all female worshippers aged between 10 and 50 years.

The court also said Friday that state authorities must implement a 1956 law on Hindu worship, which stipulates that a person who prevents women from entering a temple can be imprisoned for six months. The court's directive came after Desai challenged the ban and called it "a symbol of gender inequality" that should not be tolerated in the 21st century.

Women have also been prevented from entering Mumbai's Haji Ali Dargah mausoleum since 2011, with its trust saying close female proximity to the tomb of a revered saint is "a grievous sin" in Islam.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis had earlier voiced support for Desai, saying Indian culture and Hindu religion gave women the equal right to pray. Around 80 percent of India's 1.2 billion population is Hindu, but the country is also home to large numbers of Muslims, Christians and Buddhists.

Kandhamal Christian granted month's bail after 7 years in jail

One of 7 Christians convicted of 2008 murder of Hindu leader granted interim bail. Six others still detained.

World Watch Monitor (01.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1N68dJd> - More than seven years since seven Indian Christians were arrested on suspicion of murdering a Hindu leader – whose death sparked the worst case of anti-Christian violence in India's history – one of them has been freed on interim bail for a month. All seven of them, six of whom are illiterate, continue to maintain their innocence.

Previous bail applications from the seven had been flatly rejected by the High Court of the eastern state of Odisha. But Gornath Chalanseth's successful application gives hope to the families of the other six that they too may soon be released.

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 – Bijay Kumar Sanseth, Durjo Sunamajhi, Bhaskar Sunamajhi, Budhadeb Nayak, Munda Badamajhi, Sanatan Badamajhi and Chalanseth – 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.

Chief among these is Anto Akkara, a journalist who is close to completing his fifth book about the saga, which he refers to as a great "conspiracy".

"There is absolutely no shred of evidence that links these people to the murder, so my question is: why are these people in jail?" he said. "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."

Akkara was recently 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 Prime Minister, the Chief Justice of India's Supreme Court and the Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission, asking for the release of the seven.

The 22 March bail order for Gornath Chalanseth from the Odisha High Court came a day after Akkara received a call from the National Human Rights Commission asking about the online signature campaign.

A conspiracy?

The website 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.

"Everyone should speak up for these people," said Cardinal Oswald Gracias, Archbishop of Mumbai, after the website's launch.

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.

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.

Profiles of the seven

In his forthcoming book, 'Cry of the Oppressed', Akkara profiles the seven Christians, outlining some of the reasons why he believes they are innocent.

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, 39, was called for a meeting with the police on the morning of 13 December, 2008. The next time his cousin, Paramanand Badaseth, who had travelled with him, saw him, he was being taken away in a police van.

However, Chalanseth's successful bail application has given hope to the families of the other six Christians.

"I am fine, thank you," Chalanseth said, via his son Nithaniel's phone, as he left Phulbani jail alongside his wife Ruta and other relatives, who had travelled 130km to meet him.

"They all are fine and waiting for their release," he added, excitedly, about his fellow convicts.

"This bail is a big breakthrough in the fight for justice for these voiceless people," said Akkara. "I'm really elated and happy – the judge gave instant bail! Now the precedent has been set. Once bail has been given to one, the others can ask: why has bail not been given to us?"

Impact on Kandhamal community

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.

Father Ajaya Kumar Singh, director of the Odisha Forum for Social Action told Asia News: "After the violence of 2008, young people migrated to other states in search of work."

In June 2013, according to The Hindu, a report recommended that the Odisha State government "take immediate measures to adequately rehabilitate and resettle the victim-survivors of the Kandhamal violence". The report further urged the government to "ensure full reparation to those whose livelihoods were affected due to violence and strife".

Bajrang Dal activists attacked church over "religious conversion", clothes of women stripped

The Siasat Daily (07.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1LcOZGz> - In Kachna area of Raipur, Bajrang Dal activists attacked a church yesterday suspecting religious conversion. They vandalized church premises and shouted slogans "Shri Ram Ki Jai".

The mob alleged that many people had assembled at the church for religious conversion. It is reported that five persons were injured in the attack.

According to the news published in Pradesh 18, President of Chhattisgarh Christian Forum, Arun Pannalal alleged that Bajrang Dal activists barged into the church and started vandalizing. He also alleged they stripped off the clothes of women and pushed a two-year-old boy on to the ground.

Some of them wielded with chains, rods and knives carried out gruesome attack. One of the victims who got injured who is undergoing treatment at the district hospital, told that, the assailants entered the church while praying was being offered. They alleged that conversion was going on and thrashed and molested them.

Arun Pannalal alleged that this was the fourth attack on Christian community within a span of five weeks. He also alleged that these attacks are being carried out under the patronage of BJP led government.

They are exerting pressure on the people either to convert to Hinduism or leave the place. It was reported that Vidhan Sabha Police refused to entertain their complaint, but afterwards, an FIR was lodged against unidentified assailants.

Mr. Niraj Chandrakar, ASP told that three vehicles were seized and police force was deployed.

India denies visas to U.S. religious freedom monitors

HRWF: India's government under Narendra Modi has provided cover for increasing hostility and intolerance toward non-Hindu religious minorities. Mr Modi intends to visit Brussels on 31st March. A rally is being organised to publicly protest the Prime Minister's extreme nationalist policies and the suppression of religious freedom in India.

JP Updates (06.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1QDhnRk> - A US government team that monitors religious freedom around the world has been denied visas to India, New Delhi's embassy in Washington confirmed.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) visits countries to report on violations of religious freedom and make policy recommendations to US officials.

The group said Thursday that India had refused its request for visas for a long-planned trip, saying it was "deeply disappointed."

USCIRF chairman Robert George said the group's members had traveled to nations that "are among the worst offenders of religious freedom," including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and China.

It comes as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government faces accusations it has fostered an atmosphere of rising intolerance and emboldened religious hardliners.

In its response, the Indian embassy in Washington questioned the right of a "foreign entity like USCIRF to pass its judgment and comment on the state of Indian citizens' constitutionally protected rights."

"There is no change in the policy of the government of India with respect to such visits," it said in a statement, adding that the Indian constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion.

The US group has been denied visas to visit India in the past, a spokesman for the Indian foreign ministry told AFP, without giving specific dates.

The religious monitors will still try to visit India, "given the ongoing reports from religious communities, civil society groups and NGOs that the conditions for religious freedom in India have been deteriorating since 2014," George said.

A recent spate of violent attacks on secular intellectuals and Muslims suspected of killing cows, which Hindus consider sacred, have heightened concerns of mounting intolerance under Modi's two-year-old government.

Human rights group says India needs to do more to defend religious freedom

WSJ (29.01.2016) - <http://on.wsj.com/1PYtg0W> - Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government did little to improve the protection of religious freedom in India last year, says a new Human Rights Watch report.

The New York-based advocacy group's World Report for 2015 pointed to a series of violent attacks on religious minorities in the country including the September killing of a Muslim man by a Hindu mob who suspected him of slaughtering a cow for food. The killing sparked a debate in India over whether the rise of Mr. Modi—who has Hindu nationalist roots—has emboldened people eager to push a religious agenda.

"The authorities did not press robustly for prosecution of those responsible for violent attacks on minorities, and impunity for the assailants contributed to a sense of government indifference to growing religious intolerance," the report's section on India said.

Mr. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party has deep roots in Hindu nationalism. Hindus make up 80% of India's population and many of them don't eat beef. Cows are considered holy in Hinduism.

The Human Rights Watch report drew attention to a series of attacks on Christian houses of worship and a school in India's national capital last year. In February, intruders vandalized a church in Delhi, scattering communion wafers on the altar and stairs. The attacks prompted "fears of growing Hindu nationalist militancy under the BJP government," the report said.

Spokesmen for the BJP did not respond Thursday or Friday to requests for a reaction to the report.

Last year, after the churches were attacked, Mr. Modi made broad appeals for religious harmony.

"My government will not allow any religious group, belonging to the minority or the majority to incite hatred against others, overtly or covertly," he said in a speech to Catholics in February. In October, in an interview with a local newspaper, he was quoted saying that incidents of inter-religious violence were "unfortunate" and could be "solved via dialogue."

In May, India's government rejected findings of similar report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a government organization that advises the U.S. president on religious freedom around the world. That report put India on a list of countries that engage in or tolerate violations of religious freedom.

At that time, India's foreign ministry said the report appeared to "be based on limited understanding of India, its constitution and its society."

The Human Rights Watch report also expressed concern about the Indian government's restrictions on non-governmental organizations.

In April, the government froze bank accounts belonging to Greenpeace India's arm and suspended the environmental group's foreign funding license. It claimed that the group underreported its foreign funding. Greenpeace India denied that it had broken the national foreign-funding law.

"The Indian government's clampdown on dissent this year undermines the country's long and rich tradition of free expression," Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement Wednesday.

GCIC condemns deportation of peace activist Russian Orthodox priest, Rev. Fr. Seraphym

Persecution.in (19.01.2016) - <http://persecution.in/node/3162> - The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) condemns the arrogant behavior of the Immigration Officials at the Chennai Airport towards the Peace Activist Russian Orthodox Priest, Rev. Seraphym, who was visiting India at the invitation of the Russian Ambassador to India, Mr. Alexander Kadakin. The Indian Government has deported Rev. Seraphym back to Russia. The Chennai Immigration officials have sent him back from the airport and it is also learnt that the Russian diplomats were not even allowed to visit the priest at the airport and handover some food to him.

Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) fears that this mis-adventure and violation of the covenants of Hague International convention may have its own serious repercussions on the Indian community living in Russia. We urge the Government of India to conduct an inquiry to bring out the truth behind this incident because similar complaints are emanating that Christians missionaries are singled out and are being treated as terrorists. Father Seraphym, working in the department of foreign relationship with Asia in the Russian Orthodox Church, was deported by officials of the Foreign Regional Registration Office of the Bureau of Immigration at the airport here on Sunday 17-01-2016 on the grounds that he had only a tourist visa. "He had previously visited India on a proper visa, but this time, he could not get one because of holidays in the Russian Federation. But he had an invitation from Russian Ambassador to India Alexander Kadakin. Still, he was not allowed to enter the country," a Russian Consulate source has informed. Rev. Seraphym was scheduled to participate in a special prayer here on Monday as part of his Asian trip to consulate offices in India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Nepal to give spiritual support to officials and family members of Russian embassies and other official organisations. "He is not here for preaching or evangelical work among Indian citizens," the sources inform. Earlier, the Russian Embassy in Delhi had sent an invitation to the Indian Embassy in Moscow to issue a visa to Fr. Seraphym. But he was given a visa that allowed him entry only twice.

"Since he was travelling around Asian countries, he had to enter India two times on his way to other countries. His visa expired and he could not go to Moscow to receive a new visa because of the holidays and the Indian Embassy also did not work. So he applied for a visa through Internet. But you can use Internet only for tourist visa on arrival at Chennai. He explained the problems while pointing out that he had already visited India many times. But Indian officials said he could do only sightseeing and cannot involve in other activities," the consulate source said.

Russian officials are alleging that his deportation was against the spirit of an agreement between the two countries. Russian consulate sources said the tourist visa could be utilised for humanitarian purposes too. "What disturbed the Russian diplomats most was they were not allowed to visit the priest at the airport to hand over food. Since he was not allowed to be deported through Delhi, the Russian Embassy could not hand over his winter clothes. This is unfortunate that such disrespect was shown to a priest from a friendly country. Such disrespect will not augur well for the long-term business and cultural relationship between the two countries," a consulate official said.

We can also recall at this juncture here a similar incident that occurred some time ago in which a 77 year old Nun Rev. Sister Betilla Capra of the Missionaries of the Immaculate

Congregation who had first arrived in India in 1970 and cared for people with leprosy for over 40 years. The Government of India under Narendra Modi had refused to renew her visa.

We would be very thankful if you could kindly give necessary publicity to this press release and oblige.

Thanking you,

Yours faithfully,

For Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC)
(Dr. Sajan K George)

National President

India arrests 12 for violating anti-conversion law

Those arrested say they follow Jesus but did not convert to Christianity

UCA News (18.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ODP81t> - Twelve people were arrested and jailed, accused of violating a law restricting religious conversions in central Indian Madhya Pradesh state.

They were arrested late Jan. 14 in Dahar village of the state's Dhar district and sent to jail the next day.

Those imprisoned included a blind man, and a mother with her 3-year-old child. Seven people were released on bail Jan. 17, according to Janu Bai, 35, one of the arrested.

"We did not know why we were arrested and sent to jail," Bai told ucanews.com after being released from the jail.

She said the group follows the teachings of Jesus but have not converted to Christianity and had gathered at the home of Shankar Singh to celebrate the Hindu harvest festival of Makarsankranti.

Singh said he suspects a "conspiracy" to trap him and his friends who came there by invitation. "There was no conversion activity and no attempt to convert anyone," Singh said.

Madhya Pradesh state law restricts religious conversions and makes it a criminal offense for anyone to change religion through force, allurement or through fraudulent means. Changing one's religion without informing the government is also a punishable offense, according to the law.

Singh said he does not belong to any Christian denomination. Yet Hindu activists gathered outside his house, accusing him of conversion. "They also informed the police, who arrived and booked us," Singh said.

"I have faith in Jesus and regularly pray to him," Singh told ucanews.com, explaining that he led an unhappy and alcoholic life "before experiencing the love of God" through the help of some ministers. "Later I began to follow Jesus but am not a member of any church," he said.

Anar Jamre, pastor of the Florida Fellowship Church who helps the group, said Singh and those arrested "shared same faith and prayed together."

"There is tremendous pressure on us that we cannot go and meet our people in the villages," he said.

Richard James, public relations officer for the Rashtriya Isai Mahasangh, a Christian forum in the state, said "police were hand in glove with the right-wing Hindu activists."

Together, they "have been unleashing a reign of terror against minority groups, especially Christians" ever since the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party government came to power in the state 12 years ago, he said.
