

New, More Dangerous Hindu Extremist Groups Emerge in India

✖ After more than a decade of severe persecution, India's Christian minority is growing increasingly concerned over the mushrooming of newer and deadlier Hindu extremist groups.

Gone are the days when Christians had to watch out only for the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) and its youth wing, Bajrang Dal, which are closely linked with the most influential Hindu extremist umbrella organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). With voter support faltering for the RSS's political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), moderate and extremist sections within the Hindu nationalist movement are blaming each other, and militant splinter groups have emerged.

Claiming to be breakaway factions of the RSS, new groups with even more extreme ideology are surfacing. The Abhinav Bharat (Pride of India), the Rashtriya Jagran Manch (National Revival Forum), the Sri Ram Sene (Army of god Rama), the Hindu Dharam Sena (Army for Hindu Religion) and the Sanatan Sanstha (Eternal Organization) have launched numerous violent attacks on Christian and Muslim minorities.

The Sri Ram Sene was one of the most active groups that launched a series of attacks on Christians and their property in and around Mangalore city in the southern state of Karnataka in August-September 2008, according to a report, "The Ugly Face of Sangh Parivar," published by the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), in March 2009. In Jabalpur city in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, suspected extremists from the Abhinav Bharat attacked the Rhema Gospel Church on Sept. 28, according to the Global Council of Indian

Christians. They had earlier attacked Pastor Sam Oommen and his family in the same city on Aug. 3.

The Hindu Dharam Sena has become especially terrifying for Christians in Jabalpur. Between 2006 and 2008, Jabalpur was plagued by at least three anti-Christian attacks every month, according to *The Caravan* magazine. In the western state of Gujarat and other parts of the country, the Rashtriya Jagran Manch has also violently attacked Christians, according to news website Counter Currents.

At an ecumenical meeting held in New Delhi on Oct. 24, the secretary general of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Archbishop Stanislaus Fernandes, said the rise of fundamentalism was "seriously worrying" the church in India. The meeting was held to discuss prospects for immediate enactment of federal legislation to counter religious extremism with the proposed Communal Violence (Prevention, Control and Rehabilitation of Victims) Bill of 2005.

RSS 'Too Mild'

The new groups, formed mostly by former members of RSS-connected outfits, find the Hindu nationalist conglomerate too "mild" to be able to create a nation with Hindu supremacy.

The Sri Ram Sene, mainly active in south India, was started by Pramod Muthalik after he was expelled in 2007 from the Bajrang Dal, one of the most radical groups in the RSS family, for being an extremist, according to the daily newspaper DNA.

The Hindu Dharam Sena was started by Yogesh Agarwal, former worker of the Dharam Jagran Vibhag (Religion Revival Department) of the RSS, also in 2007, as he felt "the RSS did not believe in violence," according to *The Caravan*. He had earlier launched the Dharam Sena, an offshoot of the RSS, in Madhya Pradesh and neighboring Chhattisgarh state in 2006.

The founding members of the Abhinav Bharat, which was started in Pune in 2006, also believe that the RSS is not militant enough. Outlook magazine notes that its members were planning to kill top leaders of the RSS for their inability to implement Hindu extremist ideology. The Rashtriya Jagran Manch, also a breakaway group of the RSS founded in 2007, has close links with the Abhinav Bharat.

Based out of Goa, a western state with a substantial number of Christians, the Sanatan Sanstha provides the ideological base for Hindu militant groups. It has close links with the Sri Ram Sene and publishes a periodical, Sanatan Prabhat, which occasionally spews hate against Christians.

Media reports warn of tensions due to the recent spurt in activity of the splinter groups.

"The hardliners are now getting into more extreme activities," *The Times of India* daily quoted V.N. Deshmukh, former joint director of India's Intelligence Bureau, as saying on Oct. 21.

The most extremist sections are disillusioned with the way the RSS is functioning, said Mumbai-based Irfan Engineer, Director of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Most RSS cadres were mobilized with an ideology that called for elimination of minorities, mainly Muslims and Christians, he told Compass, adding that many of them were highly disappointed with the way the movement was being led.

He said the BJP was restricted when it led a coalition government at the federal level from 1998 to 2004, keeping it from effectively working towards a Hindu nation. A majority of the BJP's allies in the National Democratic Alliance were not Hindu nationalists.

"One section of the [Hindu nationalist] movement believes in acquiring state power by participating in parliamentary democracy, and the other wants to create a Hindu nation by violent means," Engineer said.

It is believed that the divide within the RSS family may deepen even further.

Analysts believe that Hindu nationalism is losing relevance in national politics, as was evident in the two successive defeats of the BJP in the 2004 and 2009 general elections. Consequently, the RSS and the BJP may distance themselves from the hard-line ideology or make it sound more inclusive and less militant.

After this year's elections, the RSS increasingly has begun to talk about the threat China poses to India and the need for development in rural areas, instead of its pet issues like Islamist terrorism and Christian conversions. This has disappointed sections of the highly charged cadres even more, and the splintering may accelerate.

For the next few years, "we will see more new names and new faces but with the same ideology and inspiration," said Anwar Rajan, secretary of the PUCL in Pune.

Whether the new groups truly have no connection with the RSS is not fully known – that appearance may be an RSS strategy to evade legal action, said Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, chairman of the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism in Mumbai.

He said relations between the RSS and the new groups can be compared with the ones between Maoist (extreme Marxist) rebels and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) in India. While the CPI-M distances itself from Maoist violence, it speaks for the rebels whenever security forces crack down on them.

At base, the newer rightwing groups surely have the sympathy of the RSS, said Pune-based S.M. Mushrif, former Inspector General of Police in Maharashtra, who has been observing Hindu extremist groups for years.