

Christians in India Fear Backlash at Massive 'Reconversion' Event

✘ Responding to a petition by the state Catholic Bishops Conference, the High Court of Madhya Pradesh yesterday directed the state government to ensure the safety of Christians during a massive Hindu nationalist rally scheduled tomorrow through Saturday (Feb. 10-12) in Mandla.

Organizers of the Maa Narmada Samajik Kumbh (Mother Narmada Social Kumbh, with "kumbh" literally meaning, "pot") on the banks of the Narmada River hope to draw 2 million pilgrims to the event. Christian leaders said that the Kumbh is the latest in a series of anti-Christian propaganda events that Hindu nationalist organizations have held in recent years.

"We are worried about our safety and security, as our attempt to get adequate protection from the state government received a very cool response," said Bishop Gerald Almeida of Jabalpur.

A similar event in Dangs district, Gujarat state in 2006 was filled with hate speech against Christians and attempted mass "reconversions," and area media in Mandla district have already begun carrying false stories of "forced conversion" and other malicious accusations against Christians.

A local tribal party known as the Gond Mahasabha (Great Assembly of the Gonds) has vehemently opposed the Kumbh. The Gonds, whose origins predate Hindu presence in the area, have stated that they are not Hindus and are against the proposed ghar wapasi or "homecoming" ceremony – a "reconversion" drive by the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS umbrella group of hard-line Hindu extremist groups asserts that all people born in India are Hindus, and that therefore anyone who believes otherwise must be "reconverted" back to

Hinduism.

The Gonds have delivered an ultimatum to the RSS threatening violence should even one case of "reconversion" occur at the Kumbh. They have called for a protest tomorrow (Feb. 10), and clashes are expected.

The former chief minister and general secretary of the Congress Party, Digvijay Singh, has also protested the event, accusing the RSS of "brainwashing the people."

Dr. John Dayal, secretary general of the All India Christian Council (AICC), told Compass that the Sangh Parivar (the RSS and its affiliates) "has left no one in any doubt" that the main reason for the Kumbh "is to purge the region of 'Christian missionaries' they accuse of carrying on large-scale conversions of tribals, mostly Gonds, in this part of the country."

Dayal and Vijayesh Lal, secretary of the Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, made a recent fact-finding trip to Mandla and compiled a report. In a press statement, Dayal said that they supported the freedom to hold large-scale religious events.

"But, we fear that, even if there is no violence or a forcible conversion of Christians to Hinduism during the Kumbh, the Hindutva [Hindu nationalist] campaign has poisoned the atmosphere in Madhya Pradesh," Dayal stated. "This will negatively impact relationships between Christian and other tribals in the hamlets, villages, and townships of the region."

The activity of hard-line Hindu nationalists in Madhya Pradesh could damage freedom of religion in the region, he added. "It may also negatively impact the continuing social work of Christians, including schools and medical centers in under-developed districts."

Sources in the region have indicated to Compass that a hate campaign against Christians is already underway, fanned by local-language media reports hostile to Christian workers.

“The propaganda against Christians is getting serious by the day,” Pastor Rakesh Dass of Mandla told Compass. “Just a few days back, there was a report in a local newspaper that a Christian priest was coercing three tribal children to convert to Christianity. Remarks from the district collector were taken, and a case was made of forcible conversion, whereas the reality was completely different.”

Hindu nationalists publicized the accusations, Pastor Dass said.

“We refuted the news and submitted a memorandum to the district collector, but the very next day the local papers carried news against Christian missionaries and alleged that Christians are opposing the organizing of the Kumbh in the area.”

While some clippings of local-language newspapers targeting Christian churches are highly malicious, organizers are also forcing Christians to help finance the event, Christian leaders said.

“Christian pastors have been forced to give donations to the cause of the Kumbh,” said Anoop George, an independent pastor in Mandla. “Christian families are being forced to give rice and pulses as their contribution to the Kumbh, and they are being threatened with dire consequences if they continue to preach the message of Jesus Christ in and around Mandla.”

Pastor George told Compass that a lot of anti-minority – especially anti-Christian – materials were appearing in the area.

“Posters denouncing the church and missionaries are being put up around Mandla, and pamphlets are being distributed against

the so-called anti-national activities of the Christians,” he said.

Another pastor on condition of anonymity told Compass, “The Superintendent of Police had sent us a letter on his official letterhead asking the Christian institutions to remain closed from Jan. 23 till mid February to accommodate the pilgrims. Later, when we took the matter up with him, he denied any such letter being sent from him.”

Tribal students in government hostels have been mobilized to go to villages to educate people about the “nefarious designs of the missionaries,” the pastor sadly added.

Dayal and Lal reported how Hindu nationalists were using the administration to target Christian institutions.

“The police issued a notice to Sister Olga Lucas of the Deenbandhudham Convent in Mandla that they were investigating complaints and wanted the convent to give a list of the nuns serving in the convent with details, further details of their bank accounts, the details of other inmates, numbers of landline and mobile telephones in the convent and the names of those who owned these instruments,” their report noted. “Going to ridiculous lengths, the police also asked for full details of patients undergoing treatment in the hospital and clinics and the details of the administrative structure of the congregation of the nuns, together with names, addresses and phone numbers of the office bearers and superiors. Similar notices were also issued to other Catholic priests and Protestant pastors.”

The report also noted that that the government of Madhya Pradesh was “going all out” to ensure the success of the Kumbh, reportedly allotting 1.4 billion rupees (US\$30.7 million) for infrastructure and other arrangements.

“Police from the division but also other parts of the state are being deployed, as prominent Hindu religious leaders as

well as activists of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal and other Hindu organizations, besides prominent Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] leaders, are expected to attend," the report notes. "We were given to understand that chief ministers of BJP-ruled states, including Mr. Narendra Modi of Gujarat, Mr. Shivraj Singh Chauhan of Madhya Pradesh and Mr. Raman Singh of Chhattisgarh, were also expected to attend."

When plans for the Kumbh in Mandla district were announced in May 2010, an area house church was attacked. (See , "Hindu Nationalists in India Plan 'Religious Cleansing' in Madhya Pradesh District," May 20, 2010.)

The Kumbh venue is spread over a 14 square-kilometer (nearly nine square-mile) area

Previous Kumbh

The Ma Narmada Samajik Kumbh is a follow-up of the Shabri Kumbh held Feb. 11-13, 2006 in tribal-dominated Dangs district of Gujarat state.

Besides hate speeches before, during and after the event, the Kumbh also led to the beating of Christians, with many abandoning the area, and much loss of Christian property, including graveyards. Christian graves were reportedly dug up and crosses desecrated.

The Supreme Court of India subsequently banned a CD produced by the event organizing committee entitled "Shri Shabri Kumbh 2006: Spirituality along with the Wave of Patriotism," ruling that it incited "Hindus against the Christian community and suggests that Christians be attacked and beheaded."

Swami Aseemanand of Dangs was the main force behind the Shabri Kumbh in 2006. He is now in police custody, under investigation for his part in terrorist targeting of religious minorities, including alleged involvement in the bombing of Muslim shrines and mosques, as well as the bombing of the

India-Pakistan “peace train” in 2007.

Church leaders also believe that Aseemanand was also the mastermind of the attacks on churches in Dangs district in 1998.

Traditionally a Kumbh is a mass Hindu pilgrimage celebrated every three years. The Ardh Kumbh is a bigger event celebrated every six years, while the full Kumbh – known as the Purna Kumbh – is celebrated every 12 years. A Maha (great) Kumbh is held every 144 years at Allahabad. The last Mahakumbh was held at Allahabad in 2001 and was attended by 60 million people, making it the largest gathering of people anywhere in the world in recorded history.

“What distinguishes the Narmada Samajik Kumbh from the others is that it is part of a very recent series of religious festivals invented by the Sangh Parivar as part of an ideological campaign to animate tribal populations in western and central India,” the report by Dayal and Lal states.

According to RSS leader Mukund Rao, the “social Kumbh” began in 2006 with the Shabri Kumbh in Dangs, Gujarat – described as an attempt to counter the influence of foreign Christian workers in the area. It resulted in propaganda against Christians and heightened tensions.