

Christians Suspect Cover-Up in Pastor's Death in Orissa, India

Relatives of a pastor who was found dead in a secluded area in eastern Orissa state's Kandhamal district last week have accused local police of a cover-up.

The body of Saul Pradhan, a 45-year-old independent pastor whose house was burned by Hindu extremists two years ago, was found near a pond in Pakala village in Kandhamal's Raikia Block on Jan. 11 and bore marks of assault, Catholic activist Ajay Singh told Compass.

"I spoke to the widow of the pastor, and she told me that the hands and legs of the deceased looked twisted, and there was blood in his mouth. His pants were also torn," Singh said by phone from Orissa's capital, Bhubaneswar. "Why should it not arouse suspicion when Pastor Pradhan was last seen with two Hindu men, Marda Pradhan and Baiju Mallick, who were among the rioters who burned houses of Christians in 2008?"

A local activist with the Evangelical Fellowship of India said he visited the site after the body had been removed and saw blood stains on a stone.

Kandhamal witnessed two of India's deadliest waves of anti-Christian violence in December 2007 and August-September 2008; the latter killed over 100 people, destroyed thousands of homes and displaced more than 60,000 others after a Hindu nationalist leader was killed by Maoists; Hindu nationalist groups blamed it on local Christians.

Christian residents of Kandhamal say the antagonism toward them by those who engaged in the attacks under the influence of extremist Hindu nationalists remains strong.

Singh said that the two Hindu men who burned houses of Christians in 2008, Marda Pradhan and Mallick, came to Pastor Pradhan's house the evening of Jan. 10 and asked him to come out.

"The pastor's wife was about to serve dinner and so asked him to wait," he said. "But he said he wouldn't take long."

When the pastor did not return the next day, his wife went to the house of Marda Pradhan with a few villagers. Marda Pradhan's wife told them her husband had been in the jungle for three days because of a leg injury, Singh said.

That afternoon, the pastor's wife and the villagers again went to the house of Marda Pradhan, whose wife claimed he was not there. They could see him inside the house, however, and asked him to take them to the spot in the jungle where he had taken Pastor Pradhan the previous night. After walking for around half an hour, Marda Pradhan ran away, Singh said.

"The villagers got suspicious and began to look around," he said. "That's when they found the body lying near a pond."

Some area residents told the villagers that they had heard loud quarreling the previous night.

Police, however, say they have found little reason to suspect foul play.

"There were no injury marks on the body of the man," Inspector Ravi Narayan Barik told Compass, refuting the claims of the dead man's family. "The doctor who performed the autopsy said it was just an unnatural death."

According to police, Pastor Pradhan and two other men got drunk on the night of Jan. 10. The two others were able to return to their homes, Barik said, while the pastor could not and died in the cold.

"Drinking country-made liquor is normal behavior here," said Barik, of the Raikia police station. "We called one of the two men who was with the deceased for interrogation but did not find anything suspicious."

An official autopsy report was still awaited at press time.

Asked what sections of the Indian Penal Code or the Criminal Procedure Code were mentioned in the First Information Report or the formal police complaint, the official said, "None."

"The family is spreading rumors about murder in hope of receiving compensation from the government, as many victims of the 2008 violence got compensated," the inspector said.

Activist Singh said when the family went to police to report the suspected murder, officers were unwilling to listen.

"The police scolded them," Singh said. "They said he must have died from the cold. When the family asked for an autopsy, the police asked them to collect the body, take it to the village and bring it to the police station the following day."

But after the family insisted, the police asked them to bring the body the same day, he said.

"So the family and friends carried the body on a bicycle and brought it to the police station," Singh said. Asked why police did not go to collect the body, Singh said, "This is how it happens here."

Singh also said he heard that some local politicians from the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) visited the Raikia police station after the death was reported, though he added that he "could not confirm if that actually happened."

Until March 2009, the BJP was a ruling party in Orissa in coalition with a regional party, the Biju Janata Dal, for 11 years.

Dr. Sajan George of the Global Council of Indian Christians called for an investigation by the Central Bureau of Investigation, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency reported on Monday (Jan. 17).

“The killing of Saul [Pradhan] seemed to be an organized crime by a section of people who had threatened him a few months ago, his family members alleged, adding that his house was also torched during the Kandhamal riots in 2008,” George told PTI.