

India's Christians Suffer Spike in Assaults in Past Decade

NEW DELHI (CDN) – Christians in India faced a spike in attacks in the past decade, suffering more than 130 assaults a year since 2001, with figures far surpassing that in 2007 and 2008.

This year Christians suffered at least 149 violent attacks, according to the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI). Most of the incidents took place in just four states: two adjacent states in south India, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, and two neighboring states in north-central India, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, noted EFI in its report, "Religion, Politics and Violence: A Report of the Hostility and Intimidation Faced by Christians in India in 2010."

Of India's 23 million Christians, 2.7 million live in the four states seen as the hub of Christian persecution. While north-central parts of the country have been tense for a decade, the escalation of attacks in southern India began last year.

This year Karnataka recorded at least 56 attacks – most of them initially reported by the Global Council of Indian Christians, which is based in the state capital, Bengaluru. Chhattisgarh witnessed 18 attacks, followed by Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh with 15 and 13 attacks respectively.

Christians are not stray incidents but are part of a systematic campaign by influential [Hindu nationalist] organizations capable of flouting law and enjoying impunity," the EFI report said.

In 2009 there were more than 152 attacks across India, and the

same four states topped the list of violent incidents, according to the EFI: 48 in Karnataka, 29 in Andhra Pradesh, 15 in Madhya Pradesh and 14 in Chhattisgarh.

Three of the four states – Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh – are ruled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the EFI noted that the high number of attacks on Christians in those states was no coincidence.

“While it cannot be said that the ruling party had a direct role in the attacks on Christians, its complicity cannot be ruled out either,” the report stated.

In Andhra Pradesh, ruled by centrist Indian National Congress (commonly known as the Congress Party), most attacks are believed to be led by Hindu nationalist groups.

EFI remarked that “although in 2007 and 2008 two major incidents of violence occurred in eastern Orissa state’s Kandhamal district and hit headlines in the national as well as international media, little efforts have been taken by authorities in India to tackle the root causes of communal tensions, namely divisive propaganda and activities by powerful right-wing Hindu groups, who do not represent the tolerant Hindu community.”

The violence in Kandhamal district during Christmas week of 2007 killed at least four Christians and burned 730 houses and 95 churches, according to the All India Christian Council (AICC). These attacks were preceded by around 200 incidents of anti-Christian attacks in other parts of the country.

Violence re-erupted in Kandhamal district in August 2008, killing more than 100 people and resulting in the incineration of 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions, according to the AICC.

Soon the violence spread to other states. In Karnataka, at least 28 attacks were recorded in August and September 2008, according to a report by People's Union of Civil Liberties, "The Ugly Face of Sangh Parivar," released in March 2009.

Before the two most violent years of 2007 and 2008, incidents of persecution of Christians had dipped to the lowest in the decade. In 2006 there were at least 130 incidents – more than two a week on average – according to the Christian Legal Association of India.

At least 165 anti-Christian attacks were reported in 2005. But from 2001 to 2004, at least 200 incidents were reported each year, according to John Dayal, secretary general of the AICC.

In 1998, Christians were targeted by the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS –India's chief Hindu nationalist conglomerate and the BJP's ideological mentor – when Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, Catholic by descent, became the president of India's Congress Party. Gandhi, the wife of former Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi, was seen as a major threat to the BJP, which had come to power for the first time at the federal level the same year. The Gandhi family has been popular since the Independence of India in 1947.

But Christian persecution – murder, beating, rape, false accusation, ostracism, and destruction of property – had begun spreading across the country in 2001, especially in tribal-inhabited states in central India. The attacks on Christians were apparently aimed at coaxing Sonia Gandhi to speak on behalf of Christians so that she could be branded as a leader of the Christian minority, as opposed to the BJP's claimed leadership of the Hindu majority. Observers say it is therefore not surprising that Gandhi has never spoken directly against Christian persecution in India.

Change in Political Atmosphere

After Hindu nationalist groups were linked with bombings in late 2008, the RSS and the BJP distanced themselves from those charged with the terrorist violence. The BJP also adopted a relatively moderate ideological stand in campaigns during state and federal elections.

The BJP, mainly the national leadership, has become more moderate also because it has faced embarrassing defeats in the last two consecutive general elections, in 2004 and 2009, which it fought on a mixed plank of Hindu nationalism and development. The voters in the two elections clearly indicated that they were more interested in development than divisive issues related to identity – thanks to the process of economic liberalization which began in India in 1991.

The incidence of Christian persecution, however, remains high because not all in the BJP and the RSS leadership seem willing to “dilute” their commitment to Hindu nationalism. Especially some in the lower rungs and in the regional leadership remain hardliners.

How this ideological rift within the Hindu nationalist family will play out next year and in the coming decade is yet to be seen. There is speculation, however, that more individuals and outfits formerly connected with the RSS will part ways and form their own splinter groups.

Although politicians are increasingly realizing that religion-related conflicts are no longer politically beneficial, it is perhaps too early to expect a change on the ground. This is why none of the “anti-conversion” laws has been repealed.

Four Indian states – Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Arunachal Pradesh – had introduced legislation to regulate religious conversion, known as “anti-conversion” laws, before 2001, and since then three more states – Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh – brought in such laws, while two states

sought to make existing laws stricter.

Anti-conversion laws are yet to be implemented, however, in Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan. The anti-conversion amendment bills in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have also faced political hurdles.

Although the anti-conversion laws claim to ban conversions undertaken by force or allurement – terms that have not been defined adequately – they are commonly used to jail or otherwise harass Christians who are simply following Christ's mandate to help the poor and make disciples. The laws also require all conversions to be reported to the authorities, failing which both convert and relevant clergy can be fined and imprisoned.

Some of these laws also require a prospective convert to obtain prior permission before conversion.

Concerns in 2011

Hard-line Hindu nationalists are seeking to create more fodder for communal conflicts and violence.

In April 2010, Hindu nationalists declared their plan to hold a rally of 2 million Hindus in Madhya Pradesh state's Mandla district in February 2011, with the aim of converting Christians back to Hinduism and driving away pastors, evangelists and foreign aid workers from the district.

Several spates of violence have been linked to past rallies. India's first large-scale, indiscriminate attack on Christians took place in Dangs district of Gujarat state in December 1998 after local Hindu nationalist groups organized such a rally. The violence led to mass destruction of property belonging to local Christians and Christian organizations.

Law and order is generally a responsibility of the states, but

how the federal government and other agencies respond to the call for the rally in Madhya Pradesh may indicate what to expect in the coming months and years in India.