

16 Christians Arrested Under New Anti-Conversion Law

A group of 16 Indian tribal Christians who visited another tribal family in the eastern state of Jharkhand to talk to them about Christianity are in police custody after the local village head accused them of “conversion by inducement”.

Last year, Jharkhand became the seventh Indian state to introduce a so-called “anti-conversion law”. Although ostensibly aimed at preventing “forced conversions”, in reality such laws are often used to prevent all conversions—whether by force or through free choice—and especially conversions away from Hinduism to minority religions such as Christianity.

Two months ago, 15 Christians were arrested under the same law.

In his complaint to police, Ramesh Murmu, the village president of Phulpahari, in Dumka District, alleged that 25 unknown people entered the village in the late evening on 5 July, installed a microphone and began proselytising the tribal villagers.

A group of 25 Christian youths, volunteers from the Friends Missionary Prayer Band (FMPB), who are all also Adivasi (Sanskrit for “aboriginals”) tribals from different parts of eastern India, were on a mission to preach in the tribal hamlets.

They visited Biti Soren’s family in Phulpahari.

“We are the only Christian family here, and the FMPB group prayed for us and sang a couple of hymns, before the supporters of the village president opposed this prayer service,” Soren, who has now fled her village, told World

Watch Monitor.

“[The villagers] threatened that there should not be any Christian teachings in the village,” she said, adding: “They were saying [the group’s] vehicles should be set on fire so nobody could move from here.”

‘Your religion is bad’

The first complaint submitted by the village president to police, the morning after the group’s visit, said villagers had stopped the Christians from preaching against their gods and idol worship, and had held them all hostage all night. That morning, the police took the 25 youths into custody.

“My husband only went to the police station to give a statement that we had invited the FMPB brethren to our house and that there was no attempt to forcefully convert anybody, but he too was taken into custody,” Soren told World Watch Monitor.

“I am now afraid to go back to the village, with my infant, in my husband’s absence. They instigated the villagers against Christianity. I am too scared. They tried to put me also in jail.”

“The tribals in Jharkhand are either Sarna [religion of the indigenous people] or Hindu, and the 25 Christians who entered the village were putting the tribes under pressure to convert,” Inspector Manoj Kumar of Shikaripara police station, 70km south of Phulpahari, told World Watch Monitor.

Asked what kind of pressure, Inspector Kumar said: “Firstly, they are 25 in number and entered the village at night. They belong to different parts of the country; one is from Bengal and another from elsewhere. They came to this tribal hamlet and started inducing the illiterate, innocent tribals to convert.

“They told the villagers: ‘Your religion is bad’, and that ‘Satan lives in your worship places,’ and said that ‘only conversion to Christianity will do you good’. And when the villagers answered that they are happy with their own religion, then the Christians have tried a variety of ways to lure them. They were luring the villagers by telling them the advantages that conversion to Christianity can fetch.

“When the villagers told the Christians that nobody can enter our village without the president’s permission, they said that they have permission from a superior authority, far above the village president. That was the reason why they were confined that night—the villagers said: ‘Call the authority who sent you here; we will let you go if you call that person.’ And waited until it was morning and then complained to the police station.”

Asked why the Christians were held hostage by villagers, Inspector Kumar countered: “Then why had they [Christians] gone there? They were not brought from anywhere and held hostage; the Christians have themselves gone to the village, and if an unknown person enters their area and starts speaking against their faith, what else would they do?”

FMPB coordinators said: “The whole day and night of Friday, 6 July, the police kept the Christians, including the minors—against whom there was no FIR [police report], in their custody.”

Inspector Kumar told World Watch Monitor: “An FIR has been registered against 16 of the 25. The remaining seven are minors and women, and so we handed them to their families. The 16 were presented before the court and were sent to judicial custody, in Dumka Central Jail, yesterday [July 7].”

The village head’s later complaint, attached to the FIR, accused the Christians of conversions by inducement. Jharkhand’s new law, contrary to what many believe, does not

criminalize conversion from one belief (including Hinduism and Sarna) to another, but does forbid inducement or allurement.

“The changes in the narrative are of serious concern. It is sad that it appears the complaint has been modified in a way to frame the Christians under the anti-conversion act,” FMPB field missionary Ramesh Velraj told World Watch Monitor.

“The missionaries are well trained, and there is no chance they would utter a word against other religions or even mention Satan. They take this job of sharing [the] gospel as their calling, and have already been to 20 other villages in the state [before visiting Phulpahari] and have been witnessing souls coming to Christ.”

Inspector Kumar alleged: “Today, 90 per cent of tribals here practice Christianity; please come and do a study of how is this happening? The Christians employ various tricks to evangelize the poor, illiterate tribals,”

Soren told World Watch Monitor: “The prayer was at our house and neighbors and relatives also gathered, so this annoyed the village president and his supporters.”

‘Vital Role’

On July 7, the day after the police arrests, members of the Hindu nationalist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) held an event in the village to celebrate the court’s order that sent the 16 Christians to jail. The village president was garlanded and appreciated by key BJP and RSS leaders who attended.

Local Christians say that Jharkhand’s BJP government authorities combine together with indigenous Sarna advocates against Christian missionary work amongst the poor, rural, illiterate Adivasis. One local Christian priest, who wished to remain anonymous, told World Watch Monitor: “The Christian missionaries have played a vital role in bringing education to

the Adivasis. They have reached even the remotest parts of Jharkhand, started good schools and propagated the love of God through various activities.”

So far, 31 Christians have been charged under Section 4 of Jharkhand’s anti-conversion act, officially titled the Freedom of Religion Act, since it came into force in February.

The law passed by the state legislature punishes a person guilty of forcible conversions of a minor, woman or a person belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (members of India’s lowest caste) by imprisonment of four years and a fine up to 100,000 rupees (U.S. \$1,500). It prescribes prior permission from the district collector to convert to another faith. Local Catholic leaders, such as Prabhaakr Tirkey, said at the time that Hindu nationalists misinterpret Christian missionary services of healthcare and education as “allurement” and fraudulent means for conversions. {eo}

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