

Christmas Season Attacks Worry Christians in India

✖ With at least two violent attacks and alleged “reconversion” of more than 1,700 Christians in the week leading up to Christmas, a sense of fear is growing among India’s minority Christian community.

On Sunday, Hindu extremists attacked a church during worship in western Maharashtra state’s Sindhudurg district and a Christmas exhibition in Gwalior city in central Madhya Pradesh state. The following day, extremists claimed having converted over 1,700 tribal (aboriginal) Christians “back” to Hinduism in western Gujarat state.

“Christmas is a favorite time for violence against Christians in India, as it intimidates the Christian community at large,” said Dr. John Dayal, member of the government’s National Integration Council, headed by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Dayal pointed out that the first mass attack on Christians in India took place in Gujarat’s Dangs district during Christmas in 1998, setting the stage for future attacks through the season.

“Then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee [of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP] went to see the damage [in Dangs], but instead of commiserating with the victims, he called for a national debate on conversions,” Dayal said. “That political philosophy has been behind the festive season attacks on the Christian community.”

The Rev. Anand Muttungal of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Madhya Pradesh said the attacks around Christmas could be a reaction to increased and favorable coverage of Christians and churches in newspapers and television channels during the

festival season.

“Rightwing extremists cannot tolerate this, and they cannot stop it either,” he said. “So, in frustration, they launch attacks.”

On Christmas Eve of 2007, eastern Orissa’s Kandhamal district witnessed a massive spate of anti-Christian attacks that killed at least four Christians and burned 730 houses and 95 churches.

Arson in Madhya Pradesh

The assailants in the Dec. 20 attack in Madhya Pradesh state have been identified as members of the extreme rightwing outfit *Bajrang Dal*. Muttungal said members of the Hindu extremist group shouted Hindu slogans and burned artwork depicting biblical scenes at an annual Christmas fair organized by the Catholic Church in Gwalior city.

The mayor of Gwalior had inaugurated the two-day fair on Saturday (Dec. 19), and it was organized with due permission from authorities, he said.

“The incident has spread panic among Christians in the state,” reported *Indian Catholic*, a news portal run by the Catholic Church in India.

The portal quoted Archbishop Leo Cornelio of Bhopal as saying that the attack “is a matter of serious concern for Christians, especially when we are preparing to celebrate Christmas.”

Three of the attackers were arrested, and two of them were sent to judicial custody by a local court.

Also on Sunday, around 60 men barged into the New Life Fellowship (NLF) church in Kankauli area in Maharashtra’s Sindhudurg district and beat the pastor, his wife and a few other Christians, according to NLF Pastor Atul Bhore. The

church meets at the privately owned Anant Hotel in Kankauli.

"The attackers, all men, accused us of converting Hindus," the 37-year-old pastor told Compass. "Then they beat us, including my wife, with their hands and legs. My back is still in pain."

The attackers were allegedly led by a local leader of the Hindu extremist *Shiv Sena* party, identified as Vaibhav Naik. Also taking a lead role in the attack was a local leader of the ruling Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Rupesh Nagrekar.

The NCP is part of the ruling state coalition with the Congress Party. As policy, both parties renounce the Hindu nationalist ideology of the opposition *Shiv Sena* party and its ally the BJP. But involvement of local leaders of the two "secular" parties is not uncommon in Maharashtra.

An official from the Kankauli police station said police were on the lookout for the attackers, and that they would be arrested soon.

A Christian from the NLF church said police were initially reluctant to take action against the attackers.

"The police warned us against 'conversions,' as if the allegations made against us were true," the Christian said. "Only after Dr. Abraham Mathai from the Maharashtra State Minorities Commission intervened did the police show interest in prosecuting the attackers."

'Reconversions' in Gujarat

Following these two attacks, yesterday (Dec. 21) Hindu extremist group *Shree Sampraday Seva Samiti* (Service Committee of the Hindu sect *Shree Sampraday*) claimed to have "reconverted" 1,747 people to Hinduism in Gujarat state's Surat city, reported *The Times of India* newspaper.

"The camp to reconvert tribals, who had embraced Christianity, was held in the city for the first time, and nearly 5,000

people from Maharashtra and Gujarat participated in the ceremony,” the newspaper reported.

About 10 Hindu priests chanted mantras at a fire ritual, around which sat those willing to “get back” to Hinduism, it stated, adding that participants were given a meditation word and sacred thread to mark their “reconversion.”

“We organized the event in Surat to promote Hinduism in urban areas,” one of the organizers, Yashwant More, told the newspaper. “We have a series of events planned in the near future to hold such reconversion camps in urban areas of Gujarat. In January, events are planned in Vadodara and Silvassa.”

Gujarat has an anti-conversion law, known as the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act, which mandates all those seeking to convert, as well as clergy involved in any “conversion ceremony,” to seek prior permission from district authorities. No permission was sought for the event, noted the newspaper.

Christians complain that anti-conversion laws, in force in four other states including Madhya Pradesh, have been enacted only to harass Christians and are rarely used against Hindu nationalist groups.

Sociologists say that India’s tribal peoples, who have long practiced their own ethnic faiths, are not Hindus. Hindu nationalists are active mainly in tribal regions to “Hinduize” local villagers and repel conversions to other faiths.

Many reports of “reconversions,” however, have been found to be false. In 2007, Hindi-language daily *Punjab Kesari* reported that four Christian families in Nahan town, in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, had “reconverted” to Hinduism. But a fact-finding team of the All India Christian Council revealed that none of the members of those families had ever converted to Christianity.

More than 80 percent of India's 1.1 billion people are Hindus; Christians make up a meager 2.3 percent of the population.

Opposition and attacks will not dampen the spirit of Christmas, said Dayal.

"The birth of Christ is a harbinger of salvation, and this salvific promise goads us on to celebrate Christmas without fear," he said. "We will not be cowed, or scared, or intimidated into retracting from our faith and from celebrating the birth of the Messiah."