

Harassment, Persecution Pattern Worsens Against Indian Christians

In vast and diverse India, Christians often live freely. Yet India ranks among the 50 countries where life as a Christian is most difficult, according to Open Doors International, a global ministry that serves Christians who are pressured because of their faith. The country is No. 31 on Open Doors' 2013 World Watch List, largely because of a streak of Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, that envisions India as a purely Hindu state.

Each month, numerous reports surface of provincial Hindutva militants breaking up prayer meetings, intimidating pastors, assaulting worshippers, and chasing Christian families from their homes and villages. The dates, locations and names change, but many of the elements remain: Christians are accused of forcing Hindus to convert; church buildings are damaged; area church leaders intervene; police often provide little protection. The incidents reported here, for May and June, contain more of the same.

Hindutva has a political base in India's rightwing, nationalist Bharatiya Janta Party, or BJP. It is the No. 2 party in the national assembly and holds or shares power in seven of India's 28 states, comprising about 15 per cent of India's population. "This ideology ... has firm root and strong support in many government structures as in the police," the World Watch List says.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an advisory body to the U.S. Congress, notes the Indian government has created programs intended to prevent religious intimidation. But it also says the country's overburdened

courts, rife with “political corruption, and religious bias, particularly at the state and local levels,” rarely punish Hindutva aggression.

The result, the commission says, is a “climate of impunity,” especially in states with anti-conversion laws. Five Indian states, three of them BJP-controlled, have passed laws placing restrictions on religious conversions.

“While intended to reduce forced conversions and decrease communal violence, states with these laws have higher incidents of intimidation, harassment, and violence against religious minorities, particularly Christians, than states that do not,” the commission’s 2013 annual report claims.

Incidents in May and June, listed by state:

Karnataka

May 15: Hindu nationalists rally in Pakshirajapura, accusing Pastor Steven Suresh of forcefully converting members of the nomadic Hikki Pikki Adivasi tribe to Christianity and insulting Hindu gods. Police arrest Suresh and 11 other Christians. Pastor Shiibu of Indian Evangelical Church tells World Watch Monitor the new converts were forbidden to draw water from the town well, and denied government-subsidised staples such as rice and sugar.

June 26: In Narasipura, a crowd burns Zion Church, beats the pastor and five church members, following repeated calls to stop holding worship services, according to the pastor, named Annaiah. Three days later, the temporary shed built to replace the church is also burned. Police tell Hindus to stop disturbing the church, and tell Christians to stop holding meetings and to pray at home.

Odisha

May 21: Hindutva extremists attack Kati Singh in Bhalukasai

village after he refuses to contribute to the local Hindu festivals. Singh is injured and admitted to Nilgiri Government Hospital. According to the All India Christian Council, Singh files a complaint with police, who turn aside his petition and ask Singh to make a festival donation.

June 12: The third day of a three-day meeting of pastors and church leaders conducted by Independent Pentecostal Church in Canalpada is disrupted when a crowd barges in, accusing organisers of forceful conversion, according to one of the guest speakers, Rev. Suratmahat Samal. Some of the intruders use motorcycles to chase several meeting participants as they leave the session in an auto-rickshaw. The rickshaw overturns, injuring eight.

Uttar Pradesh

June 10: Returning home from a visit to a church member in Sonari, Pastor Ram Prakash from the Prakash Healing Society's Church is stopped by a group, which threatens to kill him if he doesn't stop holding worship meetings in the area, according to the Evangelical Fellowship of India. Prakash tells World Watch Monitor that the church member, named Raghu, "has been visiting our church for the past two years and I went to his house as he invited me to pray for him and his family." The militants threaten to burn Raghu's house. Prakash files a complaint with police, with no response.

Manipur

June 10: Some residents of Kongpal assault Pastor A. Shyam and damage the newly built Victory Church of India, according to the Evangelical Fellowship of India. They complain the church, completed in May, is an insult because it is built adjacent to an historic site.

Tamil Nadu

June 9: Pastor Ram Chandra is beaten by Hindu attackers after

he prays for a sick man, according to Pastor C.V Chacko of the Indian Pentecostal Church. Chacko tells World Watch Monitor that the man's wife and children asked Chandra to pray with them, and that protesters massed at the family's home, setting upon Chandra as he left the house.

Maharashtra

May 5: A mob of about 20 enters Maranatha Worship Centre in Pimpri village during services, menaces the 50 assembled parishioners assembled for evening prayer, and orders the priest to leave town and close the church, according to the Catholic Christian Secular Forum. The priest, Fr. Wilson Patole, suffers a swollen eye and other bruises.

May 23: Intruders barge into the Sarfabad house of Gyaneshwar Kurwade as they are gathered for an evening family prayer. The intruders assault Kurwade and his son, Shrikrishana, saying they don't want Christian activity in the area. The victims report the assault to police, but no action is taken.

June 6: State police in Pandherwani file a First Information Report against local Christians after Hindus accuse them of forceful conversion. Sudharkar Mavli, field coordinator for Indian Evangelical Mission, tells World Watch Monitor that some of Hindus in the town have assaulted Christians, destroyed a house, seized farmland, and have ordered Christians to leave the village.

Andhra Pradesh

June 4: In Thukkuguda, Hindu extremists attack a Telegu pastors meeting, hurl verbal abuse at their faith and caste, and beat them with sticks, according to Pastor Bhagati Timothy. Four pastors suffer significant injuries and are taken to the hospital. Police register a First Information Report against the attackers. No arrests have yet been made.

June 10: A Hindu mob, assisted by Dhanjiy Reddy, a local

government official, demolishes Christ Church in Gutta Begumpet, making good on a year of insistence that Pastor Paul Viswas stop church services. At the intervention of area church elders, Reddy is transferred to a different area.

Tripura

April 28: Angry Hindus in Twirisa interrupt worship meetings on April 14, 21 and 28, threatening “dire consequence” if the meetings don’t stop, Nabin Zamatia tells World Watch Monitor. On April 28, the meetings stop. “There are about 40 church members and some are very fearful of the extremists’ threats now,” Zamatia says. “My family and a few other families went to another village to worship Christ.”

May 23: Tapas Bin, 35, is murdered in Twirisa village. Area church leader T. Honathan tells World Watch Monitor that after Bin had married a local woman, his Hindu father had been pressuring him to abandon Christianity. Church officials claim the killing was religiously motivated. Police disagree, though at times have provided conflicting assessments.

Kerala

June 5: Eight Hindutva extremists attack Church of God Full Gospel India Pastor Vijayan M. and his wife in Edathar, as they return home from a visit to a believer who had fallen sick, according to the All India Christian Council. Attackers knocked the couple off their scooter, and in the ensuing assault suffer injuries that require care at Palakkad District Hospital. Local Christian leaders file a police complaint.

Gujarat

May 14: Rajubhai R. Bhuriya and his family, assembled in their Bilwani village home for the evening family devotion, are assaulted by a group of about 20 drunken villagers who accuse the family of forceful conversion. Five injured members of the family are admitted in Dahod Government Hospital.

Chhattisgarh

May 3: Police arrest four pastors in Bhelwa Baddhara after they are accused of forceful conversion. The Evangelical Fellowship of India reports that pastors Mani Munda, Vishnu Kerketta, Ashok Idaigo, and Rajgopal Munda, from the Power of Saviour Ministry in Sundargarh, Odisha, were visiting the house of a believer when police arrived and took them to the police station for questioning. Ten local Christians tell police they became believers of their own free will. Police charge the pastors with continuing an assembly that has been ordered to disperse, and release the men on bail.