

Hindu Nationalist Party Official in India Charged in Nun's Rape

Police in Orissa state have arrested an official of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for allegedly leading an attack that ended in the rape of a Catholic nun during last year's anti-Christian mayhem in Kandhamal district.

Officers in the eastern state of Orissa had been searching for Gururam Patra, identified by local residents as the general secretary of the BJP in Kandhamal district, for more than 14 months. Arrested on Saturday in Balliguda, Patra was charged with leading the attack but not with rape.

Dilip Kumar Mohanty, an investigating officer, told Compass that a non-bailable warrant had been issued against Patra, accused of being "the main organizer" of the attack on Aug. 25, 2008, in which then-28-year-old Sister Meena Lalita Barwa said she was gang-raped.

Mohanty said he had gathered "sufficient evidence" against Patra.

"He is the one who went into the house where the nun was staying and took her out, along with his associates who outraged her modesty," Mohanty said.

Previously police had arrested 18 associates of Patra.

The Rev. Ajay Singh of the Catholic Archdiocese of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar told Compass that Patra had become a "terror" for local Christians, as "he was threatening against [those] identifying the accused in numerous cases."

Violence in Kandhamal took place in August-September 2008, killing more than 100 people – mostly hacked to death or

burned alive – and incinerating more than 4,500 houses, as well as destroying over 250 churches and 13 educational institutions. The violence began after a VHP leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, was killed by Maoists (extreme Marxists) on Aug. 23. Hindu extremist groups wrongly blamed local Christians for the assassination.

A local Christian from K. Nuagaon village, where the nun said she was raped, told Compass on condition of anonymity that Patra was the general secretary of the BJP for Kandhamal district. But the BJP and its ideological mentor, the Hindu nationalist conglomerate Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps or RSS), were reluctant to admit association with him.

Suresh Pujari, president of the Orissa state BJP, told Compass that he did not know if Patra was a member of his party.

“I have heard his name, but I have never met him,” he said. “The BJP is a big organization, and I cannot know everyone.”

RSS spokesperson Manmohan Vaidya told Compass that Patra was a block president (a local government position) in Balliguda during the violence.

“He may have attended a few meetings of the RSS, but he was never associated with the organization officially,” he said.

Investigating officer Mohanty said police have yet to establish his affiliations, but “it appears that he was from the RSS group.” Mohanty said Patra was not accused of rape but of being the main leader of the attack.

On Nov. 11, Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, told the state assembly House that 85 people from the RSS, 321 members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council or VHP) and 118 workers of the Bajrang Dal, youth wing of the VHP, were rounded up by the police for the attacks in Kandhamal.

Educated by Christians

Union Catholic Asian News (UCAN) agency reported Patra attended a Catholic school, Vijaya High School, in Raikia town in Kandhamal district.

The news agency quoted the Rev. Mathew Puthyadam, principal of the school when Patra attended, as saying that he was a good student and respected the priests.

“I really wonder how he changed,” Puthyadam told UCAN.

UCAN reported that Puthyadam said right-wing Hindu groups commonly recruit people educated at Christian schools and indoctrinate them against Christians. There were a few other former students of Catholic schools who also led mobs that attacked Christians in Kandhamal, he added.

Puthyadam reportedly said that when Patra’s mother brought him to the school, she said he lost his father in early childhood and they had no money to continue his studies; the priest arranged sponsorship through a Christian aid agency to cover his fees and lodging at Bishop Tobar Hostel.

“Police Refused to Help”

It was during these attacks that Barwa of the Divyajyoti Pastoral Centre in K. Nuagaon area in Balliguda, said she was attacked and raped.

At an Oct. 24, 2008, press conference, the nun said 40 to 50 people attacked the house in which she and priest Thomas Chellantharayil were staying; he also was attacked in the Aug. 25 incident. She said the assailants first slapped and threatened her, then took her out of the house.

“There were three men who first threatened to throw me into the smoldering fire,” she said. “Then they threw me on the veranda [which was] full of plastic pieces. One of them tore my blouse and undergarments. While one man stood on my right

hand, the other stood on my left hand and the third man raped me.”

Another man tried to rape her as she got up, she said, and when a mob arrived she was able to hide behind a staircase. But the mob pulled her out and threatened to kill her while others wanted to parade her naked in the street.

“They then beat me up with their hands,” she said. “I was made to walk on the streets wearing my petticoat and sari, as my blouse was torn by one of the attackers. When we reached the market place I saw two policemen there. I asked them to help me, but they refused.”

When the nun filed a complaint at the Balliguda police station, she said, police made no arrests until The Hindu newspaper highlighted her case on Sept. 30, 2008.

Christian leader John Dayal, a member of India’s National Integration Council, said the government has yet to fully address violence against Christians.

“The administration, civil and police, have to act with their full strength to stop the hate campaign that has been unleashed in the last one year, and which has penetrated distant villages, creating schism and hatred between communities,” he said.

On Sunday Christians and rights activists formed a new organization, the Association of Victims of Communal Violence in Kandhamal in Phulbani to deal with the growing communal divide in Kandhamal.

“The major task of the new association, working closely with clergy and civil society activists irrespective of religion, is to restore public confidence and to ensure that the victims and witnesses felt safe enough to depose in court,” said Dayal.

He said Christian leaders hope this grassroots initiative will also help in the process of reconciliation and allow people to go back to their villages, where right-wing groups are threatening them with death if they do not convert to Hinduism.

Dayal also said there were rumors of human trafficking in Kandhamal, and that the new association felt special projects for women and especially young girls were urgently required.

"I pray they remain rumors," he added.