

Hindus Begin Demolishing Christian Graves

✖ With the government refusing to listen to their three-year plea for an official cemetery and ignoring a protracted hunger strike, Nepal's Christians are now seeking redress from the Supreme Court.

"Every day there are two to three deaths in the community, and with each death we face a hard time with the burial," says Chari Bahadur Gahatraj, a pastor who filed a petition in the high court on March 13 asking it to intervene as authorities of Nepal's oldest Hindu temple had begun demolishing the graves of Christians there.

Gahatraj and Man Bahadur Khatri are both members of the newly formed Christian Burial Ground Prayer and National Struggle Committee that since last month began leading a relay hunger strike in a public area of the capital, asking for a graveyard. They said they were forced to go to court after the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT), which runs Nepal's oldest Hindu shrine, the Pashupatinath temple, said it would no longer allow non-Hindus to use the temple's forested land.

"We don't want to hurt the sentiments of any community," Gahatraj told Compass. "Nor are we trying to grab the land owned by a temple. We are ready to accept any plot given to us. All we are asking for is that the burials be allowed till we get an alternate site."

Judge Awadhesh Kumar Yadav has since ordered the government and PADT not to prevent Christians from using the forest for burials until the dispute is resolved. The legal battle, however, now involves a counter-suit. Hindu activist Bharat Jangam filed a second writ on March 20, saying that since the

forest was the property of a Hindu temple, non-Hindus should not be allowed to bury their dead there just as churches do not allow Hindu burials.

Subsequently, the court decided to hear the two petitions together, and on April 18 the hearings began. While two lawyers argued on behalf of Gahatraj and Khatri, a cohort of 15 lawyers spoke against their petition. The next hearing is scheduled for May 3.

Along with the legal battle, Christians have kept up their relay hunger strike. To step up pressure on the government, the protestors also announced they would lead a funeral march to the offices of the prime minister and the culture minister and hand over coffins to them as a symbolic protest. If that too failed, they warned they would have no option but to go on hunger strike in front of the prime minister's office and parliament, this time carrying dead bodies with them.

Alarmed at the rate the issue was snowballing, the government finally responded. On Tuesday Culture Minister Gangalal Tuladhar opened talks with the protestors, agreeing to continue the negotiations after three days. The government also formed a four-member committee to look into the demand. Currently, Christians are asking for cemetery land in all 75 districts of Nepal.

Protestors were wary of the government's intent in the overture.

"This could be a ploy to buy time and bury the issue," says a member of the Christian committee formed to advise parliament on drafting the new constitution, who requested anonymity.

Though the committee formed to look into the Christians' demand for burial land has been asked to present a report within two weeks, Christians suspect the panel is dragging its feet.

"The new constitution has to be promulgated by May 28, but it does not seem likely that the main political parties will be able to accomplish the task," the Christian committee member says. "And if the constitution doesn't materialize in time, there will be a crisis and our problem will be shelved."

Adding to their unease, Christians are now facing a redoubled campaign by Hindu groups for the restoration of Hinduism as the state religion, five years after parliament declared Nepal, the world's only Hindu kingdom, secular.

If the new constitution had been promulgated last year, it would have consolidated secularism in Nepal. But with the country missing the deadline due to protracted power-sharing rows among the major political parties, Christians still feel under threat.

On Thursday (April 14), when the country celebrated the start of the indigenous new year 2068 with a public holiday, the Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal, which seeks the reinstatement of Hinduism as the state religion, kicked off a campaign at the Bhadrakali temple in Kathmandu. As curious onlookers and soldiers patrolling the nearby army headquarters looked on, party members fervently blew into conch shells and rang bells to draw people's attention to their demand.

The party, which is also seeking the restoration of monarchy, took some oblique shots at the Christian community as well.

"There is a deliberate and systematic attempt by organizations to convert Hindus," said Kamal Thapa, party chief and a former minister. "These organizations are guided by foreign powers and foreign funds. If the widespread conversion of Hindus is not stopped immediately, we will have to take stern measures."

Three days later, an umbrella of Hindu groups—the Rastriya Dharma Jagaran Mahasabha (the National Religion Resurrection Conference) held a massive gathering in the capital, declaring

Nepal a "Hindu state" and meeting with no official objection. The proclamation came as the climax to a three-day public program calling for the restoration of "the traditional Hindu state." Several Hindu preachers and scholars from neighboring India attended the program, held on the grounds of the Pashupatinath temple, which is also a UNESCO-declared World Heritage Site.

The "Hindu state" proclamation was the brainchild of Shankar Prasad Pandey, a former member of parliament from Nepali Congress, the second largest party in Nepal, now in opposition. Though Pandey was a sitting Member of Parliament in 2006, when the body unanimously declared Nepal secular, he began opposing the move soon afterwards, leading four campaigns against it nationwide.

"I consider the nation and the Hindu religion to be more important than the party," says Pandey, known as the MP who began to go barefoot 32 years ago to show solidarity with Nepalese, who are among the poorest in the world. "Over 90 percent of the Nepalese want Nepal to be a Hindu state. However, the government is led by people whose only concern is power and money."

Pandey's campaign is supported by Hindu groups from India and the West: Narendranath Saraswati, who is the Shankaracharya or religious head of a prominent Hindu shrine in India's Varanasi city; Dr. Tilak Chaitanya, chief of a group in the United Kingdom that propagates the Gita, the holy book of the Hindus; and Tahal Kishore, head of a Hindu organization, Radha Krishna Sevashram, in the United States.

Two weeks before the May 28 deadline for the new constitution, Pandey and his followers plan to step up the campaign for a "Hindu state" in the capital. Though Pandey denies it could stir up animosity between the majority-Hindus and Christians—whose minority population is said to have crossed 2 million but is actually only 850,801, according to Operation

World—there are fears of religious tension if not outright violence.

The Hindu rallies continue to grow as a pressure tactic. On Monday members of Nepal Brahman Samaj, an organization of “upper castes” from whose echelons temple priests are appointed, fought with security forces in front of parliament house, demanding their rights be respected and an end to conversions.

More Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) campaigning is scheduled on April 29, when the Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal’s Thapa has called for a mass gathering in the capital.