

Jammu Pastor Accused of Paying Muslims to Convert

Charges that a pastor in Jammu and Kashmir state “lured” Muslims to Christianity by offering money are false and have put the lives of the clergyman and other Christians in danger, according to Bishop Pradeep Kumar Samantaroy of the Church of North India denomination.

Following the arrest on Nov. 17 of the Rev. Chander Mani Khanna, pastor of All Saints Church in Srinagar, Bishop Samantaroy told Compass by phone that the time has come for the church to speak up against the “discriminatory action” by authorities in India’s Kashmir Valley.

The bishop of the Amritsar Diocese said the pastor told him his life was in danger, as the charges have angered area Muslims. The government must provide protection to the pastor, churches and Christian institutions “immediately,” he said.

The allegations of allurement appear to have turned Muslim clergy and separatist leaders against the Christians. Kashmir lies at the heart of a bitter territorial dispute between India, Pakistan and China, even as many Kashmiris call for separation from India. Two prominent leaders of the separatist movement, Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, have met religious leaders to prevent “conversions.”

A court in Srinagar on Nov. 18 remanded Pastor Khanna to judicial custody for 15 days, a representative of the Evangelical Fellowship of India’s advocacy wing told Compass. Pastor Khanna was arrested for creating “enmity” between religious communities and hurting religious sentiments.

Bishop Samantaroy said the allegation made by Kashmir Grand Mufti Bashir-ud-din Ahmad, the state’s highest official of Islamic law, that Pastor Khanna had converted Muslims by

offering money was “totally baseless and untrue.”

Ahmad has a video of Muslims being baptized in Pastor Khanna’s church, which he said was evidence on which to file a police complaint of fraudulent conversion, although the video only shows a baptism ceremony. The Constitution of India grants religious freedom to all, allowing them to propagate and change their religion or have no religion at all.

Superintendent of Police of East Srinagar Sheikh Zulfkar Azad, however, told Compass there was “certain evidence” of allurement by Pastor Khanna, though he did not specify it.

“I am in hospital for treatment, and that’s all I can say at the moment,” he said.

Seven youths who were baptized, as shown in the video, have denied to police that they were offered money to convert, a local Christian told Compass. But some local newspapers have quoted anonymous police sources as claiming the converts were given money.

A source who requested anonymity previously told Compass that police beat the converts from Islam when asking them if Christians had given them money for their conversion.

Police arrested Pastor Khanna two days after the mufti held a hearing on conversions in the *Shariah* (Islamic law) court he heads. Although shariah courts in India deal only in civil matters with community people’s cooperation and do not have any legal authority, the mufti had summoned the pastor to appear for the hearing. The pastor agreed in an effort to maintain peace.

On the pretext of meeting with a senior police official, police picked up Pastor Khanna at his residence on Nov. 17. After arresting him, officers did not inform his family, nor was the pastor given any written communication concerning the charges, the bishop said.

Police later brought Pastor Khanna to his home as they searched for evidence. They took CDs and literature for examination and kept him in custody.

Bishop Samantaroy said Kashmir's Bar Association had asked its members not to defend the pastor. The church has asked a lawyer from Jammu, a Hindu-majority region in the state, to apply for his bail.

He also said he was worried about Pastor Khanna's health. The pastor is diabetic and needs daily medical attention, and the bishop said he has learned that the doctor looking after him has a poor attitude toward him.

The pastor earlier told Compass that the Muslim youths had been coming to the church on their own initiative and wanted to take part in Holy Communion. Pastor Khanna told them they had to follow a procedure if they wanted to join in the sacrament, and they expressed desire to be baptized in due course.

Barring a few sporadic incidents of communal violence, Christians and Muslims had had good relations in Kashmir. Tensions began in March 2003 after local newspapers alleged that Christian missionaries were converting Muslim youth. Reports of conversions followed an article in an evangelical Christian website in the United States that claimed thousands of Muslim youths were converting to Christianity, which local Christians say was not true.

In November 2006, a convert from Islam, Bashir Ahmed Tantray, was shot dead by Islamist extremists in Barmullah district. Tantray's name had appeared in newspaper reports.

In September 2010, Muslim mobs burned a school and a church in Tangmarg district after a television channel showed a U.S. pastor burning the Quran.