

Pastor's Father Beaten Unconscious in Extremist Attack

Hindu extremists in Pratapgarh, Rajasthan have threatened to kill a pastor after beating his family and violating an agreement to stop attacking them, the pastor said.

Pastor Shantilal Ninama of Believers Church told Compass that the Hindu extremists beat his 65-year-old father until he fell unconscious in one of the attacks last month.

On the evening of June 8, after agreeing to do no further harm to Pastor Ninama and his family in exchange for him dropping police charges he'd filed over a previous attack, the enraged Hindu extremists stormed into his home and began beating and stoning his father, sister, wife and three children, he said. As he sought police help, his father fell unconscious and his wife and two of his children ran out into the darkness. Another daughter hid beneath a bed, and his sister escaped and hid in a valley.

"The next day, I asked one Hindu extremist, Bhim Shankar Sharma, to give me a copy of the agreement," Pastor Ninama said. "But he got angry with me, and verbally abused me and my faith, saying that I am an unclean person because Christianity is an unclean and foreign religion, and that Christians are not worthy to stay in India. He caught me by my collar and slapped me on my face."

The Rev. Prabhatkar Malladi, secretary of the Udaipur Diocese in Rajasthan, told Compass that the extremists were threatening to kill the pastor.

"The villagers are not allowing any Christian leaders to enter into the village to meet Pastor Ninama, but we are taking

necessary steps to help the pastor, and one advocate is now taking up the case," he said.

Pastor Ninama also told Compass that the extremists were plotting to kill him.

"Well-wishers are telling me to be careful and not to venture out alone, as the extremists are looking for a chance to find me alone, kill me, cut me to pieces and throw my body away," he said.

He said local extremists initially attacked him and his family for his faith in Christ on June 4; Khatiya Pitakaniya assaulted him as he was repairing his motorcycle.

"I was repairing the tire of my motorcycle when one villager, Khatiya Pitakaniya, came and told me that he did not want to see my face in the early morning as it will bring bad luck to him because I am a Christian," the pastor said. "Khatiya Pitakaniya grasped my neck when I told him to stop pestering me, but he would not stop and called his wife to bring a knife to kill me. His wife and elder brother ran to get it."

Bopal Ninama, the pastor's younger brother, came to rescue him. Pitakaniya later returned with his wife Devali, Pastor Ninama's older brother Naryayan Nimana and his cousin Jeevan Ninama, and began stoning and cursing him, the pastor said. He fled and locked himself inside his house.

Later the same day, Pastor Ninama filed a complaint at Ghantali police station, and the assailants were furious when they learned about it.

On June 6, the village head and elders called for a public meeting regarding the incident.

"Such public meetings took place several times in the past to discuss on how they could eliminate me from the village because of my faith in Christ," Pastor Ninama said.

The village head who summoned Pastor Ninama to the meeting told him to gather 10 people from five neighboring villages and offer the meat of five goats and five pots of alcohol as a Hindu ritual to reconvert him back to Hinduism, he said. They also told the pastor to burn his Bible and all gospel literature in front of them, he added. The extremists told him that if he agreed to their demands, they would give him all manner of support.

"I can leave everything—my family, my property—but I cannot forsake Jesus at any cost," the pastor told the extremists.

The next day, he said, they kept his father from obtaining an electricity connection for installing a water pump.

"They told my father to leave Christianity and not to stay with me, or else leave the area," Pastor Ninama said. "After prayerful consideration, my father decided to stay with me and be faithful to Christ till death."

The extremists then told the pastor they would do no further harm to him if he withdrew the police complaint. The pastor agreed, and on June 8 the parties gathered to put the agreement in writing. They agreed that anyone who disturbed the pastor and his family would be fined 5,000 rupees (\$111) in exchange for Pastor Ninama dropping the charges, and both parties signed it, he said.

"We went home happily thinking that we will not face any trouble from the extremists in the future," Pastor Ninama said.

That same evening saw the enraged villagers launching their assault on his family. When Pastor Ninama ran to the police station for help, initially officers said the area was not within their jurisdiction, but after he pleaded with them they went back to the village with him, he said. Sitting near the pastor's house when he returned with police, the extremists dispersed when they saw the officers.

On June 9, Pastor Ninama went to the Piplekhut police station to report the incident, but officers refused to file a First Information Report, saying there were no eyewitnesses to the assault, he said. They later filed a First Information Report after seeing medical reports describing the injuries to his family, he said, but no arrests have been made.

Rajasthan state has been a hotbed of anti-Christian activity since the late 1990s. Pastor Hari Shankar Ninama, 65, was praying for an 8-year-old boy's recovery from illness at a house in Ambarunda, Peepal Khoont, Pratapgarh district on Feb. 1 when at least 10 Hindu extremists arrived on motorbikes and attacked him.

The assailants beat him and, putting him on one of their motorbikes, took him outside the village, where they stripped off his clothes and struck him. Threatening to kill him if he continued to spread Christianity, they left him naked on the road and fled, he said.