

Persecution Hits India Church Hard in 2013

India ranks No. 31 on the 2013 World Watch List, a ranking of the 50 countries where living as a Christian is most difficult. The list is created annually by Open Doors International, a worldwide ministry to Christians who live under pressure because of their faith.

Most Christians live openly without pressure in huge and diverse India, but anti-conversion laws are on the books of five states, and in pockets of the country nationalist Hindus routinely confront Christians with accusations that they are attempting to forcibly convert Hindus to Christianity. Here is a sampling of incidents during January and February.

Madhya Pradesh

Feb. 9 – Jordarsingh Changod, 34, a pastor associated with Philadelphia ministry in Nanpur, Alirajpur district, was attacked after a church service.

At about noon, when the church service had finished and most of the people had returned home, about 36 people arrived on 12 motorcycles. Changod, along with Pastor Ilamsingh Kanesh and two women, were in the church. The intruders barged in and asked, “If we bring a lame man here, can you heal him?”

Changod replied, “If you have faith, certainly God will heal him.” On hearing the answer, the intruders punched and kicked Changod and Kanesh and knocked Changod unconscious. Kanesh suffered minor injuries.

About 30 minutes later between 30 and 40 members of the church arrived, and the attackers fled.

“Extremists mostly hit me on my face. It was bleeding near my

eyebrow and there was blood behind my right ear," Changod told World Watch Monitor. The church members took him to the hospital, and the next day filed a complaint with police.

Feb. 15 – Pastor Sharda Prasad and his wife visited a house church in Dola, Annupur district, where about 250 people had gathered. The meeting was disrupted by 15-16 Hindu fundamentalists, who shoved in and started manhandling the people.

"They questioned me as to from where I had come?" Prasad told World Watch Monitor. "When I answered them, they blamed me of forceful conversion and beat me with thin sticks." He suffered bruises on his back and waist. The attackers also beat members of the congregation.

Police arrived about an hour later and broke up the assault. They took pastor and his wife to their home in Jhagraha village, Shahdol district. Prasad filed a complaint with police on Feb. 18.

Feb. 16 – Three evangelists meeting with potential converts in Sawalikeda village, Khalwa block, Khandwa district were arrested after a village mob dragged them to the police.

Pastor Ashok Nahar, 50, who runs the Maranatha Prayer Hall in Punjab, and Delhi residents Arjun Singh, 45, and Anand Kumar, 19, were guests in the home of a Christian woman, identified as Shakuntala. They were holding private prayer meetings in the home with Christian seekers on Feb. 15.

The next morning, about 100 villagers came to the home and accused the visitors of trying to convert others in the village. "Punching and kicking us, they dragged us to Khalwa police station," about 1 kilometer away, Nahar said. The three men were released from jail on March 6.

Feb. 16 – Pastor Isaac Rajamani of Friends Missionary Prayer

Band, along with an evangelist identified as Raju, was attacked while conducting a prayer meeting in Gulai village, Khandwa district. Members of the Bajrang Dal, a hardline Hindu group, caught hold of Isaac and Raju and severely assaulted them. They were later taken to Khalwa in the night, where members of the Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh also beat them.

Later they were handed over to the Police station at Khalwa, where they were charged under section 295A and held in Harsud Jail. They have not yet secured bail.

Feb. 18 – Pastor Iliyas Buck, 42; Hira Lal, 32; Vishram Korku, 22; and Sundar Rachiya, 18; were gathered for a prayer meeting at the residence of Hira Lal in Roshni, Khandwa district. At noon, about 70 members of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh disrupted the meeting and started to punch and kick the four Christians, Buck said. The four were dragged to the local police station, where they were interrogated under suspicion of “luring people to Christianity.” The police released the four at 9 p.m., and did not file charges against them.

Feb. 20 – Chants of “stop this conversion” greeted a seminar conducted by Pastor Jiyalal Maravi, 35, in Dumartola, Bajag village, in Dindori district. Maravi and four other pastors – Mannulal Rajdiwar, 68; Ebenezer, 41; Tirath Patta, 35; and Vimlendra Jhariya, 25 – had been invited with their teams from Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh. As people finished lunch, Rajdiwar noticed that about 15 men standing outside the house with sticks in their hands.

“They had blocked the way to the road from the house from both the sides and were shouting slogans ‘stop this conversion,’ ” Rajdiwar told World Watch Monitor. When police were summoned, they took the pastors in for questioning. They were released in the evening, and no charges were filed.

Andra Pradesh

Feb. 8 –Pastor B. Rakshanandam cancelled two consecutive Sunday worship meetings after angry Muslims threatened to harm him if he did not stop conducting meetings in Balanagar Industrial Slums, in Secunderabad. The All India Christian Council reported that the protesters became angry after he pastor baptized 10 Muslims. After the pastor's landlord stepped in and said the pastor was not forcing anyone to convert, the Muslims withdrew their police complaint.

Feb. 12 – Police arrested a Christian identified as P. Anand after he prayed with friends attending a local college.

Anand visited his friends at IIIT College in Basara, Adilabad district on Feb. 10. "I just went to meet them, but since they were having an informal prayer session I just joined in," he told World Watch Monitor.

After about 15 minutes, five or six people arrived and started questioning the purpose of Anand's visit. They then called for the police.

The police arrested Anand and, based on the complaint filed by the intruders and a local politician, charged him under sections 295A and 193A. With the help of his friends, Anand was freed on bail Feb. 12.

Feb. 25 – About 10 women returning from a visit to a sick friend were assaulted by a group that accused them of "luring people to Christianity." The women, members of Nissi church, had visited the Secunderabad home of their friend and were returning when they were confronted by a group of about 15 people, who punched and slapped the women.

Two of the women, Laxmi Amma, 70, and Rahel Amma, 60, suffered minor bruises on their faces. Their pastor, identified as Mr. Purshottam, took them to the police station to file a complaint, but the attackers, along with some Hindu fundamentalist political leaders, already were there. The

police asked the women to reach a compromise and not press charges, but on Feb. 26 Puroshottam registered a formal complaint.

Orissa

Jan. 18 – Police arrested two Christians, Bahadur Murmu and Rama Soreng from New Creation Church in Dubia village, Baripada, Mayubhranj district, where they were holding a prayer meeting in the house of one Christian. Rajesh Digal, pastor of New Creation Church and in charge of the Baripada area, told World Watch Monitor the arrests came after Hindu extremists accused the Christians of forceful conversion and threatened to harm them if they continued to conduct prayer meetings. The Christians were arrested under the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act and were sent to Baripada jail. They were released on bail two days later.

Feb. 15 – A 4-year-old boy suffered a fractured hand in the tumult stirred up by a police raid in Patachanda village, Balarampur panchayat of Dharakot block.

Adhunik Dalabehera suffered the injury after the Central Reserve Police Force arrived after midnight in search of five tribal Christians: Jatho Mandal; Junas Mandal; Daud Gomango; Simanto Dalabehera, 42; and Kornail Raita, 50. They said they were carried to the nearby jungle on the pretext of having being associated with the Maoist chief, Sabyasachi Panda. The five men denied any involvement, and were beaten with guns and sticks.

The following morning, about 400 tribal villagers blocked roads with trees, and brandished axes and iron rods in protest to the arrests. Jatho Mandal, Junas Mandal and Gomango were released at 11 a.m.

As the protest continued, the police initiated a peace committee meeting with the villagers, and released the other

two men in the evening.

Chhattisgarh

Jan. 8 – Government officials helped tear down a wall inside a graveyard in Jagdalpur district after Hindus complained Christians had extended the wall too far, according to the Chhattisgarh Christian Forum. The protesters arrived later and further demolished the wall, desecrated the old graves, shouted anti-Christian slogans and hurled verbal abuse at the pastors and church leaders at the scene. Police filed a first Information Report was filed against three of the protesters. Area Christians staged a counter-protest on Jan. 10.

Jan. 10 – Protesters disrupted the dedication ceremony of the newly built Inlightening Prayer Tower in Dantewada district, and accused the Christians inside of forceful conversion. The meeting was stopped immediately and the matter was reported to Kirandul police, who refused to intervene, according to a local pastor, Ritesh Basra. He said a man he identified by the name Nanda had donated the land for the building and was attacked by the protesters. Basra said the man fled, leaving his wife and children behind.

Jan. 13 – A mob of about 70 people barged into the Sunday worship meeting of an independent church in Ghaspara, in the Raipur district, accused Pastor Sanjay Nag and the church members of forceful conversion, and assaulted them. Nag suffered an injury to his nose. The attackers, part of an extremist Hindu sect, filed a forceful-conversion complaint with police. The pastor filed a counter-complaint. “The police investigation is going on,” Nag told World Watch Monitor.

Jan. 18 – Members of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party barged into a prayer meeting conducted in the house of a believer in Saranggarh, in the Raigarh district. They accused pastors Rajesh Yadav and Raju Dewangan and the participants of

forceful conversion, and assaulted the two pastors, according to another pastor in the area, Dashrath Prasad. Police arrested Saranggarh and Raigarh, who were released on bail after two days.

Jan. 18 – Protesters surrounded the house of Pastor Ankush Bariyekar in Chandi Nagar, Raipur district, during a prayer meeting. They threatened to harm Bariyekar and accused him of forceful conversion. After the Chhattisgarh Christian Forum intervened and the police arrived, and protesters left. However, the pastor relocated for safety reasons.

Jan. 18. – When word got out that a Jan. 18 healing prayer service was being held in Kartik Devangan's house, a group of angry Hindus arrived, and police arrested two Christian converts conducting the meeting.

Rajesh Yadav, 45, and Raju Devangan, 24, from Navjyoti Church in the Chhattisgarh village of Shakti, came to the village of Sarangarh, to attend the prayer meeting in Devangan's home. The meeting attracted many sick people, and Devangan and Yadav prayed over them.

"Some extremists heard the news about healing taking place and attacked us," Yadav aid. "The Police locked us up in the jail and prevented anyone from beating us." The attackers registered a complaint of forced conversion against the men, who were released on bail the next day.

"The advocate (attorney) is asking us for more money and is very uncooperative" said Yadav, who works as a driver and has two children. Devangan, a tailor, and his wife and infant child have since left their home and have moved into a rented house because of pressure from extremists.

Feb. 20 – Church leaders cut short a three-day meeting in Deori, Surguja district when Hindu protesters stormed the proceedings and accused the organizers and the guest speakers,

pastors Sukhchain Masih and Lalsa Tirkey, of forceful conversion. Lalsai Khakha, a pastor of Believers Church, host of the three-day conference, told World Watch Monitor the church had police permission to conduct the meeting, which attracted about 1,000 Christians. "But we decided to stop the meeting to avoid further trouble," Khakha said.

Feb. 21 — Three Pastors were arrested in Aara, Surguja district, during a three-day revival meeting. During dinner of the second day, about 12 Hindus arrived with some police officers. The intruders started arguing with the Christians, and police arrested three men: Akshya Kumar Vishyakarma, 32, of Uttar Pradesh state; Angad Singh, 35, and a man identified only as Harendra, both of whom are from Bihar state. The organizer of the event, pastor Albis Bara, 35, was arrested the next day.

The four are free on bail, facing charges of disruption of public peace.

Maharashtra

Jan. 11 —Hindu protesters disrupted the prayer meeting of New Life Grace Ministry in Sawantwadi taluka, Sindhudurg district, and beat up participants, including women, children and the elderly. Christians sought help from the police, who took no action, said Joseph Dias of the Catholic Christian Secular Forum. The forum says any prayer meeting in the district needs police protection. The areas around Sawantwadi and Malvan have become highly sensitive.

Tamil Nadu

Jan. 28 — A traveling Pentecostal minister was robbed of his Gospel tracts and money in Kottur, Coimbatore district, according to the Evangelical Fellowship of India. A group of Hindus robbed the pastor, identified as M. Emmanuel of the Indian Pentecostal Church, and "told the pastor not to come

back in the area again to distribute tracts," said Sam Abraham, a church leader in the area. The victim filed a complaint with police, but later withdrew it. The Hindu group pledged not to disturb Emmanuel again.