

Police Collusion Seen in 'Forced Conversion' Complaints

Hindu extremist groups in collusion with the state police filed an average of more than three baseless complaints of "coerced" conversions per month in the past five years—shortly after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power—according to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Madhya Pradesh.

"I have gathered information from all the districts of the state, according to which the number of [forced or fraudulent] conversion complaints against Christians in the last five years is over 180," the Rev. Anand Muttungal, spokesman for the state's Catholic body, told Compass Direct News.

Muttungal said he asked the Madhya Pradesh State Crime Records Bureau, a body under the state interior ministry that monitors criminal complaints, about the number of forced conversion complaints in the last five years, and the state agency put the number wrongly at fewer than 35.

Muttungal also said most of the complaints were filed by third parties – not the supposed "victims" – who were unable to produce any unlawfully converted people to support their allegations. He added that the complainants were mainly members of the Hindu extremist Bajrang Dal, youth wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council or VHP).

"In Jabalpur, the complaints were lodged mainly by the Hindu Dharam Sena [Hindu Religion Army]," he said.

Most recently, the leader of the Hindu Dharam Sena on Sept. 27 got police to interrogate, without cause, a Catholic group traveling through Jabalpur. The Rev. Anto Mundamany of the Carmelite of Mary Immaculate order said the inspector-in-

charge of the Civil Lines police station and four other policemen came to the Carmel Niketan center, where the group had stopped for dinner.

Police interrogated him and the 45 Catholic visitors about their religious identity, he said, to determine whether the visitors were Hindus whom the priests and nuns at the center might be forcibly trying to convert.

Journalists accompanied the police, and the following day local newspapers reported on the incident, portraying the Christians as inherently suspect.

“Although the police left after making sure that all the participants who had arrived for an inter-parish tour were Christians, the newspapers made no mention of that fact,” Mundamany said.

The local daily *Dainik Bhaskar* reported that Yogesh Agarwal, head of the Hindu Dharam Sena, had informed police about a supposed “conversion plot” by the Catholic order.

“There can be little doubt that the police are party to this disturbing trend,” Muttungal said.

The incidence of anti-Christian attacks is the highest in the state in Jabalpur—local Christians say the city witnessed at least three attacks every month until recently, mainly by Agarwal and his cohorts. Although numerous criminal complaints are pending against Agarwal, he remains at large.

A Christian requesting anonymity said police officers personally act on his complaints against Christian workers.

A June 2006 report by the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) found that Hindu nationalist groups in Madhya Pradesh had frequently invoked the state’s anti-conversion law as a pretext to incite mobs against Christians. The NCM report also pointed at police collusion in the attacks.

"The life of Christians has become miserable at the hands of miscreants in connivance with the police," the NCM said in its report. "There are allegations that when atrocities were committed on Christians, the police remained mere spectators, and in certain cases they did not even register their complaints."

The NCM is an independent body created by Parliament in 1993 to monitor and safeguard the rights of minorities.

Muttungal said the Catholic Bishops' Conference would approach the state high court with the facts it has gathered to prove police involvement in complaints against Christians.

Most complaints against Christians are registered under Section 3 of the Madhya Pradesh "Freedom of Religion Act" of 1968, popularly known as an anti-conversion law. The section states, "No person shall convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religious faith to another by the use of force or by inducement or by any fraudulent means nor shall any person abet any such conversion."

Offenses under the anti-conversion law are "cognizable," meaning police are empowered to register a complaint, investigate and arrest for up to 24 hours, without a warrant, anyone accused of forced conversion.

Police also use Sections 153A and 295A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) to arrest Christians. Section 153A refers to "promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony." Section 295A concerns "deliberate and malicious acts to outrage religious feelings." These IPC crimes are also cognizable.