

Report in India Blames Attacks on Conversions to Christianity

Christians in India's southern state of Karnataka are preparing to file a court petition against a panel that blamed a series of anti-Christian attacks in 2008 on conversions from Hinduism.

In Mangalore, which bore the brunt of Hindu extremist attacks on churches in August-September 2008, Bishop Aloysius Paul D'Souza of the Catholic Diocese said he intended to file a writ in the Karnataka High Court against the Justice B.K. Somashekhara Commission. In its Jan. 28 report on the violence, the commission absolved the state government, ruled by a Hindu nationalist party, of any responsibility in the violence.

Defending the state government and recommending the enactment of an "anti-conversion law," the commission stated that an allegation of misuse of foreign funds for "mass conversions of innocent and helpless members of the society belonging to weaker sections ... is true."

Dr. Sajan K. George of the Karnataka-based Global Council of Indian Christians called the report "a bundle of lies intended to mislead and confuse the people," and Dr. John Dayal, a member of the government's National Integration Council, said it "parroted" Hindu nationalists.

The more than 28 attacks in Karnataka in August-September 2008 were believed to be led by Hindu extremist groups, mainly the Bajrang Dal, close to the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. The violence was seen as fallout of a deadly spate of anti-Christian attacks in eastern Orissa state's Kandhamal district, which killed about 100 people and burned

thousands of houses and churches beginning in August 2008.

George told Compass the final report submitted to Karnataka's Chief Minister was "completely contrary" to the commission's interim report submitted last year, which pointed to the culpability of police officials, ruling party leaders and Hindu nationalist groups, including the Sriram Sene and Bajrang Dal.

George said the panel tried to "rewrite the whole story as if dictated by [its political] mentors as per their requirements and convenience."

Likewise, the Catholic Secular Forum (CSF) released a statement critical of the commission.

"Attacks of such a magnitude are not possible without funds and official support," according to the CSF.

The panel runs the risk of being labeled as the mouthpiece of Hindu nationalist groups, added the CSF in its statement, signed by CSF General Secretary Joseph Dias, Vice-Chairman of the Maharashtra State Minorities Commission Dr. Abraham Mathai, retired High Court Judge Michael Saldanha, social activist Nafisa Ali and Dayal.

They criticized the report for calling anti-Christian assaults a spontaneous reaction of Hindus "victimized" by conversion attempts, and for denying collusion of the administration. Such accusations, along with baseless allegations of "forced" and "fraudulent" conversions and the demand for anti-conversion legislation, are all typical claims of hard-line Hindu nationalist groups, they said.

Speaking to The Times of India, Walter J. Maben, chairman of the Karnataka Missions Network, recalled that the pretext of the 2008 attacks in Karnataka was a 1987 book translated into the local Kannada language in the late 1990s that allegedly offended Hindus. Attention to alleged distribution of the book

by the New Life Church did not come until “several years after its publication, during which period there was no unrest,” Maben told the newspaper. The accusation that the book led to the attacks “was never proven by the commission,” he added.

On Saturday (Jan. 29), Law Minister Veerappa Moily echoed Christians’ demand for a federal probe into the 2008 attacks in Karnataka.

“Just because a commission gave a report, the truth cannot be suppressed,” he told The Times of India.

The CSF statement also pointed out that by “limited exoneration of the Catholic Church” and “blaming other Christian denominations for conversions,” the commission sought to divide the Christian community. “If the attackers were not targeting the Catholic Church, how come it had to bear most of the brunt of the violence?” it asked.

Karnataka, which recorded the highest number of anti-Christian attacks among all Indian states in 2009 and 2010, is now seen as the hotbed of Christian persecution in the country. Of 149 anti-Christian incidents recorded nationally last year, 56 were from Karnataka, according to the Evangelical Fellowship of India. In 2009, Karnataka witnessed at least 48 attacks.

Supreme Court Gaffe

Calling the Karnataka report “the final blow” to the minority community, Dayal said Christians had the right in recent times to feel “hemmed in from all sides—from the political rulers in Karnataka, Orissa and elsewhere who have made it quite clear that minorities do not matter.”

Dayal, secretary general of the All India Christian Council, also criticized a recent Supreme Court judgment in a case concerning the burning alive of Australian Christian worker Graham Staines and his two sons by radical Hindu nationalist Dara Singh in Orissa in January 1999.

Upholding Singh's life imprisonment and rejecting prosecutors' petition for a death sentence, the Jan. 21 judgment raised objections with its statement—apparently referring to non-Hindus—that “It is undisputed that there is no justification for interfering in someone's belief by way of ‘use of force,’ provocation, conversion and incitement or upon a flawed premise that one religion is better than the other.”

The judgment came under further criticism by Christians and others as it continued, “Though Graham Staines and his two minor sons were burnt to death while sleeping inside a station wagon at Manoharpur [in Orissa], the intention was to teach a lesson to Graham Staines about his religious activities, namely, converting poor tribals to Christianity.”

Following protests, the court revised the text of the judgment. It changed the first section to, “It is undisputed that there is no justification for interfering in someone's belief by any means,” and in the second part it deleted the word “conversion” and the reference to “teaching the victim a lesson.”

But the revisions did not wholly assuage Christians.

“The modified version may be less offensive, but it is in no way less dangerous,” said Dayal. “On the face of it, it is satisfactory. But senior Supreme Court advocates have told me there is enough cause to go back to the Supreme Court to seek clarifications on what it means by the term ‘interference’ in someone else's religion. Is talking about your own religion ‘interference,’ or is evangelization interference?”

Two days after the commission presented its report, the Dalai Lama, Tibetan spiritual leader in exile in India, also criticized religious conversions while condemning the attacks on churches, reported The Deccan Herald. Addressing a gathering in Karnataka's capital of Bangalore, the Dalai Lama also cited the example of Mongolia, where he said some

Buddhists, lured by money, have embraced Christianity.

Christians account for around 2.3 percent of India's more than 1.2 billion population, which is more than 80 percent Hindu. While the vast majority of Hindus are tolerant of other faiths, a small but powerful minority of extreme Hindu nationalists are believed to be responsible for attacks on minorities.