

Along the Indian road

INDIA: GUJARAT AND ORISSA PREFIGURE INDIAN CRISIS

A violent anti-Christian Hindu pogrom erupted in Orissa (northeast India) on 23 August that has claimed dozens of lives, including that of a 20-year-old nun burned to death in an orphanage. Numerous others have been injured, many seriously, including another young nun who was pack raped. Casualties are mounting daily in the wake of ethnic-religious cleansing.

Compass Direct (CD) reports (1 Sept): "While many parts of Orissa remained under curfew today, over 13,000 people were reportedly living in relief centers set up by the state government in seven places in Kandhamal." Dr. Abraham Mathai, vice chairman of the Maharashtra State Minorities Commission told reporters, "More than 50,000 Christians are living as refugees following the violence in Orissa. All the political parties are sitting as mute spectators." In Kandhamal district alone, around 1,000 Christian houses, hundreds of churches and numerous Christian institutions and businesses have been demolished by rampaging Hindus.

While this anti-Christian violence is shocking, it is not surprising. Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) elements acting with legal impunity and state government support have for decades been stoking the flames of hatred, cultivating an incendiary environment in Orissa. Now Orissa, like Gujarat, is primed for genocide. And hot on the heels of Gujarat and Orissa are numerous other Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-ruled states.

It was a brilliant strategy of the Sangh Parivar—a collection of Hindu nationalist organisations co-operating towards making India a Hindu State—to weave religion and politics strategically together in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) enabling the Sangh to exploit religion for political gain. Indeed, the present persecution is not primarily about religion. India's Christians are pawns in a deadly struggle between modernity and the beneficiaries of traditional Hindu culture who are desperate to secure the political power that would guarantee their privileged status into the future by perpetuating the racist, fatalist, immoral Hindu caste system.

GUJARAT AND ORISSA PREFIGURE INDIAN CRISIS

The strategic brilliance and alarming effectiveness of the Sangh Parivar's campaign for a Hindu Rastra (Hindu State) has never been sufficiently appreciated.

Even after the 2002 anti-Muslim Hindu pogrom in Gujarat that left some 2000 Muslims dead, India and the world failed to fully appreciate what was happening. Then an anti-Christian Hindu pogrom in Orissa over Christmas 2007 left a swath of destruction and turned hundreds of thousands of Christian into traumatised IDPs (Internally Displaced Peoples). Yet again India and the world did not understand what was happening.

The ringleaders and inciters of the Gujarat 2002 and Orissa 2007 pogroms — Narendra Modi and Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati respectively — not only remained free, but were elevated and to many they became national heroes! In Gujarat, Narendra Modi was even rewarded by being re-elected as Chief Minister — twice! The "kranti" (revolution) in Gujarat, through which the majority, caste-perpetuating Hindu community terrorised the minority Muslim community into submission, is now held up by Hindutva protagonists as the model.

In January 2006 it became clear that the Modi government was planning to set the Dangs (in Gujarat) alight with an anti-Christian pogrom following the Shabri Kumbh Mela that February.

However, alarm bells rang out, opposition mounted and the Church prayed.

And God answered the prayers of many. While the Shabri Kumbh Mela may have effected mass religious-political conversions (converting tribal Congress-voting animists into BJP-voting Hindus), the Sangh's strategy to ignite another Hindu kranti — this time a genocidal massacre of Christians — failed.

The Christmas 2007 anti-Christian pogrom in Orissa however was not heralded. Hindutva forces kept secret their plans for a pogrom for Christmas Day 2007 under the guise of a bandh (strike) in protest of the Pana (Dalit/Scheduled Caste) Christians request for Schedule Tribe status — something they need in order to benefit from affirmative action programs in a caste driven society that denies benefits to Dalits/Scheduled Castes that convert to Christianity. (Under the rules, Scheduled Tribes who convert to Christianity continue to enjoy reservations/affirmative action, but Dalits/Scheduled Castes who convert do not.)

While police were withdrawing from the districts to take up their positions at the Biju Janata Dal's (BJD) 10-year

anniversary celebrations in the capital, Hindus were felling trees and blockading roads around Kandhamal district in preparation for the anti-Christian pogrom that Hindu communalists vowed would "teach them a lesson!".

Thousands of Hindus then rioted crying, "Stop Christianity. Kill Christians!" Across Kandhamal district alone, more than 700 Christian homes and around 100 churches and 95 Christian institutions were vandalised, looted, destroyed and torched. Leading the incitement was the state's principal Hindutva ideologue and proselytiser, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati. After falsely claiming to have been wounded in a violent attack by a vicious Christian mob, he told his followers via a mobile phone message (in the presence of police and journalists) to burn Christian homes and churches and repeat the kranti (revolution) that brought "shanti" (peace) to Gujarat (i.e. the 2002 Hindu pogrom in which some 2000 Muslims were brutally massacred).

ORISSA: A TINDERBOX

In 1960 the RSS launched Goraksha Andolan, a Hinduisation program focused initially on banning cow slaughter. In 1965 the Hindu paramilitary organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS: National Volunteer Corps) deployed a Hindutva proselytiser named Lakan to oversee the implementation of the Prevention of Cow Slaughter Act in Orissa. Orissa subsequently passed a Freedom of Religion Act in 1967 which prohibited conversions to Christianity by force or fraudulent means. (This Act was subsequently strengthened in 1999.) In 1969 Lakan established an Ashram (Hindu religious centre) in Kandhamal, changed his name to Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, and committed himself to countering the work of Christian missionaries in Orissa.

While Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati never succeeded in stopping conversions to Christianity, he did succeed in creating a tinderbox, hot with Hindutva, anti-Christian hatred, majoritarianism and communalism. Appalling crimes have been perpetrated against Christians in Orissa, with numerous forced conversions into Hinduism, assaults and killings, including the martyrdom of Graham Staines, burned alive with his two young sons Phillip and Timothy in January 1999.

The advance of Hindutva over recent years has given rise to some alarming developments. Today it is not just individual Christian evangelists at risk of assault and assassination, whole Christian communities are now at risk of genocide. No longer are the murderers "loose cannon" Hindus and militants from the Bajrang Dal (the Sangh's militant Hindutva youth militia), they are simply local Hindus raping, beating, looting and killing their Christian neighbours with impunity. Reporting on the Christmas 2007 pogrom, Tehelka Magazine (an Indian magazine) noted in January 2008 that when a 1,000-strong mob of rampaging Hindus attacked Balliguda's Mt Carmel Convent, the Carmelite sisters were shocked that local Hindu beneficiaries of Mt Carmel's vocational courses were among the rioters.

According to Dr Chatterji, it is this violence with impunity along with a complete breakdown in trust that has led to the "ghettoisation" of the Christian community over recent years.

So at the behest of the Sangh Parivar and with the support and encouragement of the BJP-BJD Orissa state government, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati turned Orissa into a tinderbox of communal tension, and on 24 December 2007 he lit the fuse in Kandhamal.

23 AUGUST 2008: ORISSA BURNS AGAIN

Unlike the anti-Christian Hindu pogrom of Christmas 2007, the anti-Christian violence that exploded in Kandhamal on 23 August 2008 was not premeditated. It was however incited by VHP (World Hindu Council) activists. Immediately after Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati (85) was ambushed and shot dead in a girls' orphanage in Kandhamal district, VHP leaders were publicly charging that the Christians were responsible. VHP state general secretary Gouri Prasad Rath demanded a high-level probe and ban on churches in Kandhamal, and told the media: "Christians have killed Swamiji. We will give a befitting reply."

This charge was levelled against the entire Christian community despite evidence that it was a targeted assassination carried out by a group of some 40 well-armed Naxalite/Maoist militiamen. (Egalitarian left-wing Naxalite/Maoists are natural enemies of caste-perpetuating right-wing Hindu nationalists.) Many analysts believe the Maoists are intervening to take sides in the communal tensions in Orissa in the hope of winning Christian support.

However the VHP subsequently claimed to have received a letter from the Maoists denying any involvement but offering that some wayward cadres may have been paid by "communal Christian miscreants" to murder of the VHP leader. The alleged letter stated that Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati was murdered because of his opposition to religious conversion.

According to a CD report entitled, "Maoists in India Say They Killed Hindu Leader" (1Sept): "The Central Committee of the Communist Party of India-Maoist, an extreme Marxist group banned by the Indian government, released a statement today saying that Sangh Parivar . . . have deliberately misled people about Saraswati's death.

"The Maoist statement warned the VHP of 'more such punishments if it continued violence against religious minorities in the country' and called for a ban on groups linked to the Sangh Parivar, such as the VHP, its youth wing Bajrang Dal, right-wing Hindu political party Shiv Sena and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)."

STRATEGY OF SANGH PARAVAR

WEA RLC has stated numerous times over several years that the strategy of the Sangh Parivar is brilliantly strategic and hugely successful.

As noted in the WEA RLC News & Analysis annual Religious Liberty Trends posting of 2006-07 entitled Hindutva's Advance: "Because the Hindutva forces are active primarily in the religious sphere—Hinduising the animist tribals and creating new exploitable Hindu mythology—their activity is slipping under the radar of most political analysts. But while the Hindutva forces are focusing on the religious sphere it is all for political gain. This strategy of effecting political conversion by means of religious conversion is hugely successful."

In her sworn affidavit, Dr Angana Chatterji comments likewise on the strategy and methodology of the Sangh Parivar, noting that instead of pursuing its earlier strategy of conversions by means of forced re-conversion ceremonies, "The Sangh Parivar has instead increased its emphasis on the Hinduisation of Adivasis [indigenous tribals, traditionally animists] by making them a part of Hindu rituals and ceremonies (as during the Sammelan), which, in effect, 'converts' Adivasis into Hinduism by assuming that they are Hindu. Such 'conversion' tactics are diffused and no longer have to negotiate certain legalities, which public and stated conversion ceremonies did. On 'converting'/reconverting' to Hinduism, Adivasis are expected to join Hindu caste society as Sudras, a 'higher' placement than Dalits in the caste hierarchy, Sangh activists say.

"Dalit Christians are doubly discriminated against, as Dalits and as Christians. Post-Hinduisation, Adivasis are being mobilised against Christian groups. Adivasis are incited into targeting Dalit Christians, both fomenting Adivasi-Dalit divides and vitiating the historical solidarities between them. This is crucial to Hinduisation. It also acts to warn non-Christian Dalits against conversion to Christianity.

"The Hinduisation of the Hindu community, and Hinduisation of the secular, allows the Sangh's escalation. This process unfolded in Brahmanigaon, for example, where the growth of the business community has supported the rise of the Sangh Parivar. Hindutva conversions served to terrorise the Adivasi and Dalit community, via which the Sangh Parivar achieves its preliminary expansionist goals. While ceremonial conversions continue sporadically, a more protracted and dispersed strategy of Hinduisation through incorporation and assimilation is aggressively pursued as effective methodology."

This Hinduisation by means of "incorporation and assimilation" was described in the WEA RLC News & Analysis posting of January 2006: "One of the main strategies used by the Sangh Parivar to win the allegiance of the tribals is the campaign to convince them that they are actually Hindus who are just practising local and maybe corrupted expressions of mainstream Hindu traditions. Slowly the animist practices are redefined as Hindu, given Hindu names, and gently refined to suit Brahmin sensitivities.

"Part of this campaign is the renaming of the Adivasis (first inhabitants) as Vanvasis (forest dwellers). Upon this foundation the proponents of Hindutva then claim that the tribals and the Indo-Aryans are all one people (there is no indigenous population and no Indo-Aryan invasion) and the "Vanvasis" are really historically Hindu. They use this lie as a basis to 're-convert', absorb, communalise and exploit the Adivasis."

It must be noted that the BJP unexpectedly lost power in the May 2004 elections by only the slimmest of margins and on 22 July 2008 the Congress-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh only survived a confidence vote by the slimmest of margins, having lost the support of its left-wing allies. Meanwhile, the Sangh has been busy Hinduising the masses with a strategy so brilliant and so successful that it is quite likely that the 2009 federal elections could restore the BJP to power in the centre. And this at a time when increasing numbers of radicalised individuals — indeed whole Hindutvaised communities—are ready to kill, terrorise and ethnically-religiously cleanse Muslims and Christians on command, ostensibly in defence of the motherland.

Has the future of India been prefigured in the Hindu pogroms in Gujarat and Orissa? Let India and the world be warned: if the violent, fascist Hindutva fire that the power- and privilege-hungry Sangh Parivar is presently spreading across the nation is not successfully challenged and countered soon, then a holocaust surely awaits.

By Elizabeth Kendal

PLIGHT OF CHRISTIANS IN INDIA
Amjed Jaaved

India's north-eastern state Orissa continues to be in grip of gory anti-Christian riots. Scores of Christians, including some nuns have been burnt alive. Countless churches, houses and shops have been gutted. Even Christian orphanages have not been spared. To justify massacre of hapless Christians, Hindus spread the canard that eminent Hindu leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, had been killed by Christians on Saturday night. Kandhamal district was the epicentre of the communal riots. Most of the Christians were killed there. In the village Barakhama Hindus attacked Christian dwellings with guns and bombs. In a statement, the Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik admitted there was rampage at Barakhama. But he parried questions about the identity of the deceased Christians. He simply said: "Identities are yet to be established." The police force acted as silent spectators while the Hindus ransacked the village. As an eye-wash, the chief minister announced compensation of 200,000 Rupees (\$5,000) for the next-of-kin of those killed in the violence.

The riots are meant to teach a lesson to the Christians who have abandoned Hindu religion to convert to Christianity. The state's legislature has even passed an anti-Christian bill to stop Hindus to change their religions. Instead of killing Christians, the Hindus should ask themselves: 'Why are the downtrodden people in India, particularly those in Orissa, converting to Christianity?' The answer is that it is because of the ill treatment by high-caste Hindus who do not even allow them to offer prayer in Hindu temples. According to religious tables in India's Census Report, 24 million Christians constitute 2.3 percent of India's total population of 1,028 million. The Christian population includes 14 million Christian Dalits. Dalits are Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist members of "untouchable" castes who convert to Christianity. The untouchable Christians are the most neglected community in India.

India is, constitutionally, a secular country. There are iron-clad guarantees in the Constitution for religious freedom. Yet, not only the born Christians but also Hindus who become Christians complain of persecution. It is not only Orissa, but also several other Indian states that have passed anti-conversion bills forbidding Hindus to convert to other religions. Such legislation violates the UN Charter of Human Rights which gives a person right to change his or her religion.

To discourage Dalits from converting to Christianity, not only the Centre but also the Indian states have deprived 'Dalit Christians' of minority-status privileges. Any Hindu who converts to Christianity is socially boycotted and tortured in different ways. Six women at Kilipala village in Jagatsinghpur district (Orissa) had their heads tonsured by influential Hindus. Their offence was abandoning Hindu faith at their own free will. Christian missionaries are harassed, deported and even killed. Indian government ordered 'deportation of three American preachers from Church of Christ in North Carolina on the first available flight to the US.'. The preachers wanted to stay in India for three weeks. To add insult to their injury, the preachers were even attacked by Hindu fanatics. They had a narrow escape.

Courts rarely punish people who manhandle Christian preachers. Even killers of Christian preachers are awarded lenient punishments. For instance, Dara Singh, the main accused in the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two minor sons, were awarded life imprisonment by the Orissa High Court. The converts are forced to reconvert to Hinduism at mass ceremonies. For instance, seventy-five people, belonging to 35 tribal families in Orissa's Mayurbhanj district were forced, under threats of social boycott and extermination, to reconvert to Hinduism at Sarat Amid shouts of "jai sri ram" (long live lord Rama), the reconvertees, belonging to five gram panchayats, Noto, Sarat, Sardiha, Kadamgarhia and Labanyadeipur, were forced to perform various purgation rites to the chanting of "slokas" by priests. The five-hour long rituals were attended by armed Vishwa Hindu Parishad activists.

Fanatic Sangh Parivar leaders have threatened Christian associations, including Council of Churches, that they would get them banned under Section 153A or 153B of the Indian Penal Code, read with Section 2(1)(p) of amended Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

There is no denying the fact that Christians are a peaceful community. Yet they are persecuted by Hindu zealots on flimsy grounds. Two years back, Hindus justified attacks on Christians as tit-for-tat for a book which allegedly insulted Hindu deities. Investigations revealed that the book was not written by any Christian. But, it happened to be displayed on one of the Emmanuel Mission's book-shops for sale. The Mission is a Christian organisation that runs a chain of schools in various Indian states.

Not only the Christian community, but also non-Christian minorities, political parties such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Congress, women's groups and the People's Union for Civil Liberties have condemned the attacks on Christians and the hounding of minorities in the state. The organizations have condemned the anti-conversion bills, including the Rajasthan Dharma Swatantrya Bill, passed by the state's assembly. The bill makes religious conversion a non-bailable offence.

While giving vent to their wrath against Christians, Hindus ignore the fact that Christian missionaries started coming to India, particularly the North-East, in the late 19th century. They promoted education and socio-economic developmental work in the region. In Rajasthan, the Emmanuel Mission, alone, runs 50 schools.

Narendra Modi's government in Indian state of Gujarat harbours a xenophobic attitude not only towards Muslims but also Christians. Yet, the missionaries have established a throbbing network of schools in that state also. Modi even conducted a secret survey of the Christians, living in districts of Ahmedabad, Sanaskantha, Jabarkantha and Kutch. The

survey was completed despite protests inside and outside the state assembly. The purpose of the survey was to 'pinpoint Christians and sort them out, if they become a headache like Muslims'. Even today, nameless graves are being discovered in Gujarat and Kashmir. They are believed to be Muslims burnt alive in wake of Sabarmati Express arson hoax in Gujarat, or innocent Kashmiris killed by Indian forces. Who knows that it is now the Christians' turn to face Hindus' wrath in Orissa and other Indian states. The international community should wake up to forestall Christians' carnage in Orissa, and in other Indian states. The economic blockade of 450-mile Pathankote-Jammu-Srinagar lifeline road by Hindus of Jammu brings home the message crystal clear: Hindustan is for Hindus only, no room for any minority'.