

Orissa's ongoing violence against minorities

According to local sources, an estimated 50 deaths have occurred in the Indian state of Orissa over the past six weeks, with many more injured and their property destroyed. The most recent deaths reported were on October 2, when two Baptist men were killed and five Christian homes set on fire in the district of Kandhamal. On the same night, about 250 homes were set on fire in the neighboring district of Boudh, most of which belonged to Dalits.

Asia Calling reported General Secretary of the All India Christian Council, Dr John Dayal as having said that,

[One hundred and twenty] churches were destroyed in Orissa itself, some of them for the second time. More than 4000 houses have been destroyed. Women have been raped, nuns have been raped and priests have been killed. More than 50,000 people have been rendered homeless. Of them, more than 35,000 are in the forests and 15,000 are in the refugee camps run by the government, where the conditions are pitiable. They are living like animals and epidemics are likely to break out at any time.

Indian priest describes mob ordeal 'like being tortured for Christ'

Anto Akkara, Catholic News Service

Father Thomas Chellen, undergoing treatment at a Catholic hospital in Bhubaneswar, India said he was grateful to be alive after a Hindu mob nearly set him on fire.

“They had poured kerosene on my head, and one held a matchbox in his hands to light the fire. But thanks to divine providence, in the end, they did not do that. Otherwise, I would not have been there to tell this horror,” the 55-year-old priest, director of the pastoral center at Konjamendi in the Indian state of Orissa, told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview from his hospital bed on August 28.

Following the August 23 murder of a Hindu leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, by Maoist extremists, Father Chellen said Hindu mobs started attacking Christian centers in Kandhamal, the district where the slain leader was based.

When a Hindu mob of 500 people broke into the pastoral center around noon on August 24, Father Chellen said he fled through the backyard with another priest and a nun.

“It was heartbreaking for us to watch from a distance the entire complex go up in smoke,” said Father Chellen, who had supervised the construction of the center that opened in 2001 and could accommodate 200 people.

“They vandalized everything and set it on fire. It has been reduced to ashes,” he added.

As the three watched from a distance, some other priests told them to flee.

“We fled to the jungles and came in the night to take shelter in the house of a Hindu friend and spent the night there,” Father Chellen said, adding that the second priest left them to join other priests.

The following morning, he said, the Hindu family moved the priest and nun to an adjacent vacant house and locked it to give the impression that no one was inside.

However, the Hindu mobs overheard the priest speaking on his cell phone, broke into the room and dragged him and the nun outside.

To prove to me you are fighting for me
As brothers we must jointly hate the other
You tell me

In hate what brotherhood
Can there be
Must I teach my child to hate
The way you say you do
This brotherhood in evil I reject
This I will not teach.

I'm not involved

David Ronald Bruce Pehrul (<http://www.myhiddenvoice.com/>)

Yes, I was there, but not involved,
I never said a word,
When they were tortured for their Faith,
My life of ease, preferred.

I stayed inside my Comfort Zone,
And did not make a move,
I did not have a thing to say,
And not a thing to prove.

Religious leaders said, "They're wrong,
And everyone must die,"
They asked me what I thought of it,
But I had no reply.

I didn't want to state my view,
Although I had a choice,
I should have chosen right from wrong,
And spoke up with my voice.

But I just stood there very mute,
And didn't say a thing,
When they were sentenced to their fate,
My conscience felt a sting.

And now I live with what I've done,
And when they come for me,
I will not have a thing to say,
Nor have a place to flee.

The following statement discusses the role of the Indian government in the violence:

INDIA: Government of Orissa promotes violence

A joint statement issued by the Asian Human Rights Commission - Hong Kong (AHRC) the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights - India (NCDHR) and the International Dalit Solidarity Network -

The ongoing violence in Orissa, India reflects the current status of the rule of law in that state. The violent incidents that devastated the thin line of communal harmony in the state are the result of an intentional state policy of promoting vested religious interests. This ulterior motive to attain short-term political gains through unconstitutional and non-democratic means is also augmented by poor policing. The brunt of the resultant violence is borne by the Dalit, Christian and Tribal minorities.

The uncontrollable violence demonstrates that the state is not willing to combat anti-democratic forces operating in the state. It also exposes the connivance of state administration with these forces operating in India to destabilize the fragile social fabric.

The recent incidents that resulted in the loss of life and property in Orissa appear not to be as sporadic as portrayed. Some sources cite letters and other official correspondence received by the state administration warning them about the possibility of large-scale violence that could erupt at any time. These communications, while requesting protection for life and property, also informed the administration of the fear that violence will focus on minority communities in the state. Most of these communications were addressed to the state government representatives responsible for the administration and maintenance of law and order in the state.

These concerns have proved to be true from the incidents reported in Orissa during the past 24 days. It took about five to seven days for the state administration to even begin to start responding to the calamity once it began. During this time and even after, fundamentalist Hindu political parties terrorized the minority Dalit, Tribal and Christian communities living in semi-urban and remote villages in the Kandhamal district of the state.

The massive scale of violence resulted in at least 22 deaths and property loss worth millions of rupees, beginning in the Kandhamal district and soon spreading to neighboring districts. It showed a well-planned pattern of violence that was orchestrated with precision. Such an assault, targeting communities spreading across an entire region, requires good planning and preparation.

There are allegations that the criminals had even prepared name lists of persons and their properties to be targeted during the violence. The commonly believed cause for the violence, the murder of five Vishwa Hindu Parisad (VHP) cadres, appears to have been an excuse to commence the carnage.

The media, by and large biased and communalized, has willfully hyped and misguided the general public into believing that the murder of the VHP cadres was the reason for the latest bloodshed. Contrary to these reports that were widely published in the national and international media, the violence in Orissa was not merely a communal fight between the Hindus and the Christians.

A deeper insight is gained into the violence if the following are noted; the preparations that were made before the incident: the pattern in which the violence spread; the evident reluctance of the state administration to react sensibly before and after the violence. This leads to the conclusion that the state administration is also a willing partner in the execution of the larger Hindutwa agenda in the state.

For the minority communities, particularly the Dalits and the Tribals, it means the continuation of oppression and the curtailment of all opportunities for liberation. In this context it is not a surprise that similar incidents are reported from other states of India like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

It appears that the Orissa state police and other agencies responsible for preventing violence and crime were aware of the preparations the criminals operating in the state were making. It is also certain that the police were aware which communities would be targeted by the criminals.

Similar violence of varying intensity has affected the state in the past decade. After each incident, the state police was accused of failure to investigate, prosecute and punish the criminals who orchestrated the

violence. This is a key factor for a recurrence of the violence to further spread out affecting almost the entire state as on this occasion.

The role of the law enforcement agencies in a democratic setup is not just investigating crimes once they are committed. Proper investigation and prosecution of crime has its deterrent value. In addition to the investigation of crimes, law enforcement agencies have the duty to instill confidence in ordinary people, especially those who are most vulnerable. In this way, the rule of law is maintained in the state and any breach of law and order will not go undetected and unpunished. In this context the state administration and the police force it commands cannot be absolved from the responsibility for the perpetuation of violence in Orissa.

The Central Government which is mandated to issue directions to the State Government under articles 256 and 257 of the Constitution is also equally responsible for its failure in protecting the people and arresting the perpetrators.

To make matters worse, the state administration prevented political leaders, media and human rights organizations from visiting trouble-hit parts of the state, while allowing the VHP leaders free mobility with state protection. For example, the entire Kandhamal district was put under curfew and was completely cut-off from the rest of the world for days. The people lived in fear for their lives and property. A large number of them sought protection by hiding in nearby forests at the time their properties were burned, looted and ransacked. Almost all of these people were Dalit and Tribal Christians.

It is reported that those who took refuge in government shelter camps were those who had no other option for survival. As of now those who took shelter in relief camps are reluctant to leave the relative security of the camps. Most of them continue to fear that once they leave the camps they would be forced to 'reconvert' to Hinduism against their will. It is reported that some persons who were not in the camp were 'reconverted' by force, a process in which many were blinded. It is reported that the reversion is viewed as a purification process by the VHP.

Even after three weeks of violence, the state administration continues to prevent the media and human rights organizations from accessing the victims. The state administration has enforced a regulatory policy of prior permission for the media and human rights groups to travel into trouble-hit areas or relief camps. In spite of this, the administration insists that the situation has returned to normal.

The state administration, in an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, has stated that it has taken into custody 421 persons whom the government accuses of being behind the violence. At the same time, credible sources report that the persons cited as accused in these cases are not actually those involved in criminal acts. It is suspected that this is an attempt to save the actual culprits from being identified and prosecuted.

In addition to this, the general public and some of the victims were chased away by the police when they approached the police stations to file complaints. It is also reported that many complaints that identify criminals were not registered by the police. Such incidents show the complacency of the local police in promoting violence in the state. There is also information provided by noted human rights activists that many non-Hindu institutions and other organizations were denied any form of police protection when they requested it.

It is suspected that many witnesses will fail to turn-up in court, fearing repercussions. This is a genuine fear since India lacks any form of witness protection mechanisms. In any case, it would be difficult for an ordinary person to believe that the police who failed to prevent the violence would protect them on any future occasion.

The violence in Orissa has destroyed the social fabric in the state to such an extent that it will take years of conscious effort by the administration and society to re-establish it. The primary requirement for this is that the state administration impartially investigate the crimes committed during the violence. They must ensure that the accused, if proven guilty, are sentenced to the punishment prescribed by the law for such acts.

The state administration must also ensure that the entire incident and the circumstances that led to such massive violence are properly documented, by the state as well as by the civil society and the media.