

Complementary Reflections

ATTACKS ON CHRISTIANS

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I. The Orissa Carnage

1. The Basic Data

* According to a Press Release of the all India Christian Council (AICC) on 5th Oct. 2008, **the toll of the anti-Christian violence in Orissa from 24th August to 4th Oct. 2008 stands as follows:** 14 districts hit, 300 villages destroyed, 4,400 houses burnt, 50,000 people homeless, and 59 people murdered, including 10 priests/pastors (John Dayal, AICC Secretary General). Two days earlier, another circular added that 18,000 persons were injured, and 149 churches and 13 schools destroyed.

* **The JPD** (Justice, Peace and Development) **Commission of the CBCI** (Catholic Bishops' Conference of India) **had reported on 25th Sept. 2008** *that at least 96 churches and Christian institutions were demolished, and 22,236 people displaced in refugee camps and about 40,000 in forests and other places* (Fr. Nithiya, ofm. cap., Secretary, CBCI JPD Commission). According to another Report, *“the VHP and the Bajrang Dal were responsible for similar attacks, killing 4 Christians, destroying 730 homes and vandalising 105 churches in December 2007”* (ibid., 3rd Sept. 2008).

2. Words from the Heart

In an email sent on 6th Oct. 2008, Fr. Nithiya wrote: “After my 4-day (20-23 Sept.) fact-finding visit in Orissa with two colleagues, *I am unable to think or reflect on any other subject... The situation in Orissa is very grim and disturbing. With great pain, I present you the facts... I share certain things that repeatedly come to my mind these days.* * Mr. Ishwar Digal and his wife were being forced to become Hindus by Hindu fundamentalist groups. When they

refused, he was cut into pieces in front of his wife. When she went back to the relief camp, the police refused to file an FIR. * A nun was gang-raped in front of the police in public. No action was taken. * Almost every day, people are tortured because they are Christians. This has been happening for more than a month in Orissa. TV and print media do not give sufficient coverage. * Priests, nuns and their families are targeted and killed.

* *The belongings of Christians are stolen, their lands taken away and they are forcefully converted to Hinduism.* * They are asked to sign a document that reconversion is done freely. They are humiliated and made to drink cow-dung water. If they do not accept Hinduism, they are tortured or killed. * As a sign of having become Hindus, they are asked to break down statues and churches, and even to kill other Christians. * The fundamentalist Hindu groups use country guns, axes, swords, bows, arrows, crowbars, etc. Bodies are chopped off and hewed, people are burnt and buried alive, women are gang-raped. * Dead bodies of Christians are found in the fields, on the roads. The number of martyrs is much greater than the confirmed list. Looting, arson and vandalism continue. *Yet, most people are determined to live or die as Christians.”*

3. Forcible Reconversions

Aditi Tandon (*The Tribune*, 9/9/08, cf. <www.tribuneindia.com/2008/20080909/nation.htm#4>) wrote from Kandhamal that **Christians in Orissa are under ‘threat’ to convert.** “Several Christians in 11 blocks of the tribal districts of Orissa are said to have been ‘forcibly converted’ as Hindus in the past 17 days of mayhem; *the rest say they are facing a choice between life and faith.* “The radicals have told us that we can live here only as Hindus. They are giving deadlines to people to convert or be prepared to face the worst. They asked my family to fall in line by 8 pm on September 3. When we did not agree to convert, they razed our properties’, said Jitender Digal, a refugee at Bijaya High School camp in Raikia block.”

“In Kandhamal, minorities furnish proof of how ‘force and fear’ is being used to deter people from their faith... (Sample) letters have been floating around for a fortnight, with covert but stern messages to Christians to convert. The first targets in this ‘war’ of conversion

are pastors... Three of them – Samuel Naik, Akhar Digal and Dibya Digal from Raikia and Udaygiri blocks – have already lost their lives in the recent violence. In each case, the killers first asked the victims if they were ready to become Hindus, say relatives. Samuel Naik's son, Ramesh, who witnessed the killings of his father and grandmother, recounts: 'They gave three warnings to my father. When he refused to abandon his faith, they slaughtered him. My grandmother met the same fate.'

"Forcible conversions are mostly reported to be happening in G Udaygiri, Raikia, Tikabali, Chakapad and Balliguda blocks, **with Christians now demanding a separate district**. Ashok Behera, a camper at Tikabali, says: 'We want a district with a Christian collector, a Christian superintendent of police (SP) and a Christian block development officer. *We have lost faith in the system as close to 2,000 Christians have been converted.*' VHP leaders for their part remain as adamant as ever, *claiming they will 'do everything possible to protect the Hindu faith in Orissa'*. Kabi Chandra Nath, who assumed charge of the Jalaspeta ashram after Laxmananda Saraswati's death, goes to the extent of defending the radical stand, saying, *'We are not converting anyone. We are simply bringing misguided followers back to the fold.'* Never mind the cost."

II. The Karnataka Onslaught

1. The Purpose of the Unholy Crusade

It is reported that at least **22 churches were attacked and 20 women injured in 4 districts of Karnataka in late Sept. and early Oct. 2008** (AICC Press Release, 5th Oct. 2008).

A cover story of *Tehelka* is entitled **An Unholy Crusade** (4/10/08/28-37). **The author Sanjana thus explains the anti-Christian attacks:** "*The real 'conversion' happening in Karnataka is that of the RSS-BJP, who are using aggression to consolidate their hold in a once secular state.*" "The 2001 Census pegged the percentage of Hindus in Karnataka at 83.86, and Christians at 1.91. In Orissa, where a similar campaign against Christians is on, the 2001 Census showed nearly 95% Hindus and 2.44% Christians. The BJP heads the government in Karnataka and is part of the government in

Orissa. *Analysts say that the campaign against Christians is an attempt to consolidate the rightwing hold in Karnataka.*" "This is payback time for the BJP, which has built its success on 40 years of hard work by the RSS."

"Teesta Setalvad, editor of *Communalism Combat*, had pegged Karnataka as a communal hotspot way back in 2003. 'The next Orissa or next Gujarat is a moot point, but *the communalisation process in Karnataka is many years old*. From 2003, we have seen ugly scenes of communal violence in the state targeting Muslims and Christians. The attacks on Christians fall very much into *the core ideology of the Sangh – that of creating different levels of prejudice in the minds of the Hindus*. With the BJP coming to power, there are greater possibilities in terms of the political space that the Sangh can now capture." Sanjana points out that, within a few months of B.S. Yeddyurappa taking charge, 1000 police officials (including 416 inspectors and 171 sub-inspectors), 90 IAS officers and 52 IPS officers were transferred... The transfers, says Professor Ravivarma Kumar, Senior Advocate at the Karnataka High Court, are 'an attempt to grant political immunity to the Sangh forces by ensuring that cases are not booked in case of violence'."

2. Letter of St. Joseph's College to the Chief Minister

The Principal and several staff members of St. Joseph's College, Bangalore wrote an Open Letter to the Chief Minister of Karnataka on 18th Sept. 2008. After pointing out the College's contribution to the freedom struggle and the Quit India Movement, and to the education of "generations of students of different faiths to the ideals of democracy and secularism", the Letter continues: "*As an educational institution..., we are concerned about the divisive politics that polarises people on the basis of religion...* What disturbs us is the mean claim that your party and your cadres make that Christian institutions are involved in forced conversion. Every citizen in this country has been given the right to practice, profess and propagate one's religion by the Constitution... When your affiliates attack us on the issue of conversion, we are fully aware that you are being frivolous. You do not believe in it. Nobody else believes in it... *Such divisive language to defame (Christian) institutions and the community*

for political purposes is against the spirit of secularism and we do not appreciate that coming from the head of the government of Karnataka.”

“This state does not need debates on conversion or terrorism. **What the state needs is debate on development, inequalities, peace and harmony.** There has been a campaign of hate systematically carried out by your affiliates and sometimes your own cadres... *How can we build development without peace and harmony? And how can we build peace and harmony without development?* Peace and harmony on the one hand and development and growth on the other are mutual and inter-dependent. We could debate this issue and other issues of marginalisation of people, hunger and inequality instead of the trivial issue of conversion. Instead of encouraging your cadres and your affiliates to burn and destroy churches and create disharmony, *can you not encourage them to work for literacy, employment, food, shelter and clothing?*”

“Your affiliates may assume that... your party may gain more seats in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections because of the disastrous polarisations between communities. **But that may be far from the truth.** People always see through such divisive politics. *Only economic development for the masses and the just practice of the secular Constitution can promise you votes.* So we appeal to you... to work for secularism, harmony, tolerance, and development so that together we may build a humane and progressive human community in Karnataka... **We assure you of our cooperation in the task of building a secular state in the true spirit of diversity and pluralism.** Of course, we shall continue to dissent in the true democratic spirit of the Constitution when the Constitution of the land is under attack.”

3. Pastoral Letter of the Bangalore Archbishop

Rt. Rev. Bernard Moras wrote on 25th Sept. 2008: “It is with great dismay, shock and pain I am sending this pastoral letter to all of you in the wake of the recent atrocities against Christians, and the well-orchestrated attacks on our places of worship.” **Our State Government has not only failed to protect our Constitutional rights, “but also seems to have supported fundamentalist**

groups”. “Innocent people such as children, women and old people were beaten up mercilessly by the police, and some of them were arrested and ill-treated in police custody... We do have the documentary and first-hand evidence for all these attacks. I requested the Chief Minister and the Home Minister to release immediately those innocent people... *Our Constitutional rights should be protected at all cost and our places of worship should be safeguarded from fanatics and unruly elements*” (#1).

“Later, the Chief Minister accompanied by the Home Minister and three other Ministers, called on me. I told them strongly how hurt we were at these incidents and with the off-hand manner in which the Government had handled the situation. I also asked the Chief Minister to advise the police personnel not to enter any place of worship, and to take immediate action against those who forcibly entered the churches and physically assaulted innocent people including nuns, women and children. *The Chief Minister has promised me that firm action would be taken against the culprits and that he would give necessary protection to the Christian minority. He also assured me that such incidents will not take place in future*” (#3).

“Several Christian organisations, heads of other religions, leaders of secular groups such as Peace Coordination Committees, inter-religious groups headed by senior citizens and the *intelligentsia* of society, Dalit groups and many other organisations, *not only condemned these atrocities and expressed their sympathy, but also extended their support in our efforts to safeguard our fundamental rights.* I, on your behalf, thank each organisation and its members for its goodwill, solidarity and support” (#6).

“**We need to wake up from our slumber and fight against the evil forces with Christian courage.** *Let us not resort to violence, but express our protests through non-violent methods.* We need to tell the radical Hindu organisations that they make false allegations that the Church converts illiterate people, either through allurements or force. *These are baseless and absolutely false allegations*” (#7). Let us safeguard our churches and institutions by taking all precautionary methods. Above all, let us express our unity and solidarity by sharing the love of Christ with one another... **May**

the Lord deepen our faith, increase our hope, strengthen our unity and rejuvenate our courage to help us live and bear witness to our Christian life and commitment” (#8).

4. Open Letter to the Catholics of Mangalore (25/9/2008)

Fr. Cedric Prakash SJ (Director of PRASHANT, the Jesuit Centre for Human Rights, Justice and Peace, in Ahmedabad, Gujarat) **thus sums up his impressions of his 5-day Mangalore visit.** “*We never expected this to happen to us*’ is what several of you have been saying. Many others added, ‘*and we were totally unprepared*’... The underlying feeling throughout was, ‘*this violence was just too terrible for words*’... It was also heartwarming to know how several of you stood firm to protect the Church and Church property... *I salute each one of you who have exemplified faith, courage and dignity to preserve the diversity and the secular fabric of our country.*”

Fr. Cedric then shares his reflections. These are some of them: “*The attacks on Churches and Christians are NOT a ‘one-off’ affair. It is part of a systematic long-term project of the Sangh Parivar, who have an insidious, divisive agenda based on a fascist ideology. During these attacks, the fascists have effectively used age-old tactics like ‘hit and run’, ‘divide and rule’ (it’s not ‘you’ but ‘they’), ‘diverting from the real issue’ (illegal conversion, foreign funds, etc.)... They have trapped us in their subterfuge. We have fallen prey to their evil designs.*”

“*What perhaps went awry in their plans was the groundswell of response from the Catholic laity, very specially the youth. This spontaneous response, both on Sept. 14th and 15th, certainly put them on the backfoot. The ringing of Church bells was a terrific strategy used on the part of the Catholics on both days. In doing so, we were reminded that God is with us and that we need to come together and remain united in the face of crisis.*”

“*The police had no business to enter Church property, and very specially the sacred precincts of our Churches. There is enough of documentary evidence to show how the police have beaten up and brutalised people, even inside Churches, and severely damaged Church property. No acts of violence can and should be justified.*”

“On the very first day, members of the Sangh Parivar took responsibility for the attacks. This would not have been possible if they did not have the full patronage of the State Government and the support of BJP higher-ups. *Government officials and police clearly acted as footstools for the whims and fancies of their political masters.* A few days before these attacks, a highly inflammatory and defamatory booklet was distributed outside several educational institutions in Mangalore. The booklet held the Christians responsible for the killing of the Swami in Orissa. *The police did nothing to stop those who were responsible.*”

“The Sangh Parivar with all its affiliates is a fascist organisation. They are out to destroy the secular fabric of the country. *They DO NOT represent the vast majority of the Hindus... Large sections of Indian (Hindu) society regard the Sangh Parivar as a terrorist group and would like that they be BANNED.* The dharnas/demonstrations by the Catholics have proved that ‘Satyagraha’ (the force of Truth) given to us by Mahatma Gandhi is a very effective weapon to counter hate, prejudice and violence in this country.”

Fr. Cedric finally offers several suggestions, which we numbered. “1) The machinations of the Sangh Parivar are going to continue for a long time. Please, don’t be fooled if there are utterances that it’s all over. 2) *It is important to document/study/analyse the way they work.* This should be done through well-established **Resources Centres**, which can also serve as nodal points in times of crisis. 3) We need to carefully study the various statements of the Chief Minister and Home Minister of Karnataka. There are several contradictions in them. Do remember that fascists indulge in techniques like ‘*Tell a lie a thousand time and people tend to believe it.*”

“4) *We need to be a Communicating Church* with a very effective coordinating mechanism in which power and responsibility is shared at every possible level and specially among all sections of the laity. 5) *We need to SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER...* Archbishop Bernard Moras’ bold statements to the Chief Minister are an excellent example for all of us). 6) *We need to formulate responses and strategies for the long term.* We need to set OUR agenda, very specially to preserve and enhance the Constitutional Rights and Freedom of every single citizen (the Sangh Parivar tries to make us

reactionaries to their devious agenda). 7) *We should not give up any of our routine programmes, functions/celebrations.* Every effort has to be made to show the fascists that we are citizens of this country with the rights and freedoms guaranteed to every citizen. 8) *Our response has to be broad-based.*” It should include all ethnic groups within the Catholic community, all denominations of the Christian faith (e.g. through national or State Forums), and all men and women of goodwill, especially our former students.

“9) The policemen responsible for heinous acts should be brought to book immediately for dereliction of duty.” In spite of our understandable fear of revenge, we must make the police accountable. “10) *All others responsible for the attacks on Christians and the Churches MUST be brought to book immediately, and the Government must be held responsible for this...* 11) All Catholic youth who have been arrested should be released immediately and all charges against them should be dropped unconditionally. 12) *The attacks on the Christians in Karnataka, together with those of Orissa and other parts of India, must be internationalised.* The Central and State Governments must get missives from countries who are friendly with India... **A Citizens Tribunal** consisting of eminent people from all walks of life (and preferably non-Christians) must be set up immediately...”

“**Above all, DO NOT PANIC... DO NOT FEAR.** The Lord is with us and has told us over and over again that we should ‘**FEAR NO ONE**’ on this earth... *Being a citizen of India is our birthright.* Let us hold our heads high and cherish the eternal values given to us by Jesus. The Indian Constitution also guarantees many of them. **Being Indian is our birthright and no one can treat us as second-class citizens in our country.**”