

Violence against Indian Christians raises alarm

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GROWING up in Thiruvalla, Kerala in southern India, Thomas Oommen read his family's Bible daily, attended church regularly, and spoke about his Christian faith freely. "I never experienced any discrimination and most of my close friends were Hindus and Muslims," said Oommen, 59, who immigrated to the United States in 1975 to work as a business administrator in Long Island, New York. "What is happening in India today really breaks my heart," said Oommen referring to recent violence between Hindus and Christians in the eastern Indian state of Orissa.

Over 10,000 Christians are currently living in squalid refugee camps in Orissa after riots claimed more than a dozen lives. Over 3,000 policemen have been deployed to curb the attacks on churches and Christian institutions. Christians constitute a quarter of the 600,000 people in Orissa's Kandhamal district where violence broke out. The most recent census shows Christians making up 2 percent of India's population, in comparison to the 80 percent Hindu majority.

The assassination of a Hindu leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, caused some Hindus to retaliate against their Christian neighbors although Left-wing guerrillas claimed responsibility for the murder. "It is shocking that the government of Orissa never took sufficient steps to subvert violence and douse the flames of communalism in the state and has failed to arrest the culprits and are like mute spectators," Archbishop Bernard Moras, president of the Karnataka Region Catholic Bishops' Council told a press conference at the Archbishop's House. The violence has also been strongly condemned by the Pope and the Italian government. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called the recent events a "national disgrace", but the Central government has refrained from intervening in Orissa.

India is no stranger to inter-religious tensions. Oommen helped find the Indian Christian Forum after the murder of Australian Missionary Dr Graham Staines and his two young sons, Philip and Timothy, in Orissa where they were working for leprosy patients. The Forum, which claims a membership of 5,000 in the Tri-State region, was established to help create awareness in the United States of persecution against India's minorities and influence Indian authorities to curtail fundamentalist groups.

Many Hindus are alarmed by the attacks perpetrated in their name. "Hinduism preaches total non-violence where not even animals should not be killed let alone humans," said Shyam Oberoi, who is on the executive committee of the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center in Seattle, Washington. "Every religion has some fanatics who twist their faith for the benefit of power politics," said Oberoi who emigrated from India to America in 1987 to work as an electrical engineer. Oberoi said, Hindus in America have a healthy and harmonious relationship with other religious minorities, but in India "some political parties try to exploit and incite the masses to get votes." He added: "These people have no interest in Hinduism and I would say they are anti-Hindus."

Scholars note that economics and politics, not theology, help explain the current bout of violence. "With the upcoming election, Hindu nationalists are eager to exploit any point of controversy as a form of campaign mobilization," said Partha Chatterjee, author of *The Politics of the Governed* and professor of anthropology at Columbia University. "There are political parties who are motivated to reintegrate forest-dwellers back into Hindu society to garner votes along identity lines." He added that "Hindu nationalists are aggressively responding to any missionary efforts out of political ambitions."

Oommen agrees that religious differences



In the aftermath of the killing of Hindu leader Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati violence targeting Christians erupted in several districts of Orissa. Express file photo

are not the problem. "Most Hindus are peace-loving people, but some extremists are politicizing religious differences for their personal gain," reiterated Oommen. A dozen Indian American Christians including Oommen gathered in front of the United Nations on August 29, to hold a vigil and pray for the 16 people killed and thousands displaced, due to the violence. "Those who are attacking Christians are violating the law, the Constitution and the spirit of India," said Oommen who is spearheading a letter writing campaign to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, which urges the international community to pressure the Indian government to protect all minorities.

"The Church in India serves the least privileged and most marginalized in the remotest parts of the country" said a flier distributed by protesters outside the United Nations. "To attack the Church and its members amounts to assaulting the cause of justice, peace and harmony."

Other groups such as the Indian Christians United, an interdenominational organization in San Jose, California, are raising money for those affected by the recent bout of violence. Over 6,000 people have signed an online petition to the President of India requesting that she "contain these unfortunate attacks against the Christian community and also use [her] office to thwart any other such incidents from happening in the future."

Although some Hindu nationalists suggest that Christianity is a "foreign religion" that is sponsored by western governments, Oommen notes that Christianity has had a presence in India for over two millennia. Christianity arrived in India with the coming of Thomas the Apostle during the 1st century. The second spurt in the growth of Christianity came during the colonization of India which started after discovery of sea route to India by Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in 1498.

Since the 1960s, seven of India's 28 states have outlawed religious conversion through coercion, money or gifts. Today, some fear the laws are meant to discourage Hindus from

converting to Christianity although others claim the laws exist to dissuade wealthy Muslims or Christians from buying adherents over with gifts. Many evangelical Christians regard proselytizing as part of their sacred duty so churches have had to take more nuanced approaches to spreading their faith. At the Colaba Baptist Church in southern Mumbai, churchgoers are encouraged to pray with people in the street, but not enter private residences with the intent of converting. "We are spreading our faith," said Max Fernandez, 39, a parishioner. "But not in a way that is threatening to the people. We have to be sensible. (The fear) keeps us walking on egg shells."

The BJP says it does not support attacks against missionaries, they just want missionaries to stop pressuring people to convert. "As a party, the BJP is against violence," said Sidharth Nath Singh, the party's national spokesman. "It's not that our party is against conversion. If the person wants to convert, that's fine," Singh said. "But because people are putting pressure on people to convert, and these people are lured by gifts and promises, not by faith, we think that is wrong. That is the principal stance of the BJP."

Singh accused Christian missionaries and NGOs of luring potential converts with promises of jobs, education and benefits, and taking advantage of people who are desperate and needy. The BJP is supportive of the RSS, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a nationalist cultural organization, which has spearheaded efforts to make India a "Hindu nation." The RSS is also involved in facilitating re-conversion ceremonies to Hinduism in tribal villages where missionaries were active.

Oommen says he's proud to come from religiously pluralistic India, but is concerned about the political scene in his homeland. "Incited by extreme rightist fundamentalist groups, such as VHP, RSS and Bajrang Dal which want to impose a Hindu state, minorities have been attacked and killed, their places of worship destroyed, and their freedom of religious practice curtailed," said Oommen. "In-

dia is a superpower and one of the world's greatest democracies, but great power must come with great responsibility."

Church leaders at the Sacred Heart Cathedral in New Delhi say that the BJP's anxiety over mass conversions is misguided, especially since the Christian population is not booming but has reached a plateau in recent years. "They want the whole of the country for Hindus," said Sat Pal Bhatti, a Christian convert who proselytizes. "Why is there so much restriction on Christian freedom?"

Although BJP spokesman Singh says that "we'd like everyone to exist peacefully," other leaders in the BJP have made bellicose statements in the past. After Hindus converted hundreds of Christians in a ceremony in April 2005, BJP leader Dilip Singh Judeo ominously warned, "If Christian missionaries don't stop converting people we will take up arms."

Christians are not the only religious minority group that has felt persecuted in recent years. In the communal violence in Gujarat during 2002, over thousand people were killed and approximately 50,100 people were displaced. Human Rights Watch, a nonprofit organization, criticized the Indian government for failing to address the resulting humanitarian condition, "overwhelming majority of them Muslim," who fled their homes for relief camps in the aftermath of the events. Oommen had then help organize a 3,000-people strong protest outside the United Nations in 2002 after the violence. "We are concerned about the human rights of everyone, not just Christians," said Oommen. "We have also spoken out against violence against Hindus by the Pakistani state."

Tensions on the ground are exacerbated by the unequal economic opportunities available to Christians and Hindus as well as "tribals," India's indigenous inhabitants, and "untouchables," a historically disadvantaged group in the Hindu caste system, noted Partha Chatterjee.

The Sacred Heart Cathedral in New Delhi, located only blocks away from the BJP headquarters, is working to overturn anti-conversion laws. One of the Cathedral's biggest efforts is to help Christian converts from the Dalit community enjoy a number of laws that would help improve their status — such as education stipends and job assistance. The loophole, however, is that these affirmative action laws don't apply to Dalits when they convert to Islam or Christianity because these religions don't recognize the caste system in the first place. Dalit Christians make up 70% of India's Christian population, according to the Poor Christian Liberation Movement (PCLM). "It is worth mentioning here that when (Dalit Christians) were in Hindu society, they were the victims of the caste system," PCLM president R.L. Francis said in a statement. Rev. Dominic Emmanuel, spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Delhi, believes there are Indians who practice Christianity only in private because they are scared. "Dalits want to be treated like human beings," said Rev. Emmanuel. "Anybody can walk into a mosque or church, but not a temple. Temples are only for high caste Hindus."

Hindus are quick to defend their religion from accusations of discrimination and intolerance. "The central teaching on Hinduism is 'be good, do good and good will come to you,' and all else is just politics," said Shyam Oberoi of the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center in Seattle, Washington. "Hindus have also suffered greatly in inter-religious disputes, but people are basically good-hearted," said Oberoi who pointed out that individual Hindu families have protected persecuted minorities in instable times.

According to Oommen, there is doubt that India belongs to people of all faith. The Indian freedom struggle against the British envisaged a secular and democratic nation where equal rights, freedom of speech and unfettered practice of religions were to be guaranteed to all its citizens," said Oommen.

