

India: Hindu communalists target Christian minority in Orissa and other states

Karnataka and Kerala

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For the past six weeks, Hindu supremacists associated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP--the World Hindu Council) and its youth wing, the Bajrang Dal (BD), have been mounting violent attacks on impoverished Christians in the East Indian state of Orissa.

Yet neither the state government, nor the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) national government has taken any decisive action to put an end to this pogrom.

Some 50 Christians have been killed and 5,000 dwellings razed by roving mobs of VHP and BJ members armed with tridents, iron rods, bows, homemade bombs, and kerosene. The dead include a priest and a nun who were burned alive.

The violence has been centered in the central highland district of Kandamahal, or Phoolbani, which is home to socioeconomically-deprived tribal peoples, many of whom have converted to Christianity.

More than 13,000 displaced persons have found temporary haven in internal refugee camps, but as many as 50,000 others are thought to be hiding in the region's forests and hills. The VHP-BD thugs are demanding that anyone wishing to return first convert to Hinduism.

The Indian government last week rushed additional paramilitary forces to the state at the request of Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, whose Biju Janata Dal (BJD) rules the state in a coalition with the Hindu communalist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP. Patnaik appears to be utilizing the tactic of asking for additional paramilitary forces as a substitute for ordering the suppression of the communal attacks and exposing the complicity of local police officers, who are reported to have allowed many of the attacks to proceed unimpeded.

The BJP has a decade's long association with the Hindu supremacist right and played the principal role in fomenting the two worst instances of anti-Muslim violence in post-partition India--the 1992 razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya and the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat. The BJP and VHP also share a common parent organization, the shadowy and virulently anti-socialist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

The Congress party-led UPA government has responded to the anti-Christian pogrom in Orissa by issuing pro forma statements deploring the violence. Only in recent days and after French President Nicolas Sarkozy raised the matter with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during his visit to Paris has India's central government begun to vigorously press the state government to halt the violence.

The strongest statement to date came from India's Home Minister Shivraj Patil who during an Oct. 4 television interview lambasted the Orissa government for its "inaction," which he termed a "violation of the [Indian] Constitution." He also hinted at stronger measures

including the possible dismissal of the state government and imposition of central government, noting that "there is a growing demand for President's rule if the situation worsens."

The anti-Christian attacks began August 23 after a Hindu priest and VHP Vice President, Laxmananand Saraswati, were murdered by unknown assailants. Saraswati was a notorious Hindu extremist who had led violent communal campaigns against cow slaughter and purported "forced conversion" to Christianity.

The Communist Party of India (Maoist), a Naxhalite group that has been waging "armed struggle" against the Indian government for decades, subsequently claimed responsibility for Saraswati's death, describing him as a "rabid anti-Christian ideologue and persecutor of innocent Christians" who "was responsible for the burning down of over 400 churches in Khandamal district alone."

Despite this claim, the VHP leadership, without providing a shred of evidence, accused Christians of killing Saraswati and then, in keeping with its reactionary communalist ideology, set about to impose brutal collective punishment on the Christian population as a whole.

The Hindu supremacists have exploited Saraswati's murder to widen and heighten a long-developing campaign aimed at intimidating the Christian minority. In January 1999, Barang Dal thugs murdered the missionary Graham Stewart Staines and his two young sons by setting fire to the jeep in which they were sleeping.

Undoubtedly the fact that Orissa is ruled by the reactionary BJD-BJP coalition has given the Hindu supremacist groups a sense of impunity.

The state government has abetted the anti-Christian campaign through its inaction and by seeking to cover up the deliberate and systematic character of the pogrom. A state official claimed that the communal rampage was "an emotional and spontaneous reaction of people to the killing of Swami Laxmananand Saraswati."

One of India's most impoverished states, Orissa is home to many tribal groups. In recent years it has become the focus of VHP and BD efforts to counter Christian missionary activity.

In Orissa and several other parts of India, sections of the tribal population and other groups viewed as lower-caste have embraced Christianity as a means of escaping Hindu caste discrimination and to secure access to the schooling, free health care, and other benefits provided by Christian missionaries.

The Hindu right claims that conversion to Christianity constitutes "denationalization," and insists that the tribals are Hindus and must remain Hindus, although in fact most adhere to religious beliefs and practices that bear little resemblance to Hinduism.

The charge of "forced conversion" is a reactionary canard.

To be sure, the missionaries do seek to ingratiate themselves with the local population by providing services that the Indian state, including Orissa's BJD-BJP government, has proven unwilling and woefully unable to provide. But the RSS and its offshoots like the VHP have done the same, seeking to use the provision of social welfare as a means to inculcate their noxious *Hindutvite* ideology.

As for the charge of "forced conversions," it is the Hindu right that seeks to use compulsion. This involves bloody violence but also communal legislation. At the instigation of the Hindu right, India's post-independence Congress government constitutionally limited the benefits of affirmative action programs for former untouchables (Scheduled Castes) to Hindus, thereby punishing untouchables who had converted to Christianity or Islam. This provision remains in force to this day.

In seeking to combat the missionary efforts in Kandamahala, the Hindu right has played on tribal divisions, inciting the "Hindu" Kondh against the Panas, who have converted or largely converted to Christianity. Both groups speak the same Kui language and have shared the region without hostility for centuries.

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No doubt emboldened by the state's acquiescence before the anti-Christian campaign in Orissa, BD gangs on Sept. 14 launched attacks on the Christian community in the southern state of Karnataka, a state without any previous history of significant Hindu-Christian communal conflict.

The BD mobs attacked 16 prayer houses and churches, breaking windows, doors and ransacking the properties. The attacks were especially intense in Dakshin Kannada, Chikmagalur, Udupi and Mangalore districts. Many innocent parishioners, priests and nuns were also assaulted.

The following day in the coastal city of Mangalore, police attacked hundreds of Christian protesters, lobbing tear gas and mercilessly beating the protesters. Police even raided churches to arrest youth who had sought refuge there.

Karnataka Chief Minister and BJP leader B.S. Yediyurappa failed to condemn the unprovoked attacks by his communalist allies in the VHP and BD. Instead, he effectively justified them by demanding that the missionaries stop forcible conversions of Hindus to Christianity.

Parroting the VHP-BD propaganda, Yediyurappa declared, "There is no room for forcible conversion in democracy. No one should indulge in it ... The attacks have taken place in areas where there was conversion activity."

Following a widespread public outcry against Yeddyurappa's remarks, the police claimed to have arrested 53 Bajrang Dal activists and rounded-up over 100 others. The latter group possibly includes some of the victims themselves.

The Hindu communalists also spread their attacks on Sept. 15 to the neighboring state of Kerala, which is ruled by a coalition led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist). In the Kasargode district of Kerala, Hindu thugs attacked a church adjoining a Christian missionary-run kindergarten.

The brazen and ongoing attacks against India's Christian minority, which constitutes barely 2 percent of the country's 1.1 billion

population, is a result not only of the criminal actions of the BJP and its Hindu supremacist allies. It is also a product of the cowardice and complicity of the Congress Party, which both fears confronting the Hindu "right" and itself has repeatedly courted "Hindu sentiments" in the hope that such a tactic will bring electoral dividends.

The quasi-indifference of the Congress-led UPA government to the events in Orissa needs to be contrasted with its hysterical and bellicose reaction to a series of terrorist bombings in New Delhi, Ahmedabad (Gujarat), and Jaipur (Rajasthan) over the past several months. The UPA has mounted shrill and communally-tinged campaigns against "Pakistan-supported Islamic terrorism," ordered police to mount dragnets targeting poor Muslim neighbourhoods, and is now threatening to draft a new draconian anti-terrorism law in consultation with the Bush administration's Homeland Security Department.

Similarly, the UPA has reacted with extraordinary urgency and intolerance in Kashmir, imposing round the clock curfews and supporting the use of lethal force to suppress recent anti-Indian protests. These protests were triggered by the attempt of the Congress-led state government to curry favor with the Hindu right by granting land to a shrine that has been promoted as a pilgrimage site by the VHP and other Hindu supremacist groups.

The complicity of the Congress Party with the communalists exposes as a lie the endlessly repeated claim of the Stalinist Parties, especially that of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPM, that the Congress Party is as a force for secularism in India.

The belated verbal offensive by the UPA against the Orissa government is prompted more by concern that the country's image will be tarnished in the eyes of international investors than outrage over the persecution of the Christian minority. French President Sarkozy's questioning of the Indian Prime Minister as to what steps New Delhi is taking to protect Christians in India no doubt was an acute political embarrassment to Manmohan Singh, who routinely touts India as a shining secular democracy surrounded by communal governments in South Asia.

Working people should not look to, or rely upon, any of the existing political parties or state institutions to protect India's minorities. Communalism and casteism are in the final analysis weapons of the bourgeoisie to divide the working class and maintain its class rule.

The struggle against communalism requires the independent political mobilization of the working class on a program of socialist and democratic demands that address the burning problems of all India's toilers, irrespective of mother-tongue, religion or caste.



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