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Christians Face Hindus' Wrath

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Violence in Indian State Tied to Conversions, Economic Strains

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GHUMUSAR UDAYAGIRI, [India](#) -- Babita Nayak was cooking lunch for her pregnant sister when a mob of Hindu extremists wielding swords, hammers and long sticks rampaged through their village, chanting "India is for Hindus! Convert or leave!"

The men, wearing saffron headbands, ransacked dozens of huts, searching for cash and looting bicycles and livestock. They torched the village church, leaving behind burned Bibles in the local Kui language and torn-down posters of Jesus. "Christianity is a foreign religion," they shouted over bullhorns, according to eyewitness and police reports.

Hearing that such attacks were spreading in the mist-shrouded hills of this destitute part of Orissa state, the sisters fled with hundreds of neighbors, trekking through forest land. After two days, they reached this crowded makeshift relief camp, set up on the campus of a dank high school, 15 miles from their village.

"I just want to go home and rest before the birth," wept Shyamala Nayak, who is seven months pregnant, as her wailing 3-year-old daughter tugged on her sari. The sisters and dozens of others huddled under a sweltering and leaky tent. The stench of urine wafted through.

"If we go back, they will kill us," her sister told her firmly, reaching for her hand. "We must stay."

Communal violence between Muslims and Hindus is a fact of life in India, but from time to time Christians, who make up about 2.4 percent of the country's 1.1 billion people, come under pressure, as well.

In 1999, an Australian missionary and his two sons were burned alive in Orissa. Last Christmas, according to government reports, at least four Christians were killed, and 105 churches and 700 Christian homes were burned. Several dozen Hindu homes also were destroyed about the same time; the [Reuters](#) news agency reported attacks on one or two Hindu temples.

The violence is driven by rising anger over Christian conversions -- members of the faith here are a mix of Baptists, Pentecostals and Catholics -- and economic

tensions between communities, according to government and church officials.

A six-hour drive from Bhubaneswar, the capital of Orissa, into the isolated and winding jungle-lined roads showed remnants of fatal attacks and arson directed at Indian Christians in recent weeks: razed churches, scorched orphanages and homes, and roads blocked by downed trees, boulders and stick-waving mobs. Saffron flags (saffron is the color several Hindu right-wing organizations use for self-representation) flew over Hindu-owned tea shops and homes to protect them from attack.

All told, as many as 4,000 Christian homes and 115 churches were destroyed in the region. Amid the lush corn and rice farms of Kandhamal district, more than 35 people were killed for their faith, the All India Christian Council reported; government officials estimate 18 deaths.

There are increasing reports that women were sexually abused, but victims are slow to come forward because of the stigma attached to rape.

About 20,000 people have been displaced, most of them huddled into 14 squalid government-run camps across Kandhamal. About 5,000 have left their homes in Ganjam district, media reports say.

In Bhubaneswar, nearly 500 people are taking shelter at an overcrowded [YMCA](#), too scared to leave. Thousands are missing or hiding in jungles, Christian groups say.

The killings come at a time when many Indians feel that Hindu fundamentalism appears to be on the rise. Adherents often espouse the goal of promoting India as a Hindu nation, rather than a secular one. Although Hindus are the majority in India, the country has one of the world's largest populations of Muslims, is the birthplace of Buddhism and is the home of the [Dalai Lama](#) and the Tibetan government-in-exile.

Conversions to Christianity have been happening fast among impoverished tribal communities in Kandhamal, a remote district with few links to the outside world or state services. The Christian population here, largely made up of traditionally nature-worshiping ethnic groups, has swelled from 6 percent in 1971 to 27 percent today, according to government census data.

Some people who convert often get better access to schools and health clinics run by Western Christian groups. But they lose their official status with the government as members of a disadvantaged caste and with it jobs and university seats reserved under the affirmative action program.

Christians among one such ethnic group, the Panos, have recently been agitating to continue to collect those benefits anyway. Some Hindu activists see this request as ridiculous. They say that Christians have rejected the Hindu-sanctioned caste system and should not get the benefits.

"The violence is in the name of religion. But what is really fueling it is jealousy over who is getting education, reservations and status," said Golden Kumar Naik, a Christian convert who works in development and whose 11-room home was burned. "People are still very poor in this country; there are not enough jobs. There is fear that there won't be enough for the Hindus, too."

Failure to prevent and prosecute such crimes has brought embarrassment to the Indian government, at a time when it is trying to build for the country an image as a growing superpower and the world's largest secular democracy.

[Pope Benedict XVI](#) condemned the violence, saying he heard the news with a "deep sadness."

"This is a black mark in the history of Christianity for the whole world," said Swarupananda Patra, president of the YMCA in Bhubaneswar. He said he tells displaced families to go back so they can register their damaged and stolen property. "But they refuse, saying they will be killed if they didn't become Hindu."

Some figures in the central government accuse the pro-Hindu [Bharatiya Janata Party](#), a partner in Orissa's ruling coalition, of ignoring the violence. The central government sent troops, but after most of the violence had abated.

"There was no sense of security in the rural areas," said union minister Ajay Maken, who came from New Delhi to talk to victims at the YMCA. "This is one of my saddest days as a leader of India, which is supposed to be a secular, free society," added Maken, who is also in charge of India's ruling Congress party in Orissa.

There are political undercurrents to the conflict as well. This is an election year, and pro-Hindu parties are worried about losing votes as Christianity spreads, some observers say.

The recent violence was triggered by the Aug. 23 killing in Orissa of a shadowy octogenarian figure known as Laxmanananda Saraswati, who had been linked with a Hindu radical group. He was actively trying to re-convert Christians to Hinduism. A letter left at the scene claimed that Maoist rebels had carried out the attack. Federal investigators agree that Maoists were to blame, but many Hindus blame Christians.

Subhash Chauhan, head of the Bajrang Dal, a Hindu group with links to the BJP, said in Bhubaneswar that the violence was "spontaneous and a sincere reaction to people being lost from the Hindu fold to a conspiracy to take over our religion." Bhubaneswar is known as India's temple city for its stunning collection of 1,000-year-old carved-stone Hindu temples.

"The church uses cash to steal souls," Chauhan said. "It's destroying Hindu culture."

Outside the camp where the Nayak sisters were staying, more than 100 Hindu women marched past the front gates last week waving sticks. About a dozen police officers with rifles stood by watching. The women were demanding some of the rice and yellow lentils being doled out in the camp.

The camp seems barely able to manage as it is. It's so crowded that children sleep on the floor of outdoor latrines. Most people have nowhere to shower and no fresh clothing.

Hearing the chanting women march by, Shyamala wiped her nose with her unwashed sari. She started to cry, again. Her feet are swollen and bloody, her stomach heavy. And she has a recurring nightmare.

"I am falling and falling down a big ditch. I see my newborn baby below me," she said, weeping. "And it is dead."

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