

Persecution in Orissa, India

**Violence spreads in Orissa - 4 more churches burnt and destroyed
Fr. Thomas Chellen share his horrifying experience**

[By Fr. Thomas Chellen to Asia News through Nirmala Carvalho]

Rev. Fr. Thomas Chellen, director of the pastoral center that was destroyed with a bomb, had a narrow escape after a Hindu mob nearly set him on fire. Currently undergoing treatment at a Catholic hospital in Orissa's capital Bhubaneswar

He was among the first Christians targeted by the fury of radical Hindus. For the first time since he was attacked he speaks out. After being seized, beaten, wounded and stripped he was almost burnt alive. It took police two days to free him.

Fr Thomas Chellan, 57, was one of the first victims of the anti-Christian pogrom launched by the Vishva Hindu Parishad after the assassination of Swami Laxamananda Saraswati last 23 August. Only after being beaten, abused, wounded, stripped, was he rescued by the police at the end of his calvary. A nun was subjected to the same violence, perhaps treated with even greater brutality. The Pastoral Centre in Kandhamal was one of the first Christian institutions to be destroyed, torched.



Father Thomas, who is now recovering in hospital, has agreed for the first time to talk about his ordeal. Forcing himself to speak, he is still hard pressed to describe the fury that hit him;

Rev. Fr. Thomas Chellen

in his words, "savage" is not enough to convey the sense of it all. "The manner in which they were beating us with axes, spades, crowbars; it was as if we were not humans. These attackers, I am sure, were paid by others to torture and beat us."

Father Thomas now has only one concern: the thousands of people on the run (perhaps 50,000) hiding in the forest. "Right now there is not a single priest or nun in Kadhamal district; everyone has fled. Plundering goes on and people are hunted down. In my agony I pray for the Christians in the forest. But even that is not a safe place. If my bishop sends me though, I am willing to return."

"Along with my physical wounds, Christ is healing by emotional scars; I feel no bitterness or anger; I am even prepared to serve those who attacked us. [. . .] I am glad to be part of the rich history of persecution of the Catholic Church in India." (NC)

For the past seven years I have served as the director of the Divyajyoti Pastoral Centre (in the diocese of Cuttack- Bhubaneswar). The Orissa State Armed Police (OSAP) had agents in front of our Centre for more than a month because of a number of incidents in Tumbudhibandth after a cow was killed.

When I saw the news on TV of Swami Laxamananda Saraswati's murder I called the OSAP for protection. They told me not to worry: "We are here." I was reassured. But around 4.30 pm on 24 August a huge crowd came to our gate shouting slogans. Fearing for our lives, I, a fellow priest and a sister tried to escape jumping over the back fence of the property. We could hear people shout, doors breaking, windows shattering . . . After a short while we saw smoke and flames.

Feeling unsafe we fled into the forest and stayed there for a few hours. Around 8 pm we reached the house of Prahlad Pradhan in K. Nuagaon village; he was kind enough to accommodate us giving us food and shelter.

Around 9 am on 25 August, from my room window I saw a crowd tear down a small church.

Realising the danger Prahlad hid me in an outhouse and locked me from the outside. At about 1.30 pm a group of 40 to 50 people came, broke open the door and pulled me out. Outside I saw that the sister was already standing with the crowd; they had caught her first. Immediately they began hitting me all over, forcefully removing my shirt and banyan (vest or undershirt).

They kept asking me: "Why did you kill the Swamiji? How much money did you give the killers? Why are you conducting so many meetings at the Pastoral Centre?"

Pushing and pulling us, the crowd led us to the Janavikas Building on the other side of the road.

They were armed with lathis (long canes tipped with a metal blunt), axes, spades, crowbars, iron rods, sickles etc. and continued beating us inside the building.

They tore off the sister's blouse and began assaulting her. When I started to object I was beaten with an iron rod on my right shoulder.

They took me out, poured kerosene on me and were set to strike some matches to burn me. At that point one of them suggested they take me into the middle of the road to burn me there. They dragged us to the road where they made me kneel for ten minutes. Someone searched for a rope to tie us together and burn us alive. Then they decided to parade us through Nuagaon, half a kilometre from there. We were paraded half naked. They told us to fold our hands and walk. They tried to strip away our remaining clothes, but somehow both of us managed to resist. As we walked people showered us with blows. Someone hurled insults at us in Malayalam.

When we got to Nuagaon at 2.30 pm there were a dozen OSAP agents on the side of the road. "Sir, please help us!" I told one of them. Once I spoke someone from the crowd struck me for asking help. As for the policeman he just stood there, looking on. There were no police personnel at the Nuagaon outpost.

The crowd forced us to sit by the road side. Someone kicked me in the face. Then someone I knew very well, a shopkeeper in Nuagaon, went to pick up used tires to burn us.

At one point the crowd told us to go K. Nuagaon; along with one of the officers we were taken to a police outpost. There I was stitched up, bandaged and had some ointment applied on my wounds.

Around 9.00 pm an inspector from Balliguda and a team of policemen took us to Balliguda. One of the people from the crowd that attacked us remained at the police outpost until we left for Balliguda, watching all our movements. Once in Balliguda we were sheltered at a police bungalow; people there were very helpful.

At 9 am on 26 August we were taken to the local police station where the chief inspector asked us whether we wanted to file a complaint. When we said yes he told us to be quick because he was preparing to move us to Bhubaneswar (280 kilometres from Nuagaon).

We filed three complaints, one for the attack against the pastoral centre; one for the attack against me and for the attack against the nun.

At 4 pm we were put on a comfortable bus and with other passengers were brought to Bhubaneswar. We got off around midnight on 27 August, a few kilometres after Nayagarh. Some friends were waiting for me and took me away in their car. At 2 am we reached one of our centres in Bhubaneswar.

[Source - Asia News - 03.09.2008]

Rev. Fr. Edward Sequeira SVD, rescued from burning in Orissa narrates the trauma



Rev. Fr. Edward Sequeira SVD reached Hyderabad early on August 30th morning after an 8 hours gruelling journey by road from Sambalpur hospital where he was undergoing treatment after he was rescued from the burning inferno that took the life of 19 year Hindu girl Rajni Majhi. His lungs have been badly affected due to inhaling for more than two hours smoke polluted air. He has been taken to Mumbai where he will be close to his family and receive the urgent medical care he needs.

He recounts his traumatic story:

"It all began around 13.00 hrs" he recalled. "I was having lunch at my single room presbytery that doubles as office, bedroom and store room. The doors were closed. I heard some one calling out, 'Father, Father.' Thinking that some one was there with some patients needing to be taken to hospital I opened the door and came out.

There was a crowd of about 20 people crowding before my room. They suddenly pulled out from behind their backs, iron rods, lathies, and wooden pieces. They started thrashing me. They wanted to me to shout 'Yesu Christu Murdabad' (Death to Jesus Christ) 'Bajrang Bali Ki Jai' (Long Live Bajrang Bali).

They continued thrashing me and then pushed me back into the room, poured diesel on the floor, some fell on by clothes and set the place on fire and bolted the room from outside.

I slipped on the diesel soaked floor, some how managed to reach the bath room where providentially there were two buckets of water - we do not have running water - and poured it all across the room. Without making much noise I bolted from inside all the

doors and windows under cover of billowing smoke."

"The previous evening Fr. Edward was in a town around 300 kilometers away and when he heard of the killing of the Swamy he decided to rush back to the hostel as the kids were alone in the care of Rajani.

She had been given in adoption by her Hindu biological parents. As soon as the adopted parents got children of their own Rajani's life changed. Her natural parents refused to receive her back when the adopted parents started neglecting her and pulled her out of school for working in the house.

The sisters found her a place at father's hostel so that she could continue her studies. She had completed her plus two and had been sort of a boarding mistress to the children of leprosy patients for whom the hostel was being run.

People had advised Fr. Edward not to return to the hostel. But he knew his children needed him. And that is what he decided to do - to return to the hostel.

After locking up Fr Edward in his room the marauding crowd pushed out all the children from where they were hiding in a shed nearby. When Rajani came out running, she was tied up and thrown back in the fire!

[Source - orissaburning.blogspot.com]

Disinformation or Falsehood: The Origins of Spiralling Violence

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INDIA – ITALY

Shame on India, Europe and the world
by Bernardo Cervellera



It is shameful that India's Christians, an important element for the country's social and economic development, are being massacred whilst the world's governments and humanitarian associations remain silent in what is another example of "Christianophobia." Italian bishops call on the faithful to take part tomorrow in a day of prayer and fasting in remembrance of the Blessed Teresa of Kolkata.

Rome (AsiaNews) – Mahatma Gandhi's India, a land of tolerance and democracy, has been shamed. "It is a disgrace for our country," said Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a

view seconded by Card Oswald Gracias, archbishop of Mumbai. Both agree that what is happening to Christians in the state of Orissa since 23 August is a pogrom.

The toll so far is a heavy one and bound to rise. Tens of people have died (some estimates put the number at around 100). At least 52 churches (both Catholic and Protestant) have been destroyed. Hundreds of homes have been damaged. Four convents and five hostels and youth residences have fared no better. Six Catholic volunteer and social institutes have been devastated. Last but not least hundreds of cars have been set on fire and countless personal belongings have been lost.

Even now thousands of Christians are still in flight, running from slaughter, living in forests, terrorised, without food or clothing.

Orissa, a state located in north-eastern India, has seen such waves of persecution before. Last December on Christmas Eve, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu fundamentalist organisation, attacked and destroyed 13 churches and chapels, killed three people and wounded scores of Christians in Kadhamal district, leaving many people homeless.

One of those who drove Hindu mobs against Christians was Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, a VHP leader.

The latest wave of persecution came right after the Swami met his maker at the hands of a Maoist terrorist group on the evening of 23 August.

Even though law enforcement authorities were quite clear about who was behind the Swami's assassination, some VHP leaders immediately blamed Christians for his death.

During the guru's funeral thousands of radical Hindus began the pogrom shouting "Kill Christians! Destroy their institutions!" Ultimately, by relentlessly attacking Christians and their institutions they can wipe out their mission.

For Tribals, who are often worked like slaves in farming, and Dalits or untouchables, Christianity is way out of their situation; a way to have their rights protected; a way to finally have some dignity as human beings. To some extent the degree of persecution is a measure of the Christian mission's success.

But in being anti-Christian, Hindu fundamentalists are going against the Hinduism preached by the Mahatma Gandhi who wanted a secular India, open to all religions, without castes; a country that would give Dalits, or *Harijan* (children of God) as he called them, their dignity.

In its exclusivist nationalism the VHP is closer to Nazism for it aims at turning India into a country without Christians, Muslims, Parsees, etc, destroying India's history, turning its back on the country where cultures and religions met and mixed.

But what is happening is not only India's shame. It is also that of Europe and the world. Except for a few voices like that of Italian Foreign Minister Frattini, no government has dared to say anything about the massacres in Orissa, let alone calling for them to stop.

Many pacifists and associations quick to defend other groups, minorities, endangered species, have chosen silence; perhaps they might even suspect that behind the charges of proselytism levelled by Hindu radicals there might be some truth.

As some Vatican leaders pointed out, in Europe and around the world there is a kind of Cristianophobia that seeks to rid itself of its Christian heritage, perhaps even through lies.

For this reason, the news about anti-Christian persecution in Orissa, in China or the Middle East are of little interest; indeed, they might even be justified.

This makes our news service, prayers and witness all the more important, in India and in Europe.

The call by Italian bishops to a day of prayer and fasting tomorrow, 5 September, on behalf of India's Christians and in remembrance of the Blessed Teresa of Kolkata is part of this commitment to truth and love.

