

then they came for the christians

-- a report to the nation



Report of an all-India fact finding team
constituted by
All India Federation of Organisation for Democratic Rights
(AIFODR)
April 1999

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Preface

The All India Federation of Organisations For Democratic Rights (AIFOFR) was formed in 1982. Its constituent organisations today are the Association For Democratic Rights (AFDR), Punjab; Ganatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sanghatana (GASS), Orissa; Janatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sangathan (JASS), Rajasthan; Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana (LHS), Maharashtra; and Organisation for the Protection of Democratic Rights (OPDR), Andhra Pradesh.

Over the years, the units of the Federation have taken up the issue of communalism consistently, whether in the form of investigations or public campaigns, as reflected in the reports appearing in the AIFOFR organ *In Defence of Democratic Rights*. AIFOFR itself brought out a detailed report in 1987 on the Punjab situation, and has in recent years observed December 6 (the anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Masjid) as anti-communalism day. AIFOFR units also participated in four all-India teams investigating the situation in Kashmir. In the course of all this, the Federation has acquired not only experience but a distinct perspective on the question of communalism.

The Steering Committee of the AIFOFR met in Bhubaneswar in December 1998. As the meeting was going on, news came of the incidents in R. Udaygiri, Gajapati district, Orissa. At the time the events seemed mysterious, and the Steering Committee requested the constituent organisation from Orissa, GASS, to enquire into the matter. Shortly after the meeting followed news of the incidents in Gujarat; these in turn were followed by incidents in Maharashtra and the ugly murder of Graham Staines and his two sons. These indicated that the phenomenon was not local, but nationwide. AIFOFR considered that the incidents should not be seen as

only an attack on a minority, but as an attack on ordinary working people, particularly in the adivasi regions. A dip into our clippings files revealed that the trend of such attacks and accompanying propaganda had increased since about March 1998. According to the United Christian Forum for Human Rights, the number of registered cases of communal violence against Christians in the 32 years between 1964 and 1996 was 38. This rose to 15 in 1997, a sharp increase. In 1998, the number rose to 90. The very first month of 1999 indicated that the figure for 1998 would be surpassed. Fresh reports of attacks continued to come in, from places such as Allahabad, Faridabad, Bombay, Kerala....

Given the nationwide nature of the phenomenon, the AIFOFR decided to constitute an all-India fact-finding team to enquire into these attacks and the background to them. A frame and terms of reference were prepared for the investigation.

Communalism, as the Federation understands it, is a relatively modern phenomenon. While force, discrimination and prejudice in the name of religion have existed since ancient times, the manipulation of religious sentiments as a *method of rule* in India began with the British. Partition and the mass communal killings accompanying it were the most terrible outcome of this policy, but even after 1947 the systematic use of communal division and diversion by no means disappeared. It was institutionalised in the creation of constituencies based on communal appeal and then in cultivating communal vote-banks. Communalism once again found fertile ground as the country's economic and political crises deepened over the 1970s. By the 1980s the leading parliamentary parties found that the electorate no longer as easily believed populist slogans relating to their

material needs. And so it was during the 1980s that the country witnessed an explosion of communal activities and incidents. Both Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Sikh hatreds were cynically fuelled. While the concerned political parties also chose later, for their own reasons, to lower the tension on both these fronts, the ground for revival of communalism remained. Even the propaganda surrounding the nuclear weapons tests in May 1998 was coloured by communalism, as was the sabre-rattling regarding Pakistan.

With this perspective, the following terms of reference were proposed. The team members were to explore, to the extent possible, in the course of their investigations the following:

1. Economic conditions in the affected regions – major problems of the people. Any history of struggle on secular issues.
2. Social background of the supporters of the Hindutva forces in the concerned region. Social background of the Christians – whether any different from non-Christians.
3. Details of the attacks. Who were the attackers (from the local area or outside; what social sections). How much damage was done. Terror caused and its impact on what people may or may not do. Reactions. Were there counter-attacks by Christians. Pattern of attacks: commonalities/differences. Trend in the attacks: when they picked up and their rate of growth. Nature of associated propaganda.
4. Attitude of the police/administration/other political forces and social workers.
5. Tribal, non-Christian, religious practices. Inter-tribal and intra-tribal tensions, if any. Activities of Christian missionaries/organisations (foreign and Indian) in the region. Conversions: nature of conversions. Regarding “re-conversions”: How brought about. How many. Who. Growth/decline of Christian population in the area. Percentage of Christians in the 1991 Census. Increase/decline since 1971, 1981. Normal tensions, if any, between Christians and non-Christians. Areas of tension between the two communities outside tribal areas. Relative decline of anti-Mus-

lim activities of the BJP in the area.

6. Nature of activities of BJP and related organisations such as Bajrang Dal and Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. Other such organisations (plethora) set up in the last 10 years. Since when did they actually grow in the area. Do they take up tribal issues, such as land. How, and in what way.
7. Reaction to events from local people; from other people in the state. Long-term implications of these events in the area. Comments of various political forces. Did the Prime Minister’s comments on visiting Ahwa act as a green signal.

While it was difficult to thoroughly investigate all the above aspects, the team did its best to touch on most of the points. Given the large number of incidents, it was decided to select instances on the basis of their importance as well as geographical spread. The team was divided into sections as follows:

Gujarat: Divi Kumar and Hanumantha Rao, *Organisation for the Protection of Democratic Rights (OPDR)*, Andhra Pradesh; Sanobar Keshwar and Setu Pandey, *Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana (LHS)*, Maharashtra.

Madhya Pradesh: Antony Samy and Sanjay Rai, *LHS*; Parminder Singh and Yashpal Chabhal, *Association For Democratic Rights (AFDR)*, Punjab; Devina Dutt, journalist; Savita Bajpai, social worker from Madhya Pradesh.

Maharashtra: Sam Pareth, Girija Gupte, *LHS*; Sudipta Acharya, film student.

Orissa: R. Udaygiri: Gangadhar Panigrahi, Sunakar Bal, Brajendra Mohanty, Sameer Sarkar, *Ganatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sanghatana (GASS)*, Orissa. **Manoharpur:** Gayadhar Rout, Brajendra Mohanty, Kartik Ch. Sahoo, GASS.

The Federation headquarters prepared background sections and coordinated the overall work on the report.

Rajani X. Desai,
Convenor,
AIFOFR.

April 3, 1999.

I. Why the Attacks on Christians

TILL 1984, few in India had heard of the controversy regarding the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya. It was in that year that the VHP set up a Shriram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti, with not only BJP leaders but also a Congress-I politician prominent among its members. A giant rath-yatra was organised from Sitamarhi (where Sita is said to have appeared on earth) to Ayodhya in September-October 1984. Leaflets were distributed on a massive scale throughout India depicting Ram and Sita behind bars, and calling upon Hindus to “liberate” the “temple”.

The Congress-I Chief Minister of U.P. chose, significantly, to visit Ayodhya on December 19, 1985, on the occasion of the Ramayan Mela, where a VHP delegation called upon him and pressed their case. The Chief Minister called for the file. Word apparently reached the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi.

Things moved quickly from there. A month later, in January 1986, a Faizabad lawyer moved the District Judge’s court for the site’s unlocking. The Collector readily testified that he had not seen any document under which the shrine was locked; to his knowledge the shrine was not in use as a mosque; and arrangements could be easily made for maintenance of law and order if the locks were opened. The Superintendent of Police similarly assured security arrangements could be made. The District Judge ordered that the locks be removed and that devotees be allowed to offer prayer. But well before the judge’s order, the U.P. Provincial Armed Constabulary had

been massively deployed around the site.

Later, an investigation by the *Statesman* (18-20 April, 1986) revealed that the Prime Minister himself “had indicated in no uncertain terms that the gates of Ram Janmabhoomi must open to the devotees before March 8.... The local administration had been prepared in advance. The court verdict was announced at 4.40 p.m. on February 1 and the rusty lock was actually being broken at 5.19 p.m. A Doordarshan team was posted on the spot to capture for posterity surging crowds entering the shrine.”

Then began a series of communal riots that, over months and years, spread through U.P., Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, M.P., Bihar.... Whether it was Delhi, Ahmedabad, Meerut, or Bhagalpur, the once obscure issue of Ram’s mythical birthplace became the organising device for communal bloodshed – bloodshed from which the BJP, Congress and other parties attempted to extract political benefit.

December 6, 1992

The climax came less than seven years after the breaking of the locks at Ayodhya.

On December 6, 1992, at 11 a.m., as a mammoth gathering watched, ‘kar sevaks’ broke through the flimsy police cordon and rushed toward the 464-year-old Babri Masjid. They were followed by thousands of others wielding pickaxes, hammers, shovels and

iron rods. Only four days earlier, L.K. Advani had assured the crowds: 'kar seva' would be "physical, with bricks and shovels". Meanwhile, the Faizabad Superintendent of Police told the press: "It is all under control. Go and relax, you are only wasting your time."

By 11.50 a.m. kar sevaks scaled one dome. By five minutes past noon all three domes were covered with kar sevaks, with the hundreds of thousands assembled below in ecstasy. By quarter past noon demolition of the Babri Masjid began. By 1.55 p.m. the first dome collapsed. At 3.00 p.m. 'Sadhvi' Rithambhara began singing, dancing, and repeating, as if in a trance, "*Ek dhakka aur do, Babri Masjid tod do*". By 4.49 p.m. the ancient mosque was a pile of rubble, and RSS chief Balasaheb Deoras was sent a message: the job is over. "It is the most blissful day of my life, I keep pinching myself to see if I am awake", said Uma Bharati. Murli Manohar Joshi said, "It was a rejuvenation of India, a reincarnation of India, India reunited, identified with Lord Ram." "It is Hanuman's mace at work", said Vinay Katiyar, head of the Bajrang Dal. Kalyan Singh told an audience in May 1993, "I am thankful to you, you have demolished the thousand (sic) year old structure." Atal Behari Vajpayee, in a 1995 article ("The Sangh is My Soul") in the RSS mouthpiece *Organiser*, wrote that "We did pull down the structure at Ayodhya".

Declining dividends

Six years after the tearing down of the Babri Masjid and the nationwide riots that followed, the main accused are in the highest offices of the land – Prime Minister, Home Minister, Human Resources Development Minister, Members of Parliament.

But equally remarkably, today, the Ayodhya issue, over which thousands were killed, has been placed in cold storage by the very party which raised it to such a pitch. No agitation is being waged for possession of the shrine; no riots take place in its name;

the BJP leaders who supervised the smashing of the mosque now say they await the court's verdict. L.K. Advani, one of the principal accused, now says the demolition was a mistake. Even the Vishwa Hindu Parishad has announced that construction of the temple would not begin for another three years. Evidently, anti-Muslim campaigns are yielding declining dividends.

The reason we have nevertheless recounted the events of those years is to remind ourselves of some of the lessons of that period: how quickly and systematically communal fascistic forces in our country can whip up a campaign of violent hatred against a minority community; how the State machinery can play the role of accomplice; what devastation and suffering such forces can wreak in the lives of millions; and how the real target was not a mosque. The anti-Muslim campaign was not an *end* but a *means*; the real end was political power – acquiring it, maintaining it, and, in order to do so, exercising sway over the minds of the *majority* of people. Once that particular means was found to be less productive, it was shelved.

Economic and political context of the attack on Christians

The reasons for the recent campaign of propaganda against, and physical attacks on, India's tiny Christian minority seem at first mysterious. No doubt the RSS and its affiliated organisations, including the BJP, have in the past produced literature voicing hatred of Christian missionaries and alleging an international conspiracy of the Church (see A.G. Noorani, "RSS and Christians", *Frontline*, 1/1/99). However, this theme hardly figured in the day-to-day propaganda or activities of the Sangh Parivar*. Before 1998, one would be hard put to find any posters, leaflets, press statements or speeches of the Sangh Parivar affiliates on this question. Notably, the lengthy 1998 election manifesto of the BJP did not even mention Christians, the Church, or conver-

sions – not even in its chapter on the north-east. Regarding the north-east, the BJP manifesto mentioned only the need for socio-economic development and the checking of illegal immigration from Bangladesh.

Let us look, then, at the political context in which the BJP felt it necessary to embark upon a fresh communal campaign.

The 1998 general elections presented the parliamentary parties of India with the same peculiar situation as in 1996: widespread public apathy regarding the entire election exercise; the absence of any slogans which could sway the electorate (the prominent alliances thus focussed largely on their capacity to provide ‘stable rule’); broad agreement among all the parliamentary parties on the policies of ‘liberalisation’ and ‘globalisation’ (albeit with shades of claimed differentiation); and the failure of any party to win a majority. The product was the most rickety coalition yet at the Centre. The new government did not enjoy the customary ‘honeymoon’ period, and was at the very outset faced with public criticism, resignations over corruption scandals, and ultimatums issued by the various coalition partners.

It was at this point that a series of related developments were brought about. The Defence Minister, George Fernandes, announced that the technology for Pakistan’s Ghauri missile had been supplied by China (he admitted his ministry had not analysed satellite images of the Ghauri test-firing, but declared

anyway that China was the “mother” of the Pakistani missile). Fernandes’ view was vigorously endorsed in April by the RSS mouthpiece *Organiser* in a special Ghauri issue: “Ghauri is not only a Pakistan gauntlet but a Chinese challenge”. China was depicted as the greatest threat to India.

In the beginning of May, Fernandes echoed these sentiments by terming China India’s “threat number one”, and charging that it had set up a helipad in Arunachal Pradesh, a base in Myanmar’s Coco Islands, and so on.

On May 11 and 13 the Vajpayee government carried out nuclear tests at Pokhran, and pointed to the Chinese threat as justification.

It was a risky gamble, but it appeared at first to yield rich political dividends for the ruling alliance. A wave of chauvinistic euphoria swept the urban areas, egged on by glowing coverage in the press and television. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad even planned a temple, “Shakti Peeth”, at the test site. The Home Minister told Pakistan that the nuclear tests had “brought about a qualitative new state in India-Pakistan relations, particularly in finding a lasting solution to the Kashmir problem.” He suggested that India would carry out “hot pursuit” of Kashmiri militants into Pakistani territory. The Parliamentary Affairs Minister, M.L. Khurana, openly said the Government was ready for war with Pakistan. The media were filled with the results of (grossly unscientific) ‘opinion polls’ claiming to reveal that 70, 80, even 98 per cent of the people supported the nuclear weapons tests. The scientists who headed the bomb and missile programmes were feted and honoured in the manner of victorious warriors.

The alleged ‘national euphoria’ faded with remarkable speed. Pakistan too conducted nuclear tests. Both India and Pakistan entered into negotiations with the United States to submit to international treaties banning weapons testing and controlling bomb mate-

* The “Sangh Parivar” is the name adopted by the “family” of organisations affiliated formally or informally with the Hindu communal organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The list includes the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS), Swadeshi Jagaran Manch (SJM); and so on. The BJP is the parliamentary political party; the VHP claims to be a congress of the Hindu faith; the Bajrang Dal is the “youth wing” of the VHP; the ABVP is a student organisation; the BMS is a trade union; the VKA is an organisation for tribals; the BKS is a farmers’ organisation; the SJM is a front to campaign for ‘swadeshi’ on economic issues. All openly claim that they are members of the RSS family.

rial. These two developments took much of the sheen off the supposed 'national pride' at Pokhran II. Meanwhile, the economic situation was worsening rapidly. Unemployment continued to grow. The country entered its third year of recession. The Finance Minister incautiously put a date – September 1998 — on when he expected a turnaround in the economy. Come September, the recession continued to deepen. Even more worryingly for the Government, consumer inflation hit its highest level in the decade. The earlier peak in the Consumer Price Index for Industrial Workers was 16.1 per cent (CPI-IW) in January 1991; this was surpassed by the figure of 16.3 per cent in September 1998, rising further to 18.6 per cent in October, and 19.7 per cent in November. The price rise was not limited to onions and other vegetables, but also affected pulses and edible oils, making it difficult for the poor to adjust their diet.

A series of political embarrassments too dogged the BJP-led coalition. A Supreme Court order forced the coalition regime to revoke its transfer of the head of the Enforcement Directorate. The President returned the Cabinet's recommendation of President's Rule in Bihar. The BJP had to beat a partial retreat on its plans to promote Hindutva through the education system. A major row brewed over the Government's efforts to appoint a Deputy Chief of Naval Staff against the recommendation of the Chief of Naval Staff. Open infighting wracked the BJP in all its strongholds – for example, the Chief Minister of Delhi was changed on the very eve of the assembly elections.

The BJP's earlier promotion of 'national (ie, chauvinistic) pride' and 'swadeshi' now left it vulnerable on two fronts: foreign policy and the economy. It was clear that the BJP, which in its election manifesto said that "The BJP rejects the notion of nuclear apartheid and will actively oppose attempts to impose a hegemonistic nuclear regime by means of CTBT, FMCR and MTCR" was, after lengthy secret talks with American representatives, preparing to take India into precisely that regime. The election

promises of the BJP to promote indigenous industry were in even worse tatters: the Government opened more and more sectors of the economy to foreign investment (in the name of countering the effect of American sanctions), handed over control of the country's largest car company to the Japanese collaborator, accelerated import liberalisation, and prepared to introduce legislations which it had opposed when in opposition – changing India's patents law, and opening up the insurance sector. (The Finance Minister even warned a meeting of BJP MPs on December 8 that failure to open up the insurance sector would lead to economic "disaster" on the lines of East Asia.)

Finally, at the end of November 1998, the BJP lost assembly elections in not only Delhi and Rajasthan but Madhya Pradesh as well. This event sent shock waves through the BJP. It was in December 1998 that the cruder wings of the Sangh Parivar appear to have received their green signal.

Debate on 'conversions'

There were important hurdles to be crossed by any campaign against Christians. Compare the situation of Christians in India to that of Muslims. There has been no recent history of serious tension between Hindus and Christians, and certainly no episode as traumatic as Partition; Christians constitute a very small percentage of the Indian population, particularly in the BJP strongholds in the Hindi belt; and there is no neighbouring Christian State which can be pointed to as a threat to India. India's urban middle and upper classes (including, as press reports have brought out, many prominent BJP politicians), do their best to send their children to Christian-run private schools. Even the depiction of Christians in the popular media, while in many ways stereotypical and offensive, has never targeted the community as an enemy. How was this image to be changed now, and at short notice?

The Ayodhya campaign revealed the effectiveness

of a central, all-India issue for communal mobilisation, as opposed to a number of local issues. After January 1986, there was no longer any need to wait for frictions to develop over local issues. All Hindu-Muslim riots revolved around Ayodhya, and the BJP continued to derive the maximum benefit from them. The Ayodhya issue also allowed the BJP to project that Hindus were not aggressors, but rather the victims of some historical wrong which was merely being righted. Hence no fresh justification was required for the attack on Muslims.

In the case of Christians, the Sangh Parivar cleverly chose the issue of ‘conversions’ from Hinduism to Christianity. In this fashion, Christians could be depicted as the aggressors, using force or strewing foreign money in their attempt to overpower the Hindu community. By linking up Christians with Christian missionaries and in turn with foreign countries, the Sangh Parivar attempted to strengthen the weak communal sentiment against Christians with the sort of national chauvinism whipped up at the time of the nuclear tests. According to the VHP leader Praveen Togadia, conversion to Christianity amounts to a “change of nationality”; “conversions challenge our national unity”.

The exact objection to conversions varied according to time and place. At times, Christians were charged with forcing Hindus to convert; at others, with getting them to convert by fraudulent means or with material ‘inducements’. Finally, conversion to Christianity *as such*, even if free of force, fraud, and inducement, was termed an attack on Hindu/Indian society, and calls were made to ban it (see the chapter “In Their Own Words”).

Such calls were not made merely by lower level functionaries of the Sangh Parivar; nor were they only the subject of resolutions of conferences of the VHP, Bajrang Dal, and RSS; the Prime Minister and the Union Home Minister themselves made similar statements. Vajpayee, on his visit to Dangs, declared that

the “root cause of the violence in Dangs is the conversion issue”, and called for a national debate on conversions – even hinting at a change in the Constitution in this regard. He gave his indirect endorsement to the forcible conversions (the so-called re-conversions) being carried out by the Hindu communal organisations by telling Christians that as long as conversions to Christianity continue, “re-conversions would continue”. Following widespread criticism of these remarks, Vajpayee cleverly denied any intention to amend the Constitution, and said he was merely calling for a “dialogue”, not a debate. However, this word-play was hardly relevant, since his initial call had already been given wide publicity, and various Sangh Parivar outfits had voiced their support for the “national debate”.

Advani adopted a trickier position. Speaking in the Lok Sabha on February 23, 1999, he denied there was any proposal to enact a central legislation to prevent forcible religious conversions. But he said that “*right to convert is not a fundamental right*. Neither conversion could be done through force nor through allurement or fraudulent means.” (sic) The exact meaning of Advani’s remarks is not clear: Which is not a fundamental right – the right to convert others, or (as the phrase is commonly used in India) the right to convert, ie, change one’s own religion? The Sangh Parivar, to which Advani belongs, opposes both rights in the case of conversions to a non-Hindu religion. Whatever Advani intended to say, both rights are obviously essential to freedom of religion, for without them an individual cannot choose which religion he/she wishes to profess. Indeed, clause (1) of Article 25 of the Constitution reads: “Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and *propagate* religion.” (emphasis added) Advani’s statement is clearly contrary to the actual Constitutional provision.

Further, while the use of force is clearly definable and is already against existing criminal law, the terms

'allurement' and 'fraudulent means' are sweeping and obscure. Most religions promise salvation to believers. Many religions promise that God/particular gods will better the earthly material lives and health of believers. Among some of the most prominent Hindu holy men, 'magical' production of objects, fire/smoke, *vihuti* and so on is an essential part of their preaching; none of them has accepted the challenge by rationalist organisations to perform such miracles before persons trained in exposing illusions. Long queues of devotees wait at the public appearances of such holy men to request one or the other favour, such as the cure of an illness, the solution to personal problems, and so on. Any one of these practices could be termed fraud. Devotees of a particular sect are frequently favoured in employment, business orders or loans by other members of the sect. This could be easily termed allurement.

Advani is not referring to such practices, however. What is more likely is that such ambiguous terms as 'fraud' and 'allurement' will be used to act selectively against Christians. The 'prayer healing' sessions engaged in by some Christian denominations are an obvious target, but the implications are even wider. Conversion to Christianity is also known to take place after a person is given some medication, is asked to say certain prayers, and then recovers from the illness. For the State to label such practices 'fraud' would involve extensive State interference in personal religious choice. This is not to endorse all the practices employed by various religious groups, whether Hindu, Christian, or other, to inspire faith in their adherents; the point is that these are not the monopoly of any particular religion, and any such practices will only diminish with the spread of scientific popular consciousness, not with selective bullying and interference in people's choice of faith.

Take the question of 'allurement' by Christianity. Among oppressed castes, the promise of higher social status is sometimes a reason to convert to Christianity. For example, about 600 Dalit farm labourers

of Undhai village in Mehsana district, Gujarat, recently embraced Christianity explicitly "to end the social and economic boycott" imposed upon them by the upper-caste land-owning Patels, and to protest against the Government's failure to protect them. The Dalits say that "We plan to go from village to village to convince the others to join us in the change of religion. After all, what has Hinduism given us?" (*India Today*, 15/2/99) It is easy to see how a BJP government could label such religious choices 'allurement', and turn freedom of religion into a dead letter.

If such 'national debates' were conducted on the basis of the facts, of course, the Sangh Parivar's campaign would rapidly run out of fuel. It has by now been pointed out over and over that the percentage of Christians in India has, far from increasing, actually decreased, from 2.6 per cent in 1971 to 2.32 per cent in 1991. But the crucial point to understand is this: that conversions is not actually the issue, or rather, it is a *manufactured* issue, a deliberate diversion and a trap. The target is not forced conversions, or conversions through fraud or allurement, or even conversions. The target is not even, in the last analysis, Christians, though this small, beleaguered community is today at the receiving end of the terror campaign. The real objective is the same as during the Ayodhya campaign: to sway the *majority* of people with a hate campaign against a minority.

Take, for example, the tribal areas. The Congress has traditionally reigned over these areas, and the BJP is attempting to make an entry. The RSS founded the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) in 1952 (the RSS prefers the term 'vanvasi', or forest-dweller, to 'adivasi', since the latter term would imply the tribals are a separate community *preceding* the caste Hindus). While the organisation extravagantly claims to have a presence in about one-fifth of the country's tribal villages, it was only recently that the BJP accorded top priority to establishing a base in these regions. Not only was the little-known Babulal Marandi, the head of the VKA's Bihar unit, made a

Union cabinet minister, but the VKA leader ‘Swami’ Aseemanand was despatched to raise the temperature in Dangs, an overwhelmingly tribal district of Gujarat.

However, the difficulty for the BJP is that, insofar as it is known in tribal areas, its association with traders, contractors, landlords, Government officers, and the top sections of Government employees hardly lends itself to attracting tribals. Nor is the BJP in a position to make an entry by taking up the pressing problems of tribals – lack of land/security of tenure, usury, depressed wages, plunder of forest resources/produce by officials and contractors, massive displacement, exploitation by sundry officials, and so on. For taking up these would run up against the very sections to which it is close, and who contribute to its coffers. (Indeed, the anti-Christian campaign has been used by Sangh Parivar leaders to target radical political movements instead which have been organising tribal secular struggles: according to VHP leaders, “If we don’t reach them [the tribals], the missionaries or the Naxalites will”.) The campaign against Christians, then, offers a point of entry into these regions without alienating any powerful vested interests. The real end is acquiring a hold over the majority of tribals: the hate campaign against Christian tribals is merely a means towards that end.

The parliamentary Opposition

The reaction of the various other parliamentary parties to the Sangh Parivar’s new project has been along the lines of their reaction to virtually all issues of national significance, namely, purely token. No systematic effort has been made to counter the BJP propaganda among the people at large. The Congress party’s case is particularly interesting, for at least one of the motives (though not the main motive) for the Sangh Parivar’s choosing to defame and attack the Christian community was to target the Congress President, Sonia Gandhi.* The VHP claimed that conversions to Christianity had risen since she became the Congress President. The BJP charged that on her visit to Dangs she met only Christians. The VHP charged that Rajiv Gandhi had converted be-

fore marriage and been secretly christened “Rajiv Roberto” in Italy.

The Congress President responded on January 12 with a speech in which she praised Swami Vivekananda, and took the BJP to task for “appropriating” his legacy and trying to “distort the very message of Hinduism – that of tolerant harmony and understanding of different faiths.” On January 13 Congress-I leader P.A. Sangma announced that Ms Gandhi was not a practising Christian and that she did not attend church. The Congress Working Committee proceeded to adopt a resolution on January 16 stating that “India is secular primarily because Hinduism, both as a philosophy and as a way of life, has been based on what ancients said: truth is one, the wise pursue it variously.” The resolution said that “*Hinduism is the most effective guarantor of secularism*” and attacks on minorities were a “serious affront to basic *Hindu* values and beliefs.” (emphasis added) This in fact fit perfectly the Sangh Parivar’s own line. Having adopted this resolution, the Congress ought to have no difficulty in accepting a Hindu State, as that would be the best guarantor of secularism.

It is worth quoting a press report on how cynically this resolution came to be adopted:

“It was A.K. Antony, who appeared to reflect Ms Gandhi’s mind and the public pulse, when he said that the party should not seek to join issue with the BJP on conversions. Mr Antony is understood to have termed the issue as one that the majority Hindus consid-

*It is revealing that the BJP Government has not decided to attack Sonia Gandhi on the issue of Bofors, the investigation of which has slowed to a crawl under BJP rule. *India Today* [12/10/98] sees signs of the “burial” of the investigation, noting that the CBI “has been careful not to be in a hurry to obtain documents from the Swiss on a Bofors account in which the Hindujas – old friends of Vajpayee – are appellants. On the contrary, the CBI abruptly terminated its contract with the Swiss lawyer hired to assist it in getting these documents.” Instead of Bofors, then, the Sangh Parivar has chosen to attack Sonia Gandhi’s religious background.)

ered sensitive. The Kerala leader said it would not help the party to alienate the majority sentiment.

"The new Congress line is perceived by the partymen as a bulwark against attacks on the party chief on the one hand and on the other... *taking the wind out of the Sangh Parivar's sails*.... V.N. Gadgil who, along with Vasant Sathe, is credited with the new line, is convinced that it will succeed as the party crosses the next century. 'For me, this is practical politics. It is not that I or my partymen are against the minorities. But all the minorities put together are 15 per cent (sic). So, we must get back a substantial part of the 85 per cent majority', he said. 'We have received only 25 per cent of the total vote in the last poll. Which means 75 per cent of the people are against us. Or rather, we lost the large chunk of the majority support that we earlier enjoyed because the community felt that the Congress was ignoring its interests and concerns.'

"Mr Gadgil argued: 'If it is a question of protecting the minorities' interests, then Hindus

are the minority in six states in the country. Why is it that the Congress does not speak for the Kashmiri Pundits uprooted from their homes?'" (*Times of India*, 21/1/99; emphasis added)

Ms Gandhi then embarked on a tour of Hindu temples and meetings with Hindu *sants*.

Need for genuine secular resistance

The task of resisting the current attack on Christians, then, can hardly be left to such political parties and such politics. It is also not a problem of the Christians alone, or indeed of only the minorities. At one point Muslims were made the target, today the Christians; but, as we have said, *the real objective is hegemony over the majority of people. The majority are being diverted from struggling on pressing issues relating to their daily lives, such as unemployment, eroding standards of living, and utter insecurity. The majority of Indians cannot afford to allow this diversionary and divisive exercise to continue.* The task of resisting it lies with genuinely democratic and secular organisations.

Table 1
INDIA: RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION OF
POPULATION BY STATES AND UNION TERRITORIES, 1991.

India/State/ Union Territory	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Others
INDIA	81.56	12.58	2.32	1.94	1.60
Andhra Pradesh	98.14	8.91	1.83	0.03	0.09
Arunachal Pradesh	37.04	1.38	10.29	0.14	15.15
Assam	67.13	28.43	3.32	0.07	1.05
Bihar	82.42	14.81	0.98	0.09	1.70
Delhi	83.67	9.44	0.88	4.84	1.17
Goa	64.68	5.25	29.86	0.09	27.29
Gujarat	89.48	8.73	0.44	0.08	1.27
Haryana	89.21	4.64	0.10	5.81	0.24
Himachal Pradesh	95.90	1.72	0.09	1.01	1.28
Jammu & Kashmir	34.18	62.58	0.13	2.17	0.94
Karnataka	85.45	11.64	1.91	0.02	0.98
Kerala	57.28	23.33	19.32	0.01	0.06
Madhya Pradesh	92.82	4.96	0.65	0.24	1.35
Maharashtra	81.12	9.67	1.12	0.21	7.88
Manipur	57.67	7.27	34.11	0.07	0.88
Meghalaya	14.67	3.46	64.58	0.15	17.14
Mizoram	5.05	0.66	85.73	0.04	8.52
Negaland	10.12	1.71	87.47	0.06	0.64
Orissa	94.67	1.83	2.10	0.05	1.35
Punjab	34.46	1.18	1.11	62.95	0.30
Rajasthan	89.08	8.01	0.11	1.48	1.32
Sikkim	68.37	0.95	3.30	0.09	27.29
Tamil Nadu	88.67	5.47	5.69	0.01	0.16
Tripura	68.50	7.13	1.68	0.03	4.66
Uttar Pradesh	81.74	17.33	0.14	0.48	0.31
West Bengal	74.72	23.61	0.56	0.08	1.03
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	67.53	7.61	23.95	0.48	0.43
Chandigarh	75.84	2.72	0.78	20.29	0.37
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	95.48	2.41	1.51	0.01	0.59
Daman & Diu	87.76	8.91	2.86	0.10	0.37
Lakshadweep	4.52	94.31	1.16	N	0.01
Pondicherry	86.16	6.54	7.23	N	0.07

Source : Census of India, 1991: Religion - Paper 1 of 1995, xiv-xxii. (N - Negligible)

Table 2**INDIA : CHANGES IN RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION OF POPULATION, 1951-91**

Religious community	Percentage of total population in					Trend
	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	
Hindus	84.98	83.51	82.72	82.28	81.56	regular decrease
Muslims	9.91	10.70	11.21	11.76	12.58	regular increase
Christians	2.35	2.44	2.60	2.44	2.32	decrease
Sikhs	1.74	1.79	1.89	1.92	1.94	regular increase
Buddhists	0.05	0.73	0.70	0.70	0.77	increase
Jains	0.45	0.46	0.47	0.47	0.40	decrease

(Source : Census of India, 1991: India: Religion, Paper 1 of 1995, xiv-xxiii and Census of India, 1971: India: Religion Paper 2 of 1972, 2-5 and Annexure, and Victor Petrov: *India, Spotlight on Population*, 1985.

Table 3**PERCENTAGE OF CHRISTIANS IN VARIOUS STATES, 1961-1991**

State	Percentage of the Christians in				Trend
	1961	1971	1981	1991	
Andhra Pradesh	3.97	4.19	2.68	1.83	decrease
Goa	38.07	33.97	31.35	29.86	regular decrease
Kerala	21.22	21.05	20.56	19.32	regular decrease
Manipur	19.49	26.03	29.68	34.11	regular increase
Meghalaya	35.21	46.98	52.62	64.58	regular increase
Mizoram	86.64	86.09	83.81	85.73	decrease
Nagaland	52.98	66.76	80.21	87.47	regular increase

(Source : Census of India, 1991: India: Religion, Paper 1 of 1995, xiv-xxiii and Census of India, 1971: India: Religion Paper 2 of 1972, 2-5 and Annexure)

About AIFOFR

The onslaughts on democratic rights in our country are growing daily. Some of these are carried out by wings of the State such as the police, paramilitary, and Army. Some are carried out by private forces such as the Ranvir Sena, the Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, or factory-owners' goons. Some onslaughts come in the form of laws like TADA; others, such as the practice of killing people in fake 'encounters', dispense with the laws. Sometimes the very conditions of life and labour constitute an attack on democratic rights -- as when factories close, throwing their workers into starvation, or when debt-ridden peasants find no way out but suicide.

On all these democratic rights issues, what is required is a *mass-based, struggle-oriented* democratic rights movement that builds solidarity among various sections of the people against attacks on any particular section of the people. The All India Federation of Organisations for Democratic Rights (AIFOFR) is striving to build such a movement.

AIFOFR was formed in 1982, and consists of the following organisations:

Andhra Pradesh: Organisation for the Protection of Democratic Rights (OPDR), A.P.

Maharashtra: Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana (LHS), Maharashtra.

Orissa: Ganatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sanghatana (GASS), Orissa.

Punjab: Association For Democratic Rights (AFDR), Punjab.

Rajasthan: Janatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sangathan (JASS), Rajasthan.

AIFOFR has brought out three all-India fact-finding reports before this report, namely:

- (i) *People vs. Missile Base* (1986) -- on the struggle of people of Baliapal, Orissa, against the Government's attempt to set up a missile base in their region;
- (ii) *Punjab -- People Fight Back* (1987) -- on State terrorism and communal terrorism in Punjab;
- (iii) *The Drought Is Not Over* (1988) -- on the 1987-88 nationwide drought and its roots in Government policy.

AIFOFR also publishes a bulletin, *In Defence of Democratic Rights (IDDR)*, which reports on democratic rights issues nationwide. Its periodicity is once every four months. Annual subscription for IDDR is Rs 25, to be paid by demand draft or money order in the name of: Rajani X. Desai, 8-D, B-1, Harbour Heights, Bombay 400005.

AIFOFR will continue to remain alert to, and to fight against, all attacks on democratic rights. It solicits the support of all democratic sections of the people in this fight.



Back cover: SRP personnel guarding the remains of a church in Jharsol, Gujarat.

Front cover: A Christian adivasi in Dangs, Gujarat, reads the Bible in front of a destroyed church.

Photos Courtesy: A. Srinivas, *Indian Express*

AIFOFR Constituent Organisations: Association For Democratic Rights (AFDR), Punjab; Ganatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sanghatana (GASS), Orissa; Janatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sangathan (JASS), Rajasthan; Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana (LHS), Maharashtra; Organisation for the Protection of Democratic Rights (OPDR), Andhra Pradesh.

II. The Hindutva Terror Campaign in the Dangs

The team's visit

One branch of the AIFOFDR all-India fact-finding team into attacks on Christians toured the Dangs district of Gujarat on the 7th, 8th and 9th of February, 1999. The team visited the district capital of Ahwa and the villages of Jarsol, Nactyanvath, Gadvi, Jamlapada and Subir. The Team met the Deputy Superintendent of Police, the Circle Inspector, and SRP personnel stationed in the area. It also met Reverend T.V. Gaikwad of the Church of North India (CNI), Reverend Abraham of the FMPIB, Sisters Nirmala and Lily Pereira of the Deep Darshan School, all from Ahwa; Father MV Anthony of the Subir Navjyot school, Bharat Pawar of the Dangi Mazdoor Union, Ahwa, Janubhai Pawar, chief of the Hindu Jagran Manch, activists of the South Gujarat Lok Adhikar Sangh, members of the Mofat Kanuni Salaah Kendra, and several villagers.

Topography and history of the region

Dangs is the smallest district in the state of Gujarat. It was created in 1961. It consists of 311 villages and 60 gram panchayats. It is bordered to the east and the south by the Dhule and Nasik districts of Maharashtra and to the north and the west by the Surat and Valsad districts of Gujarat. Dangs is one of the two districts in India having over 90% forest cover — mainly teak, sissoo, khair, bamboo and a host of indigenous medicinal plants. Dangs has an overwhelmingly tribal population of around 1,70,000. The Bhils are the original inhabitants of

the Dangs. The Kokanis and the Warlis came later from the adjoining areas of Maharashtra and Gujarat to cultivate the land. There are also a small number of Gavits and Chodharas here. All these tribes, however, have over time evolved a common Dangi identity in terms of social structure, norms, customs, culture and language.

When the British entered the Dangs in the early part of the nineteenth century, the Dangs was an independent Bhil kingdom ruled by five kings and nine Naiks. The Bhils — ‘the lords of the Dangs’ — were then mainly a hunting and food gathering tribe who managed to make ends meet in bad times by looting people inhabiting the adjoining areas in shock raids. It was the Kokanis who first introduced permanent cultivation to the Dangs. Despite this, by and large the concept of private ownership of land was non-existent and shifting cultivation was the norm. The Bhils are described in colonial records (the Gazetteer) as being “brave to a fault, no enterprise was too daring for them... They have a sturdy spirit of independence and intolerance of any external interference in their traditional habitat.” It was this attribute that made them fight to the last against any external invaders — be it the Peshwas, the Gaikwads or the British. Because of this trait of the Bhils, the British did not think it politically expedient or administratively practicable to completely crush the Dang chiefs. The British were chiefly interested in exploiting the forest wealth of the Dangs as they wanted a steady supply of teak for their shipbuild-

ing enterprises at the Royal Naval Dockyard at Bombay. So they tricked the Dang chiefs into giving them leases to fell trees for an annual fee. This fee was a nominal amount when compared to the astronomical amounts the British made from the sale of the timber.

By the end of the nineteenth century, all the Dang forests were under British control and they had demarcated large forest tracts into 'reserved' and 'protected'. By doing so, the British eroded the Dang people's rights over forest lands and forest produce — because shifting cultivation, collection of wood for fuel and house building, collection of the mahua flower and other forest produce was banned in these large tracts of 'reserved' and 'protected' forests. This led to large-scale displacement and impoverishment of the Dang people, which was compounded by the total absence of any alternative source of economic activity or livelihood. The Bhils steadfastly resisted these assaults on their livelihood but the British eventually subdued them. In the process, the British cultivated the Kokani tribals and set them up against the Bhils, creating an artificial division which has been insidiously used by the rulers all along.

This situation remained unchanged after 1947. The new set of rulers again were only interested in exploiting the Dangs' forest and forest wealth and increasing their revenue earnings — the Dangs district contributes over Rs 20 crore annually to the Gujarat state revenue kitty. The State Forest Department controls most of the land and has over the years been including more and more forest cover under the categories of 'reserved' and 'protected'. The area under 'reserved' forest increased from 22,280 hectares in 1961 to 91,200 hectares in 1990, whilst the area under 'protected' forest increased from 77,973 hectares in 1955 to 85,500 in 1990. This has resulted in hundreds of tribals being evicted from the

land they used to cultivate and they have also been denied their traditional rights over forest produce and grazing of their cattle in these areas.

Parallel to this development was the decline of land available for cultivation. In the late nineteenth century, around 66% of the Dangs area was available for cultivation. Today, out of a total of 1,171,700 hectares of cultivable land, the Forest Department controls 53.11%. Thus 87% of the population which is dependent on agriculture has to make do with only 32% of the land ! In the mid 1960s the Gujarat

government undertook a survey of land to allot legal titles to the cultivators. The tribals were either not informed about this or were misinformed, and consequently, many were evicted from their land. The Kokanis, however, benefited from this exercise as their traditional links with the bureaucracy helped them to get titles and they also managed to acquire large areas belonging to

the Bhils.

The tribals, however, continue to cultivate their lands which have been included in the 'protected' and 'reserved' forests. Thus the main source of conflict here is the continuing contradiction between State control over the forest and the tribal rights over use of the forest land and forest resources.

The tribals of the Dangs have very small, uneconomical holdings — most have two to three acres of land, there is an absence of large holdings — and they are totally dependent on rainfall, as there are no irrigation works in the area whatsoever. They manage to grow rice, vari, ragi, urad and kulith for a few months of the year and most, if not all, of this is used for domestic consumption. There is no alternative employment in this district. According to a socio-economic survey conducted by the Gujarat state government in 1997-98, Dangs has the highest number of unemployed people in Gujarat. From March to

**87% of the peasant
population has
to make do with
only 32% of the land**

May the tribals engage in timru patta (the bidi leaf) collection for which they are paid a pittance by contractors and the Forest Department. About 40,000 tribals migrate every year to work in the nine sugar co-operatives of Surat and Valsad districts almost like semi-bonded labourers. After eight months of toil, a couple can manage to save only Rs 3,000 to 4,000, on which the family has to manage for the rest of the year till the harvest. About 4,000 to 6,000 tribals work seasonally in the bamboo coupes of the Central Pulp Mill but here too they are paid a pittance.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Dangs witnessed a secular movement by the tribals on their various economic issues, under the banner of Adivasi Bhoomiheen Kisan Hakk Sanrakshan Samiti (ABKHSS). This movement centred around

regularisation of the forest plots the adivasis cultivated, provision of land to landless adivasis, a reasonable price for forest produce, proper wages for forest labourers, acknowledging adivasis' ownership of trees on their land, and other economic demands. In 1991 repression was brought on the movement: a tribal woman was killed in a police firing, the leadership was arrested and detained under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, the activists were arrested, beaten and harassed in ways that caused them economic loss, and the sympathisers were terrorised and told not to extend support to the struggle. While this effectively repressed the secular organisation of the tribals at the time, the burning issues addressed by the ABKHSS struggle remained unresolved. It should be noted that the Christian missionaries had nothing to do with this movement. And at the time of this movement, the Sangh Parivar

Gujarat government's collusion in attacks on Christians

The incidents in Dangs did not take place in isolation. For the last year or so, the VHP-RSS-Bajrang Dal have been waging an offensive against minorities with the help of the Gujarat government, as brought out by a number of fact-finding teams (by the Humanist Rationalist Society; Sahiyar, a women's organisation; a joint team of PUCL, NAWO, and GFSA; Nishant Natya Manch; and a joint team of CPDR and APCLC) and press reports. The attacks on Muslims included the following: forcing all 59 Muslim families of Randhikpur village (Dohad district) to flee after two Muslim youth from nearby Sanjeli village eloped with two tribal girls; a virulent VHP campaign claiming falsely that Muslim boys were kidnapping Hindu girls; and the communal riots at Vansda (Valsad district). The attacks on Christians include cases of disruption of Christian prayer meetings (Vadodara, 4/3/98; Palanpur, 11/4/98); demolition of a Roman Catholic chapel (Naroda village, 15/4/99); exhumation of a Dalit Christian's grave (Kapadvanj taluk, Nadiad, 9/7/98); attack on a Jesuit-run school (Zankhvav, Surat district, 14/7/98); many false stories in the

press of atrocities by Christians on Hindus; burning of copies of the Bible (Rajkot, 20/7/98); attack on a Christian convention of Alpha Missionary Movement (Vadodara, 29/10/98); and so on.

The support of the Gujarat government for the anti-minorities campaign was hardly disguised. When the VHP claimed that Hindu women were being kidnapped by Muslim youth, the state government promptly set up a special cell to protect "Hindu women from atrocities meted out by persons of other religions". When the VHP burnt Bible copies in Rajkot, claiming that the management of a Christian school was trying to convert Hindu girls to Christianity, the Chief Minister ordered a probe into why and how the *school authorities had provoked the VHP reaction*. And when Christian schools remained closed on December 4, 1998, in protest against the attacks on Christians, the Gujarat State Commissioner for Higher Education decided to stop all Government grants to them. All these incidents predated the stepping up of the offensive against Christians in Dangs in December 1998. ■

was hardly to be found in Dangs.

The stark contrast in the State's treatment of secular struggle on economic issues by the adivasis and its treatment of violent communal forces like the Hindu Jagran Manch is instructive. Whereas the ABKHSS leaders were earlier detained and virtually prevented from operating in the area because they had raised legitimate, democratic demands, the HJM leaders are today given the run of the area even after they have waged a terroristic communal campaign.

Tribal religion

According to Tahir Mahmood, Chief of the National Minorities Commission, less than half a percentage point of the population of Gujarat is Christian. In fact the 1991 Census gives a figure of 0.44 per cent for Gujarat. The Dangi tribals were described as animists in government records right up to 1951 because they believed in worshipping the spirits in nature. (Thereafter, there has been an unexplained change in the description of tribals as "Hindu" in all Census records.) The tribal gods were the *Wagh Dev*, *Nag Dev* and *Dongar Dev* (tiger god, snake god, and mountain god). They never celebrated Hindu festivals like Ganpati and Navratri. The tribals do have celebrations around Holi and Divali but these celebrations are more in the nature of harvest festivals.

Christian missionaries in the Dangs and their activities

The first church in the Dangs was set up in 1907. Since then the influence of Christian missionaries increased and today there are about 15 denominations of missionaries working here — among them the Church of North India (CNI), the Indian Evangelical Mission, the Friends of the Missionary Prayer Band (F.M.P.B.), the Pentecostal Church of the Protestant variety, the Jesuits, the Vedruna Carmelite

Order of nuns, and the St. Anne's order of nuns. The Jesuits were the first Christians to set up a school for tribal children at Pimpri. In the early 1970s, the Collector of Dangs requested the priests at Pimpri to set up a school in Ahwa. Hence, the Jesuits invited the Vedruna Carmelites of Charity to set up what came to be known as the Deep Darshan School at Ahwa in 1975. This school has 850 children on its rolls: of these less than 100 are Christians. The school has a hostel for girls and one for boys and has 250 boarders. 95% of the school's students are tribals. The school is government aided, education and boarding is free for all children. The government shoulders 60% of the cost of the boarders and 100% of the teachers' salaries and the maintenance costs of the school.

**Christians make up
just 0.44% of the
population in Gujarat
(1991 Census)**

The nuns here also run a Health Centre at Ahwa. The same order of nuns also runs a mobile dispensary around Pimpri. In that area they have also started organising mahila mandals in the villages to empower tribal women. In the Shamgahan area, near the hill resort of Saputara, the St. Anne's Order of

nuns is active in collaboration with the Jesuits there. These nuns run a dispensary there. The Jesuits have a school there and the nuns have some village work going on which entails educating the women of the village around issues like health care. The other school cum hostel run by the Jesuits is the Navjyot School at Subir, about 40 kilometres from Ahwa, set up 6 years ago. It has 225 students (only boys) on its rolls, of whom 30 are Christians. All the students are boarders and the fees per child for instruction and boarding is only Rs.30 per month. Father MV Anthony, who set up the school is the manager, whilst Father Osborne Ferrao is the Principal. These priests are Jesuits. The school does not receive any Government aid, but the teachers are paid according to government scales. Of the nine teachers employed in the school, only two are Christians. This school is different from the Deep Darshan one in the sense

that in its design and architecture of the matted bamboo-cum-mud structure it is integrated with the village. Here all the children feel at home and seemed very happy. When the team visited the school, the students were busy in their recess time, getting soil for a garden they themselves have nurtured around their hostel.

While the Catholic orders have set up schools, ashrams and medical clinics, the Protestants usually carry on exclusively religious activities. Father Anthony was candid about his work : “I have an avowed policy to be a messenger of Christ, but not to those who don’t want it. A change of heart is necessary for real conversion. Any other type of conversion is hypocrisy. I have spent 16 years in the Dangs and my aim has been to bring the adivasis into the mainstream of life without making them lose their identity.” Father Abraham, of the FMPB, on the other hand is equally candid about his proselytising activity or “church plantation” as he terms it. His work is to set up churches in villages where there are Christians for his order. Half of the collections of the Sunday mass is invested in a bank account in that village church’s name, the other half is used for paying the local pastor’s stipend.

There has been an increase in the Christian population of the Dangs as shown in the 1991 Census over the 1981 Census: from 1,514 to 7,824. Since 1991 too there has been a sizeable increase. “We do not deny there has been a significant increase in the Christian population in the Dangs,” says Reverend Abraham of the FMPB. “The Constitution of our country allows me to profess and propagate and convert. If people are coming forward to convert, who am I to refuse?” In the last few years there has been some step-up in the evangelical activity mainly in the form of prayer healing meetings.

What makes the adivasis convert to Christianity?

The story was the same wherever the team went : when a person falls ill, he does the usual round of *buas* and *bhagats*, the village medicine men-cum-priests, with their peculiar *jadu tona* routines. When this does not help, the tribals give the Christi prayers a try. And if they do get healed, they embrace Christianity. Nathu Gangaji Bairham of Nactyanuvat village embraced Christianity 25 years ago along with his whole family. His wife, Paruben, had been suffering from severe asthma and no *bua* or *bhagat* had been successful in curing her, so they finally turned to the missionaries for help. Paruben was given some medicines and prayers were offered and she recovered. So they all turned to Christianity. Lakshubhai Kolgebhai Bhoje of Gadhavi village became a Christian ten years ago. He was then suffering from a strange skin disease which only got cured thanks to the medicines and prayers offered by member of the Pentecostal Church who used to come to his village.

Once an adivasi becomes a Christian, he must follow a certain code of behaviour — drinking and smoking is actively discouraged. This leads to better health and more discipline in their lives, and consequently greater savings, thus usually bringing about an all-round improvement in the quality of life. For the Bhils especially, becoming Christians meant they had access to education and a better deal in life.

No forced conversions to Christianity

The team found no evidence whatsoever of forced conversions to Christianity. No one in the area, not even Janubhai Pawar, alleged that tribals had been forcibly converted. Pandurang Shastri Athavale, the noted religious preacher, has categorically stated that there have been no forcible conversions to Christianity in the Dangs after he conducted a survey of the area.

“There were very small insignificant tensions between Christian and non-Christian tribals here before the VHP started its work in this area” avers Mr. Rajen Gaikwad, the Dy. SP of the Dangs. These tensions were generated partly from the fact that once an adivasi becomes a Christian, he stops going to the village festivals or contributing donations for them. They call the animist religion ‘idol worship’ and stay away from the festivities, thus in a way distancing themselves from the rest of their kind. The tribals have a custom of cremating their dead, whilst the Christian tribals bury them. Still, till the entry of the VHP in the area, social interaction and intermarriage between Christian and non-Christian tribals was common. For example, Nachubhai of Nactyanuvat gave his daughter in marriage to a non-Christian tribal. This happens because the identity of the tribals is primarily associated with that of their respective tribes, not so much with their religion. Hence the team found that whilst there was intermarriage between Christian and non-Christian members of one tribe, there was no intermarriage between members of two different tribes, regardless of religion. For instance, the Bhils are generally looked down upon by the Warlis and the Kokanis, so these tribes will not intermarry with the Bhils. Further, there seemed no evidence of ghettoisation in the villages. The Christian tribals live evenly spaced out throughout the village.

Systematic ‘Hinduisation’ process of tribals culminating in forced conversion to Hinduism

Three years ago, the RSS drew up a plan to counter the activities of the Christian missionaries in India and to go on an aggressive ‘reconversion’ drive. The organisation identified 200 sensitive districts located in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa, Maharashtra, Bihar, the North East and UP and about 50,000 villages within them for launching a hate campaign, euphemistically termed a ‘public aware-

ness campaign’ against the activities of Christian missionaries. By the beginning of this year, they claim to have already established contacts in 10,000 of these villages all over the country and have set up one ‘reconversion’ centre (or “Shakti Kendra” as they term it) for clusters of 25 such villages. The VHP has allegedly earmarked Rs. five crore for this exercise. (*Indian Express*, 1/1/99).

The VHP has plans for setting up Ekal Vidyalayas (or one-teacher schools) in all these villages, along with some health centres and *sanskrit kendras* (a kind of moral education centre). Mahendra Bhat of the

VHP in Gujarat was recently quoted in the press as saying (*Indian Express*, 1/2/99): “This is necessary if we have to save the tribals from being misguided and influenced by foreign missionaries...if we don’t reach them, either the Naxalites or the missionaries will.”

The Hindutva drive is multi-pronged. Note the following:

— The RSS, having noted that medicinal cures attracted tribals in the first instance to embrace Christianity, made an attempt to set up ayurvedic centres in some villages in the Dangs about three years ago. One Vijay More, an RSS full-time worker at the time, who was one of those deployed to implement this task, stated that the RSS wanted to use this channel to establish contact with the tribals in the villages and propagate Hindutva.

— In 1992, the VHP branch in the Dangs was set up as part of its all-India plan of aggressive Hindu proselytisation. In the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Today the VHP president here is one Pradip Sambhaji Patil, a known anti-social who has reportedly been extorted from Maharashtra by the Mumbai Police.

— In 1997 the Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad was estab-

**“Before VHP entered,
tensions were
insignificant”**

-- Dy. SP, Dangs

lished in the Dangs with the setting up of an ashram at Waghai where about 35 adivasi students are housed. Since the last two years this ashram has been the base of a VHP activist named Swami Aseemanand who hails from West Bengal. A Ph.D., this swami came to the Dangs after doing extensive work among the tribals of the Andamans and of the Bastar district in M.P. He founded the Bajrang Dal in the Dangs and toured village to village to set up Bajrang Dal and VHP units there. He was singled out for special praise at the VHP's Dharma Sansad at Ahmedabad in February as a role model and the other sadhus were exhorted to emulate him.

— On August 15, 1998, the Bajrang Dal was formally established in the Dangs. A ceremony was held at a temple in Ahwa where 5 Bajrang Dal volunteers from each contact village assembled and were given a trishul each and a saffron scarf at the investiture ceremony. Residents say that around 500 trishuls and scarves were distributed. The majority of the members of the Bajrang Dal and the VHP are drawn from the Kokani tribe.

— In early 1998, the Hindu Jagran Manch (also known as the Hindu Dharma Jagran Manch) was set up. For the last six months Janubhai Pawar has been its chief, and is the main ringleader of the mobs that have been attacking churches and Christians.

— The Dangs villages, where the Bajrang Dal has a presence, are dotted with saffron flags, hoisted on a bamboo pole outside the house of most non-Christian tribals.

— Already existing Hanuman temples have been spruced up and new ones are being built.

— The VHP and the Bajrang Dal have been going all out to get the tribals to celebrate Hindu festivals hitherto unknown in this area. For example, last Ganesh Chaturthi, the VHP brought in truckloads of Ganpati idols and distributed them free of charge to villages under their influence.

— This plethora of organisations set up by the RSS in this area do not address themselves at all to the genuine problems of the people such as their tussles with the Forest Department, or their fight for land, their rights over forest produce, etc. The team came across only one instance of such interest taken by Janubhai Pawar: On September 2, 1998, a tribal named Sampatbhai who hailed from Janubhai's village of Gadhavi was killed by the Forest Department. Janubhai wrote a couple of memos about this to the Department but soon lost interest in it completely and did not follow it up. It is the Lok Adhikar Sangh, a secular organisation, which has consistently taken up this case and has filed a case for compensation to the victim's family before the High Court.

The RSS-spawned organisations have their base essentially among the Kokani tribals. There is a history of the Kokanis being used against the Bhils dating back to the British Raj. The Bhils, the original inhabitants of the Dangs, continued to resist the British throughout the Raj. The British brought in Kokanis and Warlis from the surrounding areas to cultivate the land (resettlement) and used these tribes against the Bhils. This traditional rivalry is so deeprooted that even among the Christians, a Bhil will not marry a Kokani. The Bhils are the poorest tribals here and form the majority of the converts in this region. So it is not unnatural that the Bajrang Dal and VHP have most of their base among the Kokanis, who are generally slightly better off than the Bhils. The VHP also has a base among the powerful sections of the village populace — the teachers, the forest department officials, the shopkeepers, the forest contractors, who are mainly non-Adivasis.

**For the last two years,
the Waghai ashram
has been the base of
Swami Aseemanand**

Events leading up to the attacks

Role of media in whipping up anti-Christian sentiment: The Gujarati press, especially newspapers like the *Gujarat Samachar* and *Sandesh*, have played a major role in whipping up anti-Christian sentiment among the people of the area over the last year, and especially in the run-up to the attacks on churches from December 25, 1998 onwards.

Beef eating report: For example, in June 1998, *Sandesh* carried a report stating that Christian tribals in Jharsol village had eaten beef and thrown the bones near a Hanuman temple in their village. This was found to be a totally false report by Reverend Abraham of the FMPB and others who personally went to the village to investigate the veracity of this report. There are 40 houses in Jharsol of which 12 are of Christian tribals. Of these 12, 11 families are Bhils, and one is a Kokani. The Bhils are the only tribals who have a tradition of eating beef, which has been one more reason for other tribals to look down upon them. On May 2, 1998, the Pentecostal Church held a two day convention here in Jharsol. The minute the VHP and Bajrang Dal came to know of this, they too organised a two day convention of their own here at the same time. At that time, some tension cropped up when the VHP and Bajrang Dal activists did a round of the Christian houses to check if they ate beef or not. The report mentioned above appeared some days after this incident.

Deep Darshan School Play: On December 6, 1998, *Sandesh* again carried a report stating that in the course of the performance of a play held at the Deep Darshan school at Ahwa, the idol of Lord Krishna had been stamped on, broken and even urinated upon. The version of the Sisters at Deep Darshan School was quite different, and they even gave us a copy of the script of the play so we could verify for ourselves. The controversial play entitled 'Rashtriya

Ekta' was a short skit five minutes long which was performed by the students on November 22, 1998, on the occasion of Parents' Day in the school. A Hindu chances upon a huge block of stone and decides to make an idol of Lord Krishna out of it so passers-by can perform puja there. He does so and moves on. Next a Christian comes across this idol and decides to make it into a statue of Jesus Christ nailed on the cross. He too moves on. Next, a Sikh comes by and decides to change the statue of Christ into one of Guru Nanak. After doing this, he too moves on. Next, a Muslim enters and decides to make the statue into one of Prophet Mohammed. After he

leaves, the Hindu once again enters and is shocked to find a statue of Mohammed in the place where he had made a statue of Lord Krishna. Soon, one by one, the others – the Sikh, Muslim and Christian also come in and start quarrelling with each other over whose statue should be carved out of the stone. At this moment a young student enters and

advises them that there is no need to fight over such things. He says that every religion is a different path to the same God and all religions have truth and non-violence written into their tenets. And so, says the boy, let us make a statue of the Father of our Nation, Mahatma Gandhi who was the apostle of truth and non-violence. In this way we can go a step towards establishing national unity. They all agree and proceed to make a statue of Gandhi together. The skit ends with the singing of 'Vande Mataram'. The Collector of the Dangs and the Dangs' most well-known 'Gandhian', Mr. Ghelubhai Naik, were both present at this performance and found nothing objectionable about it.

These kinds of false stories in the press are dangerous because, though the overwhelming majority of the tribals do not read papers, these stories are used in the hate campaign against Christians by the VHP and Bajrang Dal.

Gujarat Samachar and Sandesh have played a major role in whipping up anti-Christian sentiment

Further, on December 26, 1998, the *Gujarat Samachar* carried a report about how two Hindu temples (one of Hanuman and the other of Shiva) at Badalkhadi village had been attacked and destroyed by Christian tribals. This was found to be a totally false report and even the Dy SP of the Dangs, Rajen Gaikwad, affirmed this fact. However, this report seems to have been planted at the time so as to justify the attacks on the Christian churches the previous day.

Jeep story

There is a spurt of concocted stories doing the rounds in the towns and villages about how Christian missionaries trick the tribals into converting to Christianity, the most famous one being the jeep story which even Keshubhai Patel, the CM of Gujarat, has narrated in a *Frontline* interview! It goes as follows: a Christian priest is travelling with a jeep load of young tribals in the forest. Suddenly he switches off the ignition and the jeep comes to a halt. The priest tells the tribals that the jeep has stopped working and so they will all have to get down and push. The first time he tells them to take Shiva's name while pushing. They do so but the jeep fails to start. Then the priest tells them to take Mohammed's name whilst pushing, they do so but then too the jeep refuses to start. Then the priest tells them to take Jesus' name and push. They do so and the jeep starts up — because the priest has turned the key in the ignition. The tribals are then tricked into believing that taking Jesus' name will work wonders and then trapped into converting to Christianity. Such stories make the Christian missionaries seem like diabolic evangelists who use unscrupulous means to trap innocent, unsuspecting tribals into embracing a religion they would not otherwise accept. The truth is quite different.

The attacks

Hindu Jagran Manch Rally, December 25, 1998.

The Hindu Jagran Manch organised a rally cum public meeting on December 25, 1998, at Ahwa par-

ticularly because it was Christmas Day. Ten days before the rally, the HJM had distributed leaflets against the Christian

**Hindu Jagran Manch
distributed leaflets
talking of “teaching the
Christian priests
a lesson”**

community in the Dangs which talked of “teaching the Christian priests a lesson”. There were reports in the Gujarati language papers too that the VHP, Bajrang Dal, and the HJM were going to hold a rally against the activities of the Christians. In view of the earlier attacks on Christians and the prevailing communally charged atmosphere, the Dakshin Gujarat Adivasi Christi Kalyan Parishad, the Church of North India and the Christi Samaj Rakshak Dal submitted memorandums to the District Collector on December 18, 21, and 22, respectively, requesting him not to give permission for the proposed rally and to make adequate arrangements with the police to ensure a peaceful Christmas. The Collector called representatives of these organisations for a meeting where he was non-committal about the rally but promised to make proper police bandobast on Christmas Day. These organisations also sent a fax message to Amarsinh Choudhary, the Congress Party leader of Gujarat, to get the rally cancelled. The South Gujarat Lok Adhikar Sangh also addressed a letter to the Collector on December 24 requesting him to cancel permission for the said rally. But all to no avail. When the team asked Janubhai Pawar why his organisation had decided to call for a rally on Christmas day, he shot back, “Is there a law that we cannot hold meetings on Christmas day?”

The organisers of the anti-Christian rally started bringing truckloads of people from inside and outside the Dangs on the night of December 24 and early morning of December 25 into Ahwa. In fact a large number of outsiders were brought in for the rally. Government servants also attended. Ahwa was deco-

rated with saffron flags and banners, and a number of jeeps were doing the rounds shouting anti-Christian slogans and exhorting the people to participate in the rally. The rally commenced at 11.30 a.m. from Saputara Road and reached the meeting venue at the Raluka School ground after passing through all the main thoroughfares of Ahwa. slogans like '*Hindu jago, Christi bhago*', '*Galli galli me shor hai, sab padri chor hai*' were raised throughout the rally and the rallyists carried banners and placards with these slogans written on them. At the public meeting, speaker after speaker targetted the Christian community, the Christian religion and the missionaries. It is important to note that *the District Collector, Bharat Joshi, was himself present at the rally, was called on to the dais and was even garlanded by the organisers.*

Somewhere towards the end of the rally, certain unidentified persons pelted stones at the rallyists. While the HJM chief Janubhai Pawar alleges that this was done by some disgruntled Christians, the Christians allege that this was done by the organisers themselves to provoke the attacks on Christians and justify the attacks in the eyes of the public. As a consequence, the rallyists became overagitated and attacked a dozen Christians who had gone to the bazaar to make purchases. Three Christian women were hurt in this stone pelting incident. Immediately

thereafter, the rallyists went on a rampage, attacking shops owned by Muslims and Christians in Ahwa, in particular Vision Palace and Jolly Xerox.

Thereafter, some part of the crowd proceeded towards Deep Darshan School and threw stones at the hostel, seriously damaging the roof of the dining hall and breaking several window panes. According to Sister Lily Pereira of Deep Darshan School, "We had heard rumours that we were going to be attacked. So our Superior, Sister Carmen Borges, had asked for police protection. In response, two police constables without so much as a lathi had been deployed at our gates from December 24. At about 4.30p.m. on December 25, we heard that a mob of over 150 people were advancing towards our school so we asked the police at the gate to get more police protection. We heard slogans in the distance : "*Christian ne bhagado*", "Down with Christians", "*Padrio ne bhagado*". Then we saw a mob of 150 or so armed with iron bars and cycle chains on the hill behind our hostel. They threw stones on the hostel, seriously damaging the asbestos sheets of the roofs of the study hall, the sisters' office and the watchmen's room. They also broke innumerable window panes. Then the crowd started to advance towards us standing at the school gate. We immediately ran into our quarters. We were totally shaken, we were terrified. I kept thinking of the Jhabua incident. Just at this time a

Without comment

The attacks on churches in the Dangs were "scattered incidents blown out of proportion by vested interests to defame the BJP" — **Pramod Mahajan**.

"To some extent, the media reports of the incidents have been exaggerated". — **Atal Bihari Vajpayee** on the burning of churches in the Dangs after he visited there.

"What is there to destroy as only huts existed there ? The Congress is making a mountain out of a molehill... If there was any tension (between Hindus and Christians), then my government wouldn't have given permission for the rallies. How were we to expect that there would be stone throwing incidents by some christians during the procession. The situation took a turn for the worse and on the same night, a temple was attacked. Hence, it was natural for a retaliation in four places in Dangs district." — **Keshubhai Patel**, Gujarat Chief Minister.

List of attacks from 25th December 1998 onwards

Sr.No.	Date of Incident	Name of Village	Type of damage
1.	25 th December 1998	Gadvi	Prayer hall set on fire and demolished, Lakshubhai Bhoje attacked, house destroyed
2.	—“—	Jamlapada	Prayer hall burnt down ,Sumanbhai's house looted, Mohan Jeeva's house burnt down
3.	—“—	Nadagkadi	Tiles of the prayer hall roof damaged
4.	—“—	Padalkhadi	Prayer hall partially damaged by fire
5.	—“—	Dewantembrun	Tiles of the prayer hall roof damaged,Mohanbhai and Satrubhai attacked
6.	—“—	Subir	Navjyot School partially damaged,Fathers Anthony and Osborne assaulted, jeep and motorcycle burnt
7.	—“—	Galkund	Devdan Pawar attacked
8.	26 th December	Bhedun	Prayer hall completely demolished
9.	—“—	Karadiamba	Prayer hall completely demolished
10.	—“—	Waki	Prayer hall damaged by fire,Dinkarbhai's house damaged
11.	—“—	Pipliyamal	Gamju Pandu attacked
12.	27 th December	Borkhel	Prayer hall completely demolished
13.	—“—	Sepuamba	Prayer hall completely demolished
14.	—“—	Shivbara	Prayer hall completely demolished
15.	—“—	Pipaldagad	Prayer hall completely demolished
16.	—“—	Gougan	Prayer hall completely demolished
17.	—“—	Karanjpada	Prayer hall completely demolished
18.	—“—	Mulchond	Prayer hall burnt down
19.	—“—	Baripada	Prayer hall burnt down
20.	—“—	Dongiamba	Gomabhai attacked
21.	—“—	Motikasad	Two Christian houses damaged
22.	29 th December	Mathalbari	Prayer hall demolished
23.	—“—	Roachond	Prayer hall demolished
24.	30 th December	Jarsol	Prayer hall demolished,Sonibhen & 4 others attacked
25.	—“—	Nactyanvath	Prayer hall demolished
26.	1 st January	Kasarbari	Prayer hall set on fire
27.	—“—	Chikar	Prayer hall set on fire
28.	—“—	Jahwda	Prayer hall partially damaged
29.	10 th January	Dhuda	Prayer hall set on fire
30.	11 th January	Lahnucharia	Prayer hall set on fire

police vehicle arrived at our gates with the Deputy Collector and two mamlatdars and they kept the mob at bay. I still cannot get over that experience...whenever I hear some unfamiliar noise outside, I get frightened.” Sister Lily says that subsequently the Collector and the DSP tried to get the Christians and the others to do ‘kar seva’ together to repair the damage, but the nuns felt that the HJM and others were being hypocritical and so insisted on getting the repairs done themselves. Sister Lily added that it was sad to know that Dasrath Pawar, who himself had stayed in a hostel run by Jesuit fathers had become a leading part of the anti-Christian attacks.

Janubhai Pawar claims that the Deep Darshan attack never really took place and the nuns have made it all up. He claims that there was construction work going on and so the nuns just pointed to the rubble as proof of the attack to “give us Hindus a bad name”.

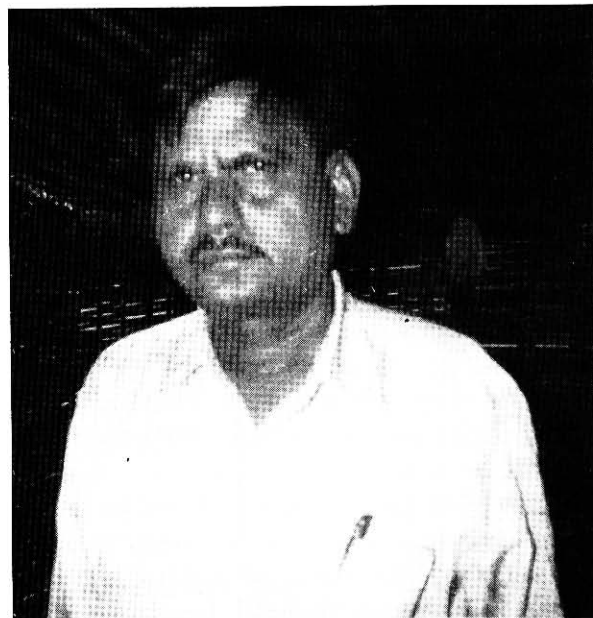
While all this was going on, another part of the rallyists, numbering about 1,500, advanced towards the big CNI church which is on the main road of Ahwa. The Christian community which had gathered nearby for Christmas celebrations went to the church with the aim of defending it lest it be attacked. The police then resorted to a lathicharge to prevent a violent confrontation between the two groups. The Christians alleged that several of them were beaten up indiscriminately and others were even beaten up after entering their compounds and houses.

After these incidents in Ahwa town, the rallyists then broke up into groups and started moving towards the villages.

Testimonies of Christian adivasis who witnessed the attacks

Jarsol village

Of the 40 houses here, 12 are Christian (11 Bhil families and one Kokani). The Pentecostal order is



Janubhai Pawar of Hindu Jagran Manch

active here and the last conversion took place eight years ago.

* In May 1998, conventions of Bajrang Dal and Christians were held side by side. After Swami Aseemanand started visiting this village, trouble began. First there was the beef eating story incident (refer above).

* Then in June 1998, four people from the village filed a complaint that their gods (huge stones) were uprooted from their usual place and thrown into the seasonal river that passes by the village. Some of the Christians were arrested due to this but later released on bail.

* A few months back, some friends of the local Christians who hail from the Gavit tribe visited them. The VHP supporters in the village alleged that these people had actually come to attack them. A scuffle ensued between the two parties in which the VHP supporters beat up a Christian named Anand Janu Barde and hit an ageing Christian woman named

Sonai Vadal on her chest and threw her to the ground. The Christians filed a police complaint but no one was arrested.

Sitarambhai, the local pastor, a young man in his early twenties, told us:

“On December 30, 1998 at about 9 p.m. at night, a crowd of 150 to 200 people came on foot to the village. Because it was dark we could not recognise more than four of them who were from our own village (this included our vice-sarpanch) and four from the neighbouring villages. The crowd headed straight for our prayer hall shouting slogans like “*Jai Shri Ram!*” “*Hindu Jaago, Christi Bhago*” “*Jai Bajrang Bali*”. We got scared and hid. The crowd then climbed onto the roof of the prayer hall and damaged the tiles. They then set the hall on fire after pouring kerosene on the church. Five of us hid near the church and watched as it became ash. We were spotted by the VHP men, dragged out of our hiding place and beaten up black and blue with their axes, sickles and sticks. Myself, Sonai bai, Sukaria and Santia sustained injuries on our heads and hands. After this incident, we complained to our Sarpanch who sent us to Ahwa in a tempo. The tempowalla got scared on the way and dropped us off over nine km from Ahwa and we had to walk the rest of the way in our injured and bleeding state. After filing a complaint with the Ahwa Police Station, we were finally admitted to the Ahwa hospital at 3.30 a.m.

“The Government gave each of us injured persons compensation of Rs.1,000. Our church was built by us with our own money, without any contribution from outside. Now we will have to rebuild it.”

Nactyanvath Village

This village is close to the Maharashtra border. Of the 150 houses here, 35 are Christian. The church here, a concrete brick structure built eight years back,

belongs to the FMPB order and the latest conversion took place three years ago.

Nathubhai Gangaji Bairham told the team:

“I have been a Christian for the last 25 years. At that time, my wife, Paruben, was suffering from serious attacks of asthma and the only people who could cure her were the Christians, who blessed her and gave her some medicine. So grateful was I about this that I was inspired to embrace Christianity along with my whole family. Here there are Christians amongst the Kokanis and the Bhils. There is inter-marriage between Christians and non-Christians but within one tribal community. For instance, my own daughter is married to a non-Christian.

“The VHP men dragged us out of our hiding places and beat us”

“On December 30 at about 10 p.m. a huge mob came to the village and came towards the prayer hall and started pelting stones at Christians houses specifically. We all got scared and locked ourselves in. So they took their chance and proceeded to break each and every roof tile of our church

and partially demolished its brick structure.”

Gadvi Village

Of the 300 odd houses in this village, 16 are of Christians. The church here was built 20 years ago and belongs to the Pentecostal order.

Lakshubhai Kolgabhai Bhoye told the team:

“I became a Christian 10 years ago. At that time I was suffering from a skin disease — I had huge dark patches on my skin all over my body. I tried the medicines and prayers of all the bhagats I knew but in vain. Finally I tried the Christis’ prayers and I was cured. So I converted. The last conversion in our village took place two years ago... now one more family converted after the Christmas day attacks.

“VHP was set up in my village in December 1997

after their inaugural meeting at Pipalpada on Christmas Day that year. Their intention is to wipe out all of us Christians from this village. Janubhai Pawar, the chief of the HJM, lives with his second wife in our village.

“On November 5, 1998, he led a mob to our church here and burnt down a small part of it. On Christmas Day, 1998, a large number of people from my village were mobilised for the Ahwa rally. At about 8 p.m., a mob of 200 people led by Janubhai, Jemsu Pawar and Baburao Kalu Gangurde, the sarpanch, first came to my house, surrounded it and broke almost all the 1000 tiles of my roof. After I fled for shelter, they looted my house, my grain, my chickens and took away the Rs.10,000 I had saved with difficulty for the purpose of rebuilding my house. Then the same mob of people advanced on the prayer hall. They put hay from the nearby hay stacks on the walls, then poured kerosene on it and set it alight. The kerosene was no doubt provided by Baburao Gangurde, who is the rationwalla of our village. All 16 families of Christians fled for our lives the same night. We spent that night in the forest and walked the next morning to Kosimda village where we took shelter for many days till the Collector came there and brought us back here.

“The Collector asked us to rebuild the destroyed prayer hall and gave us Rs.4,000 as compensation. Now the tiles of the hall alone will cost Rs.6,000 and in all we shall need Rs.20,000, so we gave back the money to the Collector. No compensation was given to me.

“On January 20, 1999, the VHP had a big meeting in our village. We got news that they were planning to beat up our men and rape our women. After the meeting, they came and surrounded our houses and yelled out threats to us. Then they went back to the main part of the village to drink. We all got very fright-

ened and so we fled again into the forest. When the VHP men came for us and did not find us at home, they robbed our hens and cocks, about 100 sackfuls of *naachmi* and set our cattle free to graze in the forest (due to this one of our cows was eaten up by a tiger). They then went to our makeshift graveyard nearby and tore out the five crosses we had put on the graves there and threw them away. We complained about these incidents to the Ahwa Police station, but no arrests have been made so far.

“Janubhai and co. seem to be getting large amounts of money from the VHP people. Some of these people did not have enough money to eat a year ago, but now they have so much that they can treat others for drinks every now and then.”

**“The kerosene was no
doubt provided by
Baburao Gangurde,
who is the rationwalla”**

Parshuben Sitarambhai Pawar told the team:

“After coming back from Kosinda, I went to draw water from the pump well in the village when I was told by the VHP people that I am

forbidden from taking water from there. When I asked why, I was slapped so hard, I lost two teeth! I am a widow with five small children. The Government gives a pension for widows, but I am not getting this pension because our sarpanch, Baburao Kalu Gangurde, is not giving me the necessary certificate.

“Many sarpanchs who are under the influence of the VHP are not giving Christian tribals the certificates and permission necessary to avail of the various government schemes for us tribals like Indira Awas Yojana, Widow’s pension, Old age pension, and Sardar Patel Awas Yojana. For instance, Lalsing Masu Pawar, a Christian tribal of our village, had got an order from the taluka panchayat under the Sardar Patel Awas Yojana to build a proper house for himself. He was staying in a small makeshift hut and he brought it down in order to build his house. The sarpanch got to know of this and somehow used all his powers to get the order stayed. Now Lalsing

is without a roof over his head and stays with his family in my house. Recently the sarpanch came to my house along with a big group of people and threatened that if I do not become a Hindu, they will break down my house also.”

Jamlapada:

This village is close to Gadvi. Of the 240 houses here, only 10 are Christian. The church here belongs to the Church of North India and the latest conversion took place two years back. Swami Aseemanand is a frequent visitor to this village.

Anita Mohan Pawar told the team:

“At about midnight on Christmas last year, a mob of about 400 people advanced on the church from Gadvi village and burnt it down. They broke the altar and the chairs inside the church and burnt every scrap of religious literature. Sumanbhai Pawar’s house, which is next to the church, was stoned by the mob and he was looted of Rs.1,500. The Collector has given us a cheque of Rs.4,500 to rebuild the church.”

Subir

Suresh Radhubhai Mahale, teacher at the Navjyot School, Subir, told the team:

“I became a Christian six years ago and I am happy I did so. My parents are not Christians.

“At about 8.30 p.m. on Christmas Day last year, a mob of 150 persons swooped down on our school shouting slogans like ‘Yahan se bhaag jao! Yeh hame de do!’ Thankfully there were

no students here at the time as they had gone home for the Christmas Holidays. Only Father Anthony, the manager of our school, Father Osborne, the Principal and the two cooks were here. They had just sat down to have their Christmas meal when the mob came. So the two fathers ran to their rooms to get the jeep keys to go to safety. The mob surrounded them in the dark and then Father Anthony told them, Please don’t destroy the school, it is after all for the benefit of your children. If you want, you can attack us. The mob then pelted them with stones. A big boulder hit one of the fathers on the chest and the other on his leg. The fathers then took the cooks and tried to start the jeep but found that it would not start and that its windows and lights had been smashed. They then ran to the Forest Office to put a wireless message through to Ahwa to get police help. In the meantime, the mob broke the asbestos roofs of some of the classrooms and the hostel and set fire to the Mahindra Jeep and a Splendour motorcycle parked next to the assembly hall. The jeep and motorcycle became charred wrecks and in the process,



The burnt jeep at Subir

some part of the assembly hall was also damaged. About 14 sackfuls of wheat and rice were also destroyed in the fire. The mob also broke all the drums containing water in the courtyard.

“We received Rs.26,000 as compensation for damage done to the school, and Rs.5,000 for the jeep and Rs.5,000 for the mobike.”

Father M.V. Anthony, who set up the school, said that many days before the attack actually took place, rumours had been circulating in Subir that the VHP/ Bajrang Dal were planning to attack the school and the fathers at anytime. So the attack was not unexpected. After the attack, about 12 students have not returned to the school, both from Christian and non-Christian families, because their parents fear for their safety. The children love their school and seemed to be very happy there. A Std.V student named Yogesh of Borkhal village heard that his school had been destroyed. He refused to eat food for days till his father brought him to Subir and showed him that his school was more or less intact. Such is the love the children have for their school.

The aftermath of the attacks

Administrative changes: After this series of attacks on Christians in Gujarat and elsewhere, the BJP was under pressure from abroad and at home to reign in its erring fraternal organisations. The BJP state government moved fast with some cosmetic operations: (1) The controversial Collector, Bharat Joshi, who had made no bones about where his sympathies lay, was transferred out of the Dangs to some other plum posting to remove him from the line of fire; (2) a new post of District Superintendent of Police for the Dangs was created, as till then the Valsad DSP held charge for the Dangs too and one Mr. Manoj Shashidhar was appointed to the post; (3) the setting up of four more police stations in the Dangs was

proposed; (4) a Special Secretary for the Dangs was appointed.(S. Nanda); and (5) Peace committees consisting of Christian missionaries and Hindutva brigade leaders were set up. (6) On December 26, the Government moved in five companies of the State Reserve Police (approximately 500 policemen) into the Dangs. Three to four SRP personnel have since been stationed in every village where there is a church/prayer hall. The Christian tribals fear a fresh round of attacks once the SRP is withdrawn.

Fact finding exercises by the BJP government and the Opposition leaders: The BJP Government at the Centre sent a fact finding team consisting of M B

The Prime Minister was accompanied on his visit by one of the main people behind the attacks

Kaushal, Special Home Secretary, and Sandeep Bagchi, the Joint Home Secretary, to assess the situation in the Dangs and report back to the Government. This team did not deign to visit the Dangs or even to meet affected people before returning with their ‘report’ to Delhi, giving the Keshubhai Patel ministry a clean chit.

Several Opposition leaders also visited the Dangs and commiserated with the affected people : 1. Deve Gowda and Ram Vilas Paswan ; 2. an all-India CPI and CPM delegation; 3. Sonia Gandhi; 4. Shankarsinh Waghela, former CM of Gujarat; 5. Ramdas Athavale of the RPI; 6. some ministers from the Punjab Akali Dal ministry; 7. Laloo Prasad Yadav.

By far the most important was the Prime Minister’s visit, of course. He visited Deep Darshan School, the Subir School and Moolchand village where the church was burnt down. At the Deep Darshan School, he wanted to know from the sisters why they had not cleaned up the rubble from the attack as yet, and instead of commiserating with them , firmly pulled up the Superior there for talking too much to the Press about the attacks by saying “Somewhere you have to draw the line”. The Christian delegation

was permitted to meet the Prime Minister and present a memorandum. He also received a score of memorandums from the local VHP, Bajrang Dal and HJM. throughout his visit, the PM was accompanied by the local President of the VHP, the exterrnee from Bombay, Pradeep Sambhaji Patil who has been one of the main people behind the attacks on Christians in the area. Patil was in fact seated next to the PM during his press meet! The PM claimed that the attacks on Christians had been unduly exaggerated and thus gave a spurt to a new round of attacks on churches: on January 10, just after Vajpayee's visit, an unsuccessful attempt was made to burn down the prayer hall at Dhuda village and on the next day, another such attempt was made on the church in Lahancharia village.

Of all the memorandums he received, the PM paid the most heed to the one given to him by two Gandhians of the area — Ghelubhai Naik and Chotubhai Vasava, who run a couple of ashrams and a school in the Dangs, who had claimed that conversions to Christianity are at the root of the problem in the Dangs and hence called upon the PM to do something about it. This was all that the PM needed — he immediately called for a “national debate on conversions” and hinted at an amendment to the constitutional right to propagate religion. “For 50 years we have followed the Constitution, but in 1998 the incidents in the Dangs have brought the issue of conversion to the fore”, he opined. Ghelubhai Naik is the younger brother of Chotubhai Naik, who was instrumental in including Dangs as a part of the Gujarat state and in establishing the control of the Forest Department over the majority of the land of the Dangs in the early 1960s. Ghelubhai Naik runs an ashram, and the team heard allegations that he is part of a group of Sarvodayees who maintain bogus accounts in order to get State funding. Other noted Gandhians of Gujarat do not see eye to eye with Ghelubhai Naik and co. Narayan Desai (the son of M K Gandhi's personal secretary Mahadev Desai) and his daughter, Uma, along with Indukumar Jani, the editor of

Naya Marg, publicly stated that it was wrong to raise the issue of conversions at this critical juncture when the Christians are facing serious attacks.

The Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) operating in South Gujarat like the Vedchhi Seva Samiti led by Ashok Choudhary and the CETU led by Achyut Yagnik term the incidents a communal problem and do not wish to get involved in the issue. Thus they do not condemn the activities of the VHP and the Bajrang Dal and prefer to maintain a safe silence.

Forced ‘reconversions’

“I feel it is rather ironic that there is a call for a debate on conversions, when the maximum amount of conversions today are being conducted by the RSS and the VHP among the tribals.” — Historian Romila Thapar

“The Dang tribals are reconverting and within a month not a single Christian family will be left to be reconverted there.” — Swami Aseemanand, at a ‘re-conversion’ rally on January 5, 1999 in Peth, Nasik District where 37 tribals embraced Hinduism; quoted in the *Indian Express*, 6/1/99.

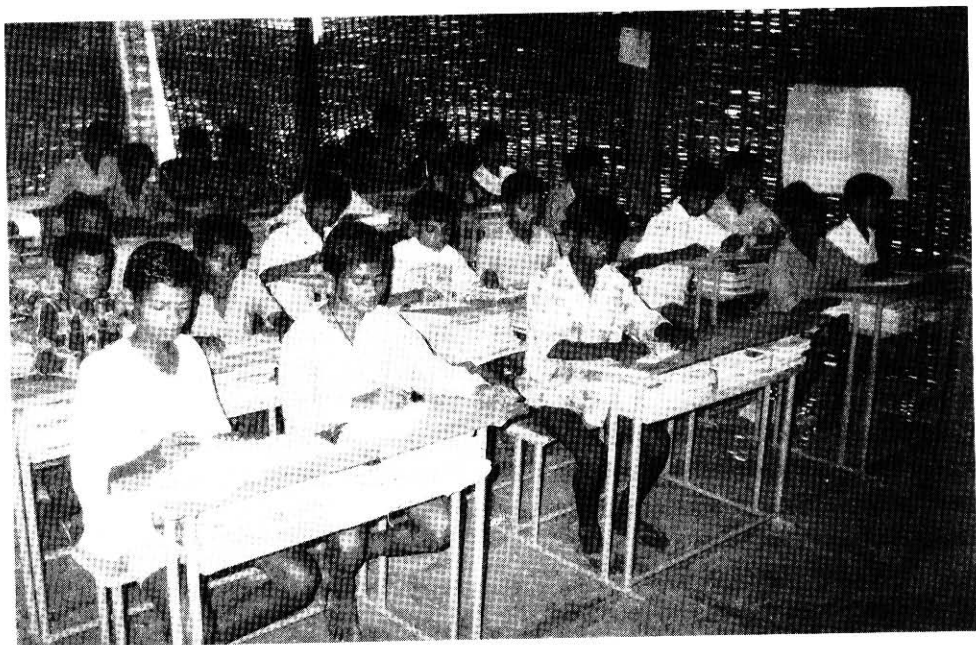
At the Dharma Sansad held by the VHP at Ahmedabad in early February this year, the VHP leaders claimed that 20,000 tribals had ‘reconverted’ to Hinduism in the Dangs. First of all, even if the tribals have embraced Hinduism, it cannot be called a reconversion because they were not Hindus in the first place. Secondly, this figure of 20,000 is grossly exaggerated — the claim of 1,500 of the local VHP leaders seems nearer the truth. And lastly, and most importantly, the overwhelming majority of these so-called reconversions have been anything but voluntary and most of those so converted still profess the Christian faith.

The reign of terror spread throughout the Dangs by the series of attacks on prayer halls and on Christians from Christmas day onwards unnerved the

Christian tribals and made them terribly insecure in their native villages. Taking advantage of this atmosphere, the VHP and Bajrang Dal allegedly offered local supporters a sum of Rs.500 for every Christian tribal they got for their reconversion exercise. So, VHP activists assisted by locals went to the houses of Christian tribals and threatened them with dire consequences unless they got ready to be reconverted. Some tribals held out, staunchly risking much, but some found it more expedient to agree, not out of any conviction but out of fear of the consequences.

Nathubhai Gangaji Bairham of Nactyanvath village was one of those who agreed out of fear:

“On January 29, a whole group of my co-villagers came to my door and asked me to come with them in some jeeps which were waiting outside. They said if I did not go with them and change my religion, they would break down my house, just as they broke down the church which is next to my house. Out of sheer fear, I and 11 other Christians went with them to the jeeps. In the jeeps we found some other tribals who we knew to be non-Christians, but who were being made to pose as Christians ready for reconversion! We were taken to Unai in Valsad district where there is a natural hot spring. We were made to take a dip in this hot spring - they said it was a “*shudhikaran*”. After that we were all taken to the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram at Waghahi where we were fed a meal. There each of us was given a laminated photo of Hanuman



Classroom at Subir

with “*Garva se kaho hum Hindu hai*” inscribed on it, a small locket of Hanuman on a piece of black string and a copy of the Hanuman Chalisa. (Nathubhai only too happily parted with copies of these objects.) We were told to worship these objects from now on. Then we were brought back to our village.

“I continue to be a practising Christian like so many others who were thus forcibly ‘reconverted’. These Hanuman pictures are of no use to me, take all of them. (At this point other members of his family brought their share of Hanuman pictures and lockets to give to the team.) Some other Christians and I went to clean the rubble near the church which was destroyed in order to make it fit to be rebuilt soon, but the supporters of the VHP came and stopped us. When we complained about this to the local posse of SRP stationed in our village, they told us: Now that you have reconverted, why do you need the church? But we live in fear of reprisal any moment.”

After the team had finished interviewing Nathubhai and his neighbours and taking pictures of the broken

down church, a young woman crept up stealthily to Nathubhai and whispered something, looking very afraid. It seems she had brought the news that the VHP local supporters were planning to attack Nathubhai's house that night after seeing that he had been talking to outsiders like us. Such is the terror with which the Christian tribals have to live every day.

In late January and early February, Christian adivasis in several villages each received an identical anonymous letter by post. The letter is a xerox of an original written by hand with a felt pen. The English translation of the original Gujarati letter is as follows :

"WARNING

Presently the Christians of Dangs district have been conspiring to convert innocent and poor Hindu adivasis to Christianity by showing various allurements. They are conspiring to break the nation by creating divisions in each and every house. Even the Government is concerned about the Dangs becoming another Nagaland through conversions. The Christians of Dangs are producing bogus tribal certificates through which they are claiming various rights and benefits such as the right to get wood for house construction (mafi card), benefits of ownership of trees on private land (*maalki hakk*), various subsidies, free education, scholarships. The Government is planning to stop giving these rights and benefits and put an end to such fraudulent practices after the next elections. There is time even now. Realise! Realise! Purify yourself through yagna and become a Hindu. Otherwise you will regret later. One who does not understand is a fool. May God give wisdom to such innocent adivasis.

Jai Hind and Vande Mataram from
a Devotee of the Truth"

This anonymous letter has confused many Christian adivasis for it predicts the shape of things to come.

There is no doubt that it has been sent by the members of the Hindutva brigade, but the people suspect the complicity of the State in

supplying these Hindutvawadis with the names and addresses of the Christian tribals in every village. Mangubhai Patel, the Social Welfare Minister in the Gujarat government, sent a letter to the DSP in November asking him to make a survey of the number of Christians in every village of the Dangs as well as a survey of how many churches, authorised and unauthorised, there were in the Dangs. Accordingly, the DSP issued a circular to the Ahwa and Waghai police stations to conduct this survey. The police, in turn, sent a questionnaire to each of the sarpanchs who conducted the survey and returned the findings to the government. The tribals suspect that the Hindutvawadis got their names and addresses from the government as a result of their survey. While the Gujarat government was forced to withdraw the circular as a result of a High Court petition, it gives evidence of the intentions of the Gujarat government.

People suspect the Government supplied Hindutvawadis with Christians' names and addresses

Long-term impact of the attacks

Artificial divisions amongst the tribals

The VHP makes it out that there is an ongoing tussle between Christian adivasis and Hindu adivasis. But the reality is that the tensions are a result of attacks on the Christian tribals by the VHP and Bajrang Dal goons. The non-Christian tribals' involvement in the attacks has been marginal. Yet because of the hate campaign conducted against the Christians by the VHP and Bajrang Dal, tensions have cropped up among the villagers which never existed before and

which are not rooted in any material basis. These tensions will erode the unity among the tribals and impede their struggles against the domination of the Forest Department officials vis-à-vis their rights over the land and forest produce.

Impediments in the working of the gram sabhas

As regards the establishment of an autonomous council for tribal areas under Schedule VI of the Constitution, the Bhuria Committee had made certain recommendations, some of which have been accepted by the Gujarat government as regards the Dangs. Under this, the gram sabha (which is like a general body of all the people who are eligible to vote in the village) will have certain wide ranging powers : 1) control over the panchayat of the village; 2) ownership rights over minor forest produce like stones, sand, silt, etc. ; 3) right to approve the budget of the panchayat; 4) control over social department employees like the teachers, the talathi, the gram sevak, etc.; 5) control as to who will be the beneficiaries of the different government schemes; 6) power to decide whether there will be prohibition in the village or not(!); 7) power to solve and settle minor disputes between villagers, though serious offences must be handled by the police; 8) preservation of tribal culture. If these sweeping powers are to be exercised effectively by the gram sabha, then must be a high level of consciousness and unity among the tribals. The Gujarat government has already proclaimed that the Bhuria Committee recommendations be implemented. But the prevailing tensions between the tribals on basis of religion will simply make this legislation another tool for the Sangh Parivar to oppress Christians.

Conclusions

1. There are no forced conversions to Christianity in the Dangs.
2. There are, on the contrary, forced conversions of Christian tribals to Hinduism, euphemistically termed

‘reconversions’.

3. No significant tensions existed between non-Christian and Christian tribals till the entry of the VHP organisers three years ago. This was because the Dangi tribals identity of belonging to a particular tribe, whether it be the Bhils, Kokane, Gavits, or others, is primary and predominant. The tribal’s religious identity is secondary to this. We found several instances of intermarriage within a tribe, regardless of religion, though there is little or no evidence of intermarriage between different tribes, even among the Christians.

4. There exists no material basis for tensions to arise between Christian and non-Christian tribals because their social and economic background is identical. Tensions have actually been engineered from without by communal propaganda and mobilisation by the VHP organiser Swami Aseemanand and others as a part of a grand national design of creating a Hindu identity among the tribals here which never existed so far. This is in order (1) to engineer communal disturbances to divert the attention of the locals and the rest of the country’s toiling masses from their burning questions of unemployment and price rise into destructive communalism, and (2) to woo the tribals as a potential vote bank for the BJP so that it can come to power without having to depend on it numerous allies. (The Dangs has always elected Congress candidates — the present MLA is also a Congressman.)

5. In their design of communalising the social milieu of the Dangs, the RSS and its affiliates have been supported, sometimes covertly, sometimes openly, by the State authorities. For example, the action of the then Collector and police authorities to give permission for the anti-Christian rally on Christmas day last year despite indications of the attacks to come smacks of open collusion with the Hindutvawadis. (The Collector demonstrated openly where his sympathies lay by attending that rally and allowing him-

self to be felicitated there.) The public statements made by the Gujarat CM and the PM playing down the attacks as insignificant and isolated, thus covertly encouraging the Hindutva forces to continue their retrograde activities, indicates the support of the state and Central government to such forces. The

way the police handled the Hindutvawadi rallies, morchas, meetings with such indulgence is a sharp departure from how they handle the meetings and activities of secular organisations like the Dangi Mazdoor Union or the Lok Adhikar Sangh.*

* The Dangi Mazdoor Union had planned to have an activists' training meeting on the rights of tribals vis-a-vis the Forest department at the Gandabhai Ashram Hall run by local Gandhians, and they had printed and circulated a pamphlet regarding this. One of these leaflets fell into the hands of the Forest Department who then approached the Gandhians and instructed them not to give out their hall to 'Naxalites' for meetings. The Gandhians then told the organisers of the meeting that it could not be held in their hall, hence the said meeting had to be cancelled. Even so, on the day of the meeting, two truckloads of police were parked outside the venue.

An Adivasi Conference was held sometime back in Khatad village which was to be addressed by a Janata Dal MLA with a reputation for being militant. A leaflet was published for the occasion in which the Pokhran explosion was condemned and tribal self-rule was asked for. The Dy.SP summoned the leading tribals and threatened them with dire consequences if they went ahead with the meeting. About six persons were arrested a day before the meeting under Section 151 of the Criminal Procedure Code (24 hours' preventive detention). But despite the State's efforts to disrupt the conference, it was held.

Appendix I **Text of circular sent by the Gujarat director of police (intelligence)** **to police commissioners and DSPs in Gujarat**

To: All DSPs and Police Commissioners of Gujarat State Police

For information: Police Ahmedabad; IGPs of all Ranges (Thru: DS.Pol. Control)

From: Director of Police (Intelligence), Gujarat State, Ahmedabad.

Ref. No. D.2: Hindu-Christi/83/99 Date 02.02.1999 (1058)

DETAILS:

Presently, the incidents of class-conflicts between Hindus and Christians are increasing very much. It is very necessary to stop these activities.

In your District:

- 1) What is the total population of Christians?
- 2) Which all places do they live in?
- 3) At which places are their missionaries located? (along with number and name)
- 4) They are encouraged by which foreign countries?
- 5) From which foreign countries and how much

amount of grant do they get? How do they make use of it?

- 6) Population of Christians in your district, taluka-wise and village-wise. You are requested to give information about the name, address and telephone numbers of their main leaders.
- 7) In the last five years, how many cases of class-wars between Hindus and Christians have been registered in your district? What was their result in the court?
- 8) How many Christians are involved and in which all offences? You are requested to certainly send the name, address and the case registration number of the offender along with their dossiers.
- 9) In your districts what type of trickery is being used by the Christian Missionaries defilement activities? (sic) How are they increasing it?
- 10) How many and what type of vehicles do they possess? You are requested to inform the number of the vehicles.
- 11) Amongst them, how many have got what all types of licenses for keeping weapons? When were these licenses issued to them?
- 12) What all arrangements have been made by you for their security? You are requested to inform the number and the approximately amount of expenses incurred after (sic) their security.

13) You are requested to send the dossiers of all such Christians who are involved in criminal activities and having criminal attitude. (sic)"

The circular ends with: "NOTE: You are kindly requested to send the above information after com-

pleting the necessary procedures before 15/2/99."

— as reproduced in the *Asian Age*, February 12, 1999. A similar circular was later issued by the Gujarat police regarding Muslims.

Appendix II

"Denials apart, HJM is very much a Sangh outfit"

— excerpts from an article by Basant Rawat, *Indian Express*, 4/1/99

"VHP and BJP leaders have been involved in the activities of the (Hindu Jagran) Manch, which surfaced mysteriously in south Gujarat early last year. They helped in organising and also participated in the rallies held in Ahwa and other parts in the Dangs on Christmas Day. Among them were office-bearers of these organisations and at least one MLA. They say they worked with the Manch because they have a common objective.

"Notwithstanding the denials emanating from Delhi, Gujarat Youth BJP vice-president Devarshibhai Joshi said the Manch is an outfit of the VHP, working in tribal areas. It is an umbrella organisation of all those attracted to Hindutva, Joshi said, adding, significantly, 'Almost every one of its members holds dual membership.'

Naturally, therefore, activists of the VHP, BJP and other Sangh Parivar outfits were present in the HJM

rallies at Tokarwa, Dolarwa, Vyara and Ahwa.

Among those at Tokarwa was BJP MLA from Bardoli Rajanikant Rajwadi. 'I was just looking after the arrangements', he said, trying to absolve himself of any links. Rajwadi, who is national secretary of the Adivasi Morcha of the BJP, said, 'HJM is a separate organisation, but, ideologically, we are one and we have the same objective'. Also present at Dolarwa was VHP district vice-president Subhas Takkar (Rajkotwala). He told this reporter that he had been in the RSS for 25 years. 'The RSS asked me to work for the VHP so I am in the VHP. Tomorrow, I may be asked to work for some other organisation. The RSS is the parent body; the VHP, Bajrang Dal and HJM are its branches', he said.

The police are still looking for Dangs district BJP president Ramesh Chaudhury and VHP president Pradip Patil in connection with the incidents in Ahwa, Dangs. They had not only participated in the rally, but had allegedly spearheaded the mob that threw stones at Deep Darshan High School on Christmas Day.

III. Sangh Parivar Campaign Comes to Nashik

— *Report from Sadadpada and Bhuvan, Peth taluka, Nashik district, Maharashtra.*

Dates of visits: February 6-7 and 19-20, 1998.

The team met: Nashik journalists; the Deputy Superintendent of Police (Peth); the Resident District Collector; Mrs. Jepraj of the Church of North India; tribal Christians (Chintaman Bhosare, Kushabh Bhosare and a group of five others); and tribal “Hindus” (Devram Jadhav, Lahanu Jadhav, Jagan and 10 others); Gangubai, police-patil of Kayre-Sadapada; and a group of about 25 tribals (both Christians and “Hindus”) of Hanumanpada, Bhuvan village; and other sources with a detailed knowledge of the region.

Peth taluka

Peth taluka has a total population of 1,27,000, of which *only 500 are Christians*. It is mainly tribal populated (Warli, Mahadev Koli and Kokana) and has a small pocket of Muslims. It is a hilly region bordering Maharashtra and Gujarat, i.e. the southern side of the Dangs. Peth town is located 60 kms from Nasik and about 35 kms from Vapi. There are only four churches in the whole of Peth taluka — Harsul, Bordha, Kayre-Sadadpada and Hanumanpada of Bhuvan village. Of these, the team visited Kayre-Sadadpada, which is located 11 kms from Peth town and Hanumanpada, seven kms from Peth town. State transport buses ply to both these

villages only once or twice a day. Both villages are 100 per cent tribal populated.

Due to lack of irrigation facilities, the tribals depend on rain and can cultivate only one crop in the entire year. Hence, the rest of the year they have to move out of the village finding jobs in grass-cutting, quarrying, brick-kilns, road construction, and as agricultural labourers in vineyards.

Traditional religion : The tribals are mainly animists worshipping *Dongardev* (mountain god), *Vaghdev* (tiger god), *Kuldev* (god of lineage) and *Gaondevi* (village goddess) and sacrifice animals to appease them. They have no concept of any defined image of any deity. Stones of different shapes and sizes smeared with vermilion represent deities.

Brief political scenario: Till recently, only two parliamentary parties have had a substantial presence in Peth — the CPI (M) and the Congress (I). For several years the CPI (M) used to win the Assembly seat. However, the local CPI(M) MLA lost his seat to his Congress (I) rival in recent years. (Even after the incident at Kayre-Sadadpada, none of the CPI (M) leadership or party cadre visited the area. The local MP and MLA of the Congress (I) have both visited the area and organised a meeting where they “promised to bring back peace”.) Elections here are reportedly accompanied with incidents of bribing and kidnapping.

History of tribal resistance in Peth

Peth has a rich history of tribal resistance against a variety of exploiters and intruders, be they landlords, money lenders or rulers. Till recently Dangs (Gujarat) was one kingdom and Peth and Dharmapur together constituted another. The earliest conquerors here were the Marathas. When Shivaji planned the loot of Surat, he used the route from Peth via the Dangs. Though the then tribal king had been bought over by Shivaji, the tribals resisted him. After successfully over-running the Peth area, Shivaji replaced the tribal king with his representative. Subsequently, until the arrival of the British on the scene, Peth-Dharmapur was ruled by the Marathas, though small and large struggles against the rulers were carried out by the tribals.

During the British period two Warli brothers, Raghoji and Bhagoji were publicly hanged for leading a rebellion against the British. Their wives too were tortured and hanged. The first-ever strike in the region took place during the British period, with road construction workers (*maeel begari*) going on strike because they were denied a holiday for the Holi festival.

A Mahadev Koli rebel popularly called Nana Farari (Nana the absconder) still lives in Peth folklore. Having struggled against the British, Nana Farari continued his rebellion after 1947 as well. He was famous for looting grain hoarders and distributing the grain among the tribals. To punish the hoarders, who were mainly Telis, Parsis and Vanis, Farari was known to cut off their noses and ears. Stories of his courage and militancy are recounted in the towns of Dharmapur, Surgana and Harsul. Farari was eventually killed in a staged 'encounter' by the police.

In recent years, for about six to seven years, adivasis of Peth and Dindori talukas of Nashik conducted some organised struggles on questions such as their forest plots and wages for road construction. The future of secular struggles in the region will face a threat from the new communal activities and organisations in the region.

Evidence of Shiv Sena/Sangh Parivar influence is noticed only since 1997, when organisations like the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (known in Dangs as the Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra) and Dharma Raksha Samiti were promoted.

For a period of six to seven years, an organisation known as the Adivasi Kisan Shetmajoor Sanghatana (AKSS) had been organising the tribals in Peth and the adjoining taluka Dindori on their economic issues, such as permanent pattas for forest plots and proper wages for road construction work. To weed out this organisation, it is reported that a few of the local political leaders had certain activists associated with the AKSS arrested in 1998. They were kept in custody under one charge or another for several months. This juncture coincides with the growth of the SS-Sangh Parivar influence in the area.

The story of Kayre-Sadadpada:

Kayre-Sadadpada has a total of 110 families, who belong to Warli, Mahadev Koli and Kokana tribes. In 1985, Arthur Jepraj of the Church of North India (Protestant Church) was invited by one Sitaram Mahale, who was suffering from a stomach ailment, to cure him through prayers. Slowly more and more tribal families started attending these prayer meetings and to date only 16 families have embraced Christianity. From 1987, a make-shift structure was used for the prayer meetings, which was made into a proper church (concrete structure) in 1997 on land donated by Chintaman Bhosare, who was given training as a pastor. Contributions in terms of labour and money were made by the 16 families themselves.

Yet, intermarrying between the Christians and non-converts continued within the respective tribes. The Christians also continued contributing towards all the traditional festivals like the *Vaghdev* festival and animal sacrifices. Both Christians and non-converts used to cook together at all weddings. According to Mrs. Jepraj, in December, 1997, the Christians cooked food and both Christians and non-converts

ate together to celebrate Christmas. Both groups co-existed in harmony: there are instances where one brother has converted to Christianity while others have not.

In 1997, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (one of the outfits of VHP) made its entry into Kayre-Sadadpada by offering idols of Hanuman to the Christians. According to Kushabh Bhosare, a tribal Christian, the VKA activists told them: “Why do you worship ‘God’? Instead place these Hanuman idols in your houses.” The Christians refused to accept the idols. Later, the VKA proposed to start a dispensary (although the village has a Government doctor visiting the already existing dispensary twice or thrice every week) and a balwadi, even though the village already had an anganwadi and a primary school. Though the dispensary was never started, the VKA ran a balwadi with the help of two local girls for about a year and closed it abruptly in 1998. According to Devram Jadhav, who spoke to the team on behalf of the “Hindu” tribals of the village, “The main aim of the balwadi was to give sanskar to our children”. By this time, the “Hindus” stopped accepting contributions of Christian families to traditional festivals, which were generally Rs. 25-30.

Build-up of tension:

In May 1998, both groups were cooking together at a “Hindu” wedding. Suddenly a few “Hindu” tribals entered the scene and dragged the Christians out of the make-shift kitchen saying they would not eat food cooked by the Christians. In the same month, the “Hindu” tribals took a decision along with the activists of the VKA to build a concrete structure for an old Hanuman temple of the village by getting each family to contribute Rs. 300. Three to four Christian families gave their contribution whereas the others refused, saying that their earlier contributions to traditional festivals had been refused, so why were

they now being asked for contributing towards the building of the temple. According to Kushabh Bhosare, the “Hindus” started harassing the Christians by knocking on their doors in the middle of the night demanding contributions. The Christians retaliated by not inviting the “Hindus” to a *maagni* (engagement) ceremony. Immediately threats to demolish the church began. This added to the tensions further.

The Kayre-Sadadpada incident:

According to sources, the Sangh Parivar (Maharashtra) held an inner circle meet of 125 of its select cadre at Nasik on October 10-11, 1998, where they discussed the issues of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and Christian missionaries as proving to be obstacles in the fulfillment of their “dream” of establishing a Hindu Rashtra. This meeting was followed

by another meeting of the Shiv Sena on October 15 at Peth town to observe the *Bhagwa Saptah* (Saffron Week). Many tribals from Kayre-Sadadpada attended this meeting. After going back to the village, they had a meeting of their own till late at night.

The next morning (October 16) at 7:30, a mob of about 150 locals, including women and children armed with sticks, iron rods and other implements stormed into the houses of Kushabh Bhosare, Chintaman Bhosare and the other Christian families and dragged them out demanding that they offer their obeisance to Hanuman. When they refused to do this, they were beaten up and then beaten with sticks till two of them fainted. Even those who had contributed for the building of the Hanuman temple were not spared. Kashinath Bhosare was stabbed thrice in his back. Chintaman was asked to bow down before the Hanuman idol. He refused again. He was then made to stand with his arms stretched (like a crucifix) and the mob started beating him saying “This is how your God in the church looks”. They continued beating him with sticks till he finally col-

**He was then made to
stand with his arms
stretched like a crucifix.
They said “This is how
your God in the
church looks”**

lapsed. Some of the men who were frightened ran into the forest seeking shelter. Chintaman's children ran to the highway and took a lift in a vehicle to go to Peth town and reported the matter to the police.

By this time, the mob had dragged some of the women to the Hanuman temple. Kushabh's family was pushed into the house and locked in from the outside. The mob then turned their attention towards the church and started demolishing it. By 10:30 am, when the police reached the spot, the front portion of the church had been razed to the ground.

According to eye-witnesses, the police snatched the implements out of people's hands but no arrests were made.

The aftermath:

Three people had to be hospitalised for a week. Yet the police claimed that there were only minor injuries. When asked why no arrests were made for a week, a top police official said that they had to make investigations before arresting anybody. (Taking away weapons and other implements out of the rioters' hands by the police themselves is not evidence enough to make an arrest!) Christian women who spoke to the team said, "We were scared of going to work alone because of repeated threats from them to strip us."

A week after the incident, 26 persons were arrested, produced before the Magistrate the next day and let off on bail immediately. According to the Christian tribals, those persons came back with more militancy. The day after they returned to the village, the "Hindus" gathered in large numbers and planted saffron flags on each of their homes shouting slogans "*Yeshu mela; Ram jeevant jhaala!*" "*Sriramacha vijay aso!*" (Christ is dead; Ram is alive! Victory to Sriram!) and threatened to demolish not only the Sadadpada church completely but also the one in Bordha vil-

lage.

The repercussions of the incident are being felt in other parts of the district as well. According to a

Roman Catholic nun who runs a women's self-help group in Dindori taluka, many women stopped attending their meetings because of propaganda that they would be forced to convert to Christianity.

On November 3, 1998, Arthur Jepraj of CNI organised a peace march in Nasik city which was attended by a few thousand tribals,

Roman Catholics of Nasik district and a maulana who wished to extend solidarity to the Christians. A delegation met the District Collector of Nasik and urged him to bring back peace to the area.

On November 5 1998, the Dharma Raksha Samiti (another outfit of the VHP) held a public meeting at Peth town where they gave an ultimatum to Christians "from outside" to leave the area by March 31, 1999.

"Reconversions" or use of force?

Devram and Lahanu Jadhav told the team that on Mahashivaratri day (February 14, 1999) 29 tribals including women and children (all non-Christians) from Kayre-Sadadpada were taken to Unnai in the Dangs by Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram activists where they took a dip in the hot springs, after which they were taken to the temple where tilak or vermilion was applied on their foreheads — thus they became "Hindus". In all 71 tribals were made to go through this ritual.

The immediate consequences of these "re-conversions" became visible in Kayre-Sadadpada within two days. On February 16, tension built up in the village over the issue of observing Tuesday (which is the day of the tribal deity Mauli) as the "official"

In all 71 tribals were made to go through a 're-conversion' ritual

weekly off in the area. The non-Christians thus prevented a land survey from being carried out even though the date had been announced in advance and labourers from many neighbouring villages and hamlets had gathered for work. People were heard saying, "Why this change of holiday now when we have always worked on Tuesdays?" Because of the large presence of the police and the SRP in the village a physical clash was averted.

Conversation of the "Hindu" tribals with the team:

When the team met the "Hindu" tribal group (Devram Jadhav, Lahanu Jadhav, Jagan and others) in the presence of about 10 SRP and two policemen of Peth police station on February 20, they vociferously reiterated their stand about not allowing any more services or prayer meetings and further vowed to pull down the rest of the church structure because they made them "appear in a court of law" (for demolishing the church). Having had his say Jagan walked out. The team continued conversing with the rest of the group on the need for unity of all tribals in the village on other pressing problems like water for drinking and irrigation, land, etc. To these questions they replied, "All else will happen later. First let them come back to our religion." When the team pointed out further that after all, those whom they attacked were their brothers and other relatives Devram said, "They are not *mool* adivasis anymore. They have accepted a foreign religion so let them go to that country."

The team then met the newly appointed woman police-patil of the village, Gangubai, who only expressed helplessness regarding bringing back "normalcy", saying she has tried to bring the two groups together on two occasions, but without success.

The role of Awaare Guruji:

Awaare Guruji is a retired tribal school teacher from Junoti village about 7 kms from Peth town, who dispenses herbal medicines. Knowing the importance of schoolteachers and medicinemen in tribal areas, the VHP has consciously chosen him as the Convenor of the Dharma Raksha Samiti of the area. According to reliable sources who did not want to be named, it is through Awaare Guruji that the VHP makes contacts in the remote villages of Peth taluka in the name of Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram for their propaganda by creating core-groups from among the tribals themselves. He also takes the tribals to Unnai and other places for conversions or re-conversions. The team made a special effort to meet Awaare Guruji

by going to his village Junoti, where they were told by his family members that once he leaves the house he returns only after two or three weeks and they are not aware of his whereabouts. On returning to his Peth town office, from where he also dispenses medicines, the team was given the address and telephone number of the office of the Vanvasi

Kalyan Ashram in Nashik city, where too he was not contactable.

**"They have accepted
a foreign religion
so let them go
to that country"**

Meetings with police officials in Nashik:

On February 19, 1999 the team met the Deputy Superintendent of Police (Peth), K.A. Kanse at his office in Nashik city. Kanse said that since his boss was not in the office, he was not authorised to speak to the team but spoke in general terms. He said that there is tension due to the entry of a foreign religion into the village and their preachers believe that their God is superior. He further added that the adivasis traditionally worship Mauli. The tension started because "there is entry of outside parties from both sides". About the attack Kanse said, "Their aim was not to kill people. A mob of 100 could have easily killed three or four. Their aim was to attack the church because they were angry." When asked what action

had been taken against those who demolished the church he said, "Only the front portion of the church has been broken, not the entire structure." The team asked why nobody was arrested for almost a week after the incident when the demolition was on when the police reached the village, Kanse said, "We had to make our investigations". About the charges levelled against Gopal Jadhav (the main accused) and 25 others, he said vaguely, "Only minor injuries (were inflicted). Maybe falling under sections 143, 147 and so on." When the team asked what the police had done after the incident, Kanse said, "We have made bandobast in all villages where there are churches. But, people must follow the customs of the village, even the NHRC has been saying this. We are now trying to hold some meetings in the village to bring the people together." When asked pointedly whether the police had any complaints of forced conversions, Kanse said, "So far we have not received any complaints."

The team then met the Resident District Collector (Rural), Omprakash Deshmukh who refused to divulge any information because he had no orders from his "Nashik boss" was not in station. When asked what administrative steps had been taken, he said that the SDM and the Collector had reached the spot immediately and held a peace meeting with the villagers and gave an assurance that such incidents would not be repeated and promised police protection. When asked whether there are any forced conversions, Deshmukh said, "Can't say whether it is voluntary or involuntary".

Hanumantpada, Bhuvan village:

Situated about 10 kms from Peth town down into the valley is Hanumantpada of Bhuvan village, which is accessible by the state transport bus only once a day. Of the 70 households in this hamlet, about 20 families are Christian. A small field measuring about 100 meters divides the Christian settlement from the

others. The village used to be CPI(M)-dominated. According to reliable sources working in the area, around 1995-96, disgruntled youth of the village brought in the Shiv Sena to oust the village leadership from the hands of the older generation. Though the elders managed to bring down the board of Shiv Sena, some communal sentiments crept into the village. A dispute was raised on the issue of contributions to the *Vaghdev* festival. The Christians had expressed their inability to contribute towards the festival because it coincides with the Christmas season and hence their expenses are doubled. This led to a physical clash between the Christian and non-Christian tribals who are also related to each other

by blood or through marriage. Immediately after the clash, the non-Christian tribal households had the direction of the main doors to their houses changed so that they would not face the Christian settlement.

The team visited Hanumantpada on February 7, 1999 in order to speak to the people about tensions prevailing in Peth taluka. There was a po-

lice posse with a wireless van present in the hamlet who were already aware of the team's visit through their own sources. Though 35-40 persons were gathered near the church, they all insisted that nothing had happened in their village and refused to speak any further. The team could feel the tension in the air and also witnessed a huge new saffron flag atop a house facing the Christian settlement. The team also observed a well having been built recently close to the Christian settlement even though there was a large well in the main hamlet. When one of the team members surreptitiously inquired with one of the Christian women about the newly constructed well, the team was told that the well was constructed about a year and a half ago and only Christians draw water from that well. No further questions were answered.

**"Only the front portion
of the church was broken,
not the entire structure"**

-- Dy. SP, Peth



The church at Kayre-Sadadpada after the attack

Tribal welfare not on the agenda

The tension prevailing throughout the area today started with the entry of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) in 1997. Though the name portrays welfare as its main aim, the VKA has not taken up any real issue affecting the lives of the tribals like water, irrigation, land or employment. In Kayre-Sadadpada, there are only two wells. One well had already dried up before the team visited the hamlet, while the other was to dry up any day soon after. Women have to walk one and a half to two kms every day to fetch drinking water. In both these villages (Kayre-Sadadpada and Bhuvan) the tribals cultivate only one crop a year due to lack of irrigation facilities. The rest of the year the tribals are at the mercy of quarry contractors who pay them just Rs. 100 for cutting and loading a tractorful of stones which takes five to six persons a full day (i.e. Rs. 15-20 per person per day); or they have to toil for rich farmers of

vineyards where they work as daily wage-earners on meagre wages.

The constructed (pucca) road ends at Peth town. The rest of the villages are connected by kaccha roads which are in poor condition. The team was surprised to find some recently constructed Hanuman temples, built with concrete, on the side of these roads. In Kayre-Sadadpada, a huge Hanuman temple is being constructed having a solid concrete foundation and large, thick columns and beams of teak wood, the expenses of which would be phenomenal. The statue of Hanuman stands in the centre of the incomplete temple structure covered with a maroon colored veil with a Nandi (bull) statue close-by.

A new value system is being inculcated among the tribals which is alien to the tribal culture — such as looking down on widows, imbibing *sanskars* (Hindu values) into their children, equating Christians with

foreigners, etc. The team observed that every non-Christian household they visited had its walls plastered with colourful calendar-art pictures of various Hindu deities as also that of Bharatmata, which stood in stark contrast with the traditional deities of the tribals which are black stones without any defined shapes.

The team could not speak to Arthur Jepraj, the preacher of Christianity in the area who runs a hostel for both Christian and non-Christian tribal boys who attend the local school in Peth town. When they met his wife, she was reluctant to speak to them out of fear of the authenticity of the team. Her main comment was, "The attackers had some backing, otherwise they would not do such a thing".

Even in the Christian households, calendar pictures of Christ on the Cross and Mary were seen. They appeared to be under tremendous fear of being attacked again at any time.

It does not seem credible that the arrogance, militancy and intolerance witnessed among the "Hindu" tribals could have arisen without outside influence and political backing. It is worth noting that the case filed against the culprits in the Sadadpada incident is weak, and no action has been taken against them to date.

The role of the police

The team met the Deputy Superintendent of Police (Dy.SP) Peth, at Nasik, and visited the Peth police station. In spite of the fact that the police had recorded the names and addresses of the team members and their purpose of the visit, plainclothes policemen followed them wherever they went in the area.

The police were non co-operative to the extent of not even telling the team under what sections the attackers were charged.

The team members got the impression that the police were deliberately playing down the whole incident and wanted to put the blame on both sides equally. "Entry of outside religion and outsiders from both sides", "preachers", "superiority attitude" — these were some of the terms used by the Dy. SP while trying to indicate the causes of the tension in the area. He disregarded the fact that the tension did not date to the entry of Arthur Jepraj, the Christian preacher, in 1985, but to the entry of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram in 1997.

The police seemed to be defending the accused themselves. Statements like "Their aim was not to injure people, but to attack the church", "Only minor injuries", "They have broken down only the front portion, not the entire church", from the police indicate a tolerant attitude towards the rioters.

The fact that the police did not make any arrest immediately, under the pretext of 'investigation' (though the rioters were caught red-handed with implements), and registered a weak case later, certainly give the impression that the police and the administration are not very serious in bringing the culprits to book. This will result in perpetuating a sense of fearlessness and renewed militancy in the VHP supporters while the tiny Christian minority will continue to live in fear and insecurity.

Postscript: Sangh Parivar conference

On January 5, the "Dharma Raksha Samiti" held a conference (a "Vishal Hindu Sammelan") in Peth, and gave Christian missionaries an ultimatum to wind up their activities, close their offices, and leave the tribal areas of the region by March 31, 1999. If they did not do so by that date, "stern action" would be taken against them. The Sammelan warned that these institutions will be responsible if "fights break out by mistake" after the expiry of the deadline. Samiti chief Janu Awaare, said that after the missionaries left, the Samiti would reconvert the tribals and

The police seemed to be defending the accused themselves

“return” them to the Hindu fold. “Swami” Aseem Anand, leader of the Sangh Parivar-affiliated Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, notorious for his role in the Gujarat incidents, also addressed the rally. He claimed that tribals in the Dangs who had converted to Christianity were “re-converting” to Hinduism and within a month not a single Christian family would be left to be re-converted. At the function, the Shankaracharya of Karveer Peeth, Vidyashankar Bharati, carried out a ceremony ‘reconverting’ 37 Christian tribals to Hinduism. He said: “Request them (the missionaries) once, twice, thrice and if they do not refrain from their activities, then take the next step.” Retaliation against “injustice” is perfectly justified, he added. “Hindus have the power to reduce the whole world to ashes. But the power is to be kept under control.”

On the same day as the rally, Maharashtra chief minister Manohar Joshi gave token assurances of protection to the Christian community. However, he said: “I will maintain that the forcible conversion of tribals to Christianity will not be allowed.” He added that he had received complaints from “some Hindu groups” (which he did not name) that the missionaries working in the area were forcibly converting tribals to Christianity.

In March 1999, the Sangh Parivar has floated one more front organisation in Peth taluka, the “Bharatiya Janseva Sansthan”, which is undertaking a propaganda drive in the poverty-ridden adivasi villages of the region. The Sansthan has brought out a pamphlet titled “Dharma”. Here are some samples of its messages: converted adivasis have gone on record saying “put cowdung on the *mulia* idol (a traditional adivasi deity) instead of *sindoor*”; the Australian missionary Staines used to entice innocent adivasis with liquor and meat; there are several police complaints against Father Staines; no church has been demolished in Dangs while 24 mandirs of Hanuman and Mahadev have been razed; the Christian population in Dangs was 400 in 1948, whereas today it is 40,000. And so on, and so forth. According to the villagers, the Sansthan members

come in Tata Sumos, distribute pamphlets and carry out their anti-Christian campaign. (*Asian Age*, 19/3/99)

Observations of the team:

The team visited Peth taluka twice in the month of February 1999. After visiting the villages and holding discussions with the tribals and the authorities, the team made the following observations.

1. The tension and conflict in Peth region is the result of a systematic campaign in the region by organisations affiliated to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad over the last two years. Neither in the material lives of the tribals nor in the relations between Hindus and Christians in earlier times is there any basis for such conflict.
2. There are no mass conversions in Peth; indeed, the total number of Christians in Peth is less than half a percentage point of the total population.
3. The police have not taken any serious action against the culprits in recent attacks, and in fact gave the team justifications for the attacks. The police were also mute spectators to the poisonous propaganda purveyed at Vishal Hindu Sammelan, including the open threats issued at the Sammelan to Christians. The minuscule Christian minority is under grave threat.
4. The Maharashtra government’s decision to allow the VHP to organise a blatantly communal and threatening rally in Peth, despite being requested by various organisations to deny permission, is further evidence of State support to the communal organisations.
5. The tensions being whipped up over this manufactured communal issue effectively divert from the burning economic issues of the adivasis of this region, who are denied security over their forest plots, face heavy debt burdens, and lack employment, decent wages, reliable water supply, health care, and proper roads.

IV. Criminal Gangs, Politicians, and the Jhabua Rape Case

Reactions to the shocking news of the rape of three nuns at Navapada, Jhabua District, M.P. in the early hours of September 23, 1998, differed widely. Christian organisations staged a silent protest on the streets of Bhopal. Around the country, democratic rights and civil liberties organisations and women's organisations protested the offence with rallies and press statements. Various parliamentary parties condemned the act. The Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister suggested that the Sangh Parivar might have been involved.

The Sangh Parivar responded in contradictory ways. Vishwa Hindu Parishad central secretary and former BJP MP B.L. 'Prem' Sharma said that the rape was the reaction of "patriotic youth" to conversions being carried out by Christian missionaries. At the same time other wings of the Sangh Parivar alleged that the rapists were linked to the Congress. And finally, the Union home minister himself alleged that many of the rapists were themselves Christians. This charge was repeated at the Bajrang Dal conference in Bombay in February 1999.

Thus it was not only the horrific nature of the offence, but the political reactions to it, that gave it national significance. Moreover, as crimes against Christians increased in other parts of the country, especially after November 1998, it became all the more necessary to investigate exactly what happened at Jhabua.

The following report of the incident is based on extensive interviews with villagers, public officials, police personnel, priests and nuns, whom the fact finding team met at Jhabua, Bagor, Navapada and the Mohankot. The team made two visits to the region, touring Ratlam, Mohankot, Ishgarh, and Jhabua on February 6 and 7, and Meghnagar, Jhabua, Bagor, Jamli, Navapada and Mohankot from March 14 to 16, 1999.

I. Sequence of events

September 22-23, 1998: At about 2 am, seven or eight adivasis of the tribal district of Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh, rang the door bell of the dispensary of the Catholic Mission at Nawapada, which is located 22 kilometres from Jhabua town. (Others, evidently, were waiting some distance away.) Four nuns reside at this dispensary, teach the children of Navapada and nearby hamlets such as Bhandaria and Barod, and also administer medication to the villagers. On hearing the door bell, the nuns looked out of their window to see who had come at that unusual hour. They saw the adivasis by the illumination of the tube light outside. One of the adivasis then imitated the sound of a child crying. When they asked what the matter was, the adivasis replied that a child was ill.

The nuns were suspicious and insisted that the adivasis should go across to the neighbouring Varode *fali* (hamlet) and bring a letter from the 'Father' or bring the watchman to identify them. The adivasis,

who were actually dacoits, promptly replied that the priest was not available. Then the nuns said that unless they brought Veronica, a dispensary helper from Bhandariya *fali* to identify them, they would not open the door or hand over the medicines. On hearing this, the dacoits, began to break the locks on the main door. One of the sisters then climbed to the terrace and began shouting for help. She also blew whistles for help. (Whistles are usually blown to chase animals from the fields; this may be why no one responded. At night a whistle blown from the nuns' house can be heard by people both in Bhandaria *fali* and Varode *fali*. On this fateful night people did not respond to the whistle.) At this point, the dacoits pelted her with stones. The sister left the terrace while some of the dacoits were continuing their efforts to break into the dispensary.

To save themselves from the dacoits' imminent attack, all four nuns went to the prayer room, closing all the doors, starting from the main door to the prayer room door, from the inside. At this point, the dacoits remained silent and tried to make out as though they had gone away. However, even after a long time, when the nuns did not step out of the prayer room, the dacoits continued with their attempts to break in. They soon succeeded in breaking open the main lock on the front door. Then they opened another door to further let themselves in. Here they looted medicines, wall clocks, a tape recorder, a radio, torches, utensils, a camera and other things kept in the room. When they tried to break into the prayer room, one sister told them to take whatever they wished and pleaded with them to leave them alone. One of the dacoits told them to inform them where the money was kept and that they would take it and leave. The nuns did not respond to this, so the dacoits began to break into the prayer room once more. One of the sisters then opened the door herself, after taking an assurance from the dacoits that they would not harm the nuns in any way. The dacoits proceeded to loot cash (Rs.20,000),

the chains and crosses that the nuns wore around their necks, the rings from their fingers. The money was meant for a training course that one of the nuns was scheduled to join, and had just been withdrawn from a bank in Jhabua. All four nuns were then dragged out of the dispensary into the maidan outside, which is covered with tall grass. Here the dacoits raped three of the nuns. One of the nuns resisted so fiercely that they beat her up badly but did not rape her.

This brutality continued for about two hours after which the dacoits fled. The nuns remained dazed till 4.00 am. Around 4.30-5.00 am, one of the sisters went over to the nearby Varod hamlet and called the watchman who was sleeping at the priest's house.

The priest was away on work. The watchman then carried the news to Father Sunny at Gopalpur, Bagor at about 6.30 a.m. The chowkidar informed the priest that a gang of dacoits had looted the dispensary and had beaten up the nuns. Father Sunny then conveyed this news to Father Thomas, deacon of the Catholics of Jhabua district. Father

Thomas conveyed the information to G.R. Meena, the District Superintendent of Police.

At 8 am on September 23, Father Sunny reached Navapada where he found the nuns crying. Veronica related the entire incident to him. Father Sunny then informed Father Thomas of all facts including the rape of the nuns. Father Thomas said that he conveyed this fresh news to DSP Meena *as early as 9 a.m.* the same morning. Deputy District Superintendent of Police, O.P. Sharma and Police Inspector-in-charge of Kalyanpur Police Station, O.P. Dwivedi reached the Navapada dispensary at 10.30 a.m. that day, according to Father Thomas and Father Sunny.

The SDM, Prakash Sharma, sent by the Jhabua collector reached Bhandaria–Navapada. The S.I of Kalyanpura police station was also present along with

**The SDM and the
sub-inspector told the
nuns not to disclose that
they were raped**

the SDM. According to Father Thomas, both these officers spoke to the nuns one by one and told them not to disclose the fact that they had been raped. They claimed that if this was made public, then not only the nuns individually but the mission too would get a bad name. The policemen assured the nuns that they would arrest the offenders and ensure that they would be severely punished. But the nuns refused to agree to this and insisted on the charge of rape.

The Remand Record of the Kalyanpur Police Station shows that an FIR was filed at 7.30 a.m. on September 23, 1998, by Father John Sunny of the Gopalpur Catholic Church. The case bears C.R.No.193/98 and the charges have been framed under Sections 395 -397, IPC, relating to dacoity and causing hurt. As the nuns later furnished information of their rape, section 376, IPC, was also added.

The police sent the nuns for a medical examination to the Jhabua District Hospital at 8.00 p.m. The missionaries requested the police to permit the presence of one of their medical workers but this request was not conceded. The police and the district administration did not even allow the mission hospital doctor to be present at the time of this examination, which was carried out by two women doctors nearly 12 hours after the police first received news of the rape. According to the priests, the police and the civil administration showed no desire to proceed with the case and actually tried to hush it up. Father Thomas said that even though the Police Inspector in-charge and the Assistant Collector had recorded the statements of the nuns at Navapada itself, they kept them waiting at the Kalyanpur Police Station till 4.00 pm in the evening. Further, they claimed that it takes a maximum of one-and-a-half hours by road from Kalyanpur to Jhabua, yet the nuns and the police party reached the Jhabua hospital as late as 7 in the evening. DSP Meena, however, denied that there was any delay from their side.

The police sent the nuns for medical examination

**12 hours after
being informed**

Instead, he claimed that it was the Catholic priests who caused the delay as they were waiting for the Bishop to arrive before the nuns were medically examined. He claimed that even though he was preoccupied with meeting police higher-ups and other VIPs who had come to his office in relation with the incident, he had seen to it that the nuns were medically examined by 6.30 pm.

Meena informed the team members that that same morning he had got news of another dacoity in the jurisdiction of Rampuria Police Station. He had heard that about 150 armed dacoits had looted a herd of cattle. He had then rushed to Rampuria Police Station. He said that though he had received the news of the nuns being beaten up and looted (at that time he did not know that they were also raped) prior to the news of the second dacoity, he rushed to Rampuria first because he thought that that was more serious. This he did, he claimed, after instructing the Inspector-in-charge of the Kalyanpur Police Station to follow up the Navapada case. Meena

said that though the Inspector got to know of the rapes when he reached Navapada, he could not inform Meena immediately because he did not have a wireless set with him at the time. Meena informed the team that he learnt of the rape from the wireless set in his car only at 9.30 am after which he reached Kalyanpur Police Station by afternoon.

All the adivasis who took part in the attack were members of various dacoit gangs. One of these gangs was from Sankheda village and another was from Navapada village. According to Meena, the events on the night of September 22 - 23 leading up to the attack were as follows.

Members of the two gangs planned a dacoity at Agral, 25 km. from Navapada. They gathered at Pipaliya village, spent a lot of time over liquor and dinner and started at 10.30 pm on foot. On the way to

Agral they had planned a dacoity at Bagor. At Bagor they attempted to break open the door of the house of the veterinarian, Dr. Naik. Suspecting dacoity the doctor jumped over the wall of his house and raised an alarm. The doctor opened fire with his licensed bore gun. By this time people gathered around and chased the dacoits. The dacoits escaped from the village and hid in the fields by the banks of the Varli river till people gave up on them.

As the dacoits proceeded further they quarrelled amongst themselves over the late start and the distance they needed to cover to reach Agral. They were also angry about returning empty-handed as a great deal of time was lost in their failed attempt at Bagor. They decided to loot the nun's mission located across the river near Navapada (1.5 km from Bagor), that lay along their way. They crossed the river near Navapada, where the water level was upto the hips. The Nawapada gang members, who live in and around Bhandariya, were not in favour of looting the nuns as the nuns dispensed medicines to them and educated their children. The Roonkeda gang insisted on the attack as they had spent a great deal of money on food and liquor and did not wish to return without collecting some booty. Thereafter, they proceeded to loot the mission and raped the nuns. According to Meena, 12 of the dacoits were involved in the rape of the nuns.

Sources close to the SDM office also revealed that the collector's office spent the morning looking at revenue records of the land on which the sisters lived in Bhandaria-Navapada to trace the previous owner. As they found that the land had been acquired from a non-tribal owner, they were unable to draw the conclusion that the rape was committed for land.

Police version of action taken

The D.S.P. of Jhabua, G.R. Meena, arrived at the site around noon of September 23. The first FIR was filed on the basis of the complaint received from the priest from Gopalpur; hence the case was registered

under section 395 (dacoity) and 397 (forceful entry). When the police learnt of the rape their investigations began. By this time, claimed Meena, the nuns had already taken a bath. The police took charge of articles such as under-garments and other clothing. Fingerprints and other evidence of rape were recorded. And a case was registered under section 376, 396 and 397. The D.I.G and I.G at Indore were informed, as also senior officials in Bhopal. The police also advised a medical examination of the victims. According to Meena, over 60 policemen (10 parties to the neighbouring villages and five parties with patrolling mobile units) were despatched to apprehend the culprits.

The police had taken the sisters to Kalyanpur police station where they were held till 4 p.m..

On the medical reports: At the request of the police, the medical examination was carried out by two women doctors from Jhabua district hospital. Their report did not draw a conclusion of rape; nor did it record injuries. Meena claimed that thereafter, the Commissioner of Police, Indore, was asked for a team of doctors from Indore. He agreed and sent a team of three doctors. These doctors recorded the injuries but did not confirm rape. At this examination the mission hospital doctor was permitted to be an observer. He claimed that police had sent vaginal swabs and under-garments for forensic test and that results were received by them confirming rape. The police further sent samples (of blood, semen and finger prints) for DNA testing to Hyderabad from where the report is awaited in a month.

On apprehending the culprits: On the afternoon of September 23 and on September 24 the police were under the strain of receiving visiting VIPs such as the Home Secretary; the Home Minister and Chief Minister. However, in spite of these pressures, Meena asserted that they apprehended 23 accused persons and filed the chargesheets.

One of the nuns said in her statement that she

identified one of her attackers as a man who lived at Pandharia village. Subsequently, the police arrested 23 of the 26 men, whose names are Nannu, Cheetu, Kalia, Tiriya, Kehti, Murji, Ruma, Ramesh, Pidiya, Badiya, Chamna, Chatra, Daru (Mansingh), Kenu, Dhanna, Mesriya, Kamji, Jheel, Pappu, Khamraj, Daru (Udariya), and Bacchu Singh. Kalu, Talu and Mesu have not yet been arrested. All those arrested are Bhil adivasis.

II. Social, economic and political context of Jhabua

Jhabua's past

This tribal district of Madhya Pradesh, about 428 feet above sea level, has a majority population of adivasis, with 86 per cent of the population being Bhils. Jhabua was once famous for its forest cover, but today one cannot glimpse even the remnants of this.

Jhabua is also a border district: To the north is the predominantly tribal district of Banswada, Rajasthan, to the south lies Maharashtra and to the west, Gujarat. Thus it lends itself to criminal activities. Jhabua's entire territory of 8,782 square miles has its tehsil headquarters at Alirajpur, Jobaat, Meghnagar, Dhandla, Pitlavar and Jhabua.

At one time, Jhabua was ruled by Bhil kings such as Jhabbu, Bhagga, Rama, etc. But around 1584, Keshodas Rathod, the grandson of Raja Jodhaji of Jodhpur in Rajasthan, established his kingdom here. Alirajpur, which is today a tehsil of Jhabua district, was then an independent kingdom. The Rathod dynasty established its sway over Alirajpur too.

Entry of Christian missionaries

The first Catholic missionary to arrive in Jhabua was Charles G. Palmer in 1886. Jhabua was then ruled by Rajput kings. Palmer set up his mission at Thandla, on the Rajasthan border, 30 km from the district headquarters. At this time, the entire tribal

belt was experiencing severe famine. Palmer started his work here by distributing food and medical aid to the famine-stricken tribals. Palmer was joined a little later by a missionary named Brother Mirnaad. Both set up a school to educate the tribals and were soon joined by some nuns. Gradually, they set up centres at Jhabua, Magor and Panchchukki. An independent centre was set up in Jhabua in 1905 and a Catholic priest began to live here. In 1933, when the Divine Word Mission (SVD) began to focus on the Bhils, they too established a centre at Jhabua. At first, the Thandla centre was included in the Udaipur district headquarters, but after the missionaries established a district centre at Indore, the Thandla and Jhabua missions were brought under it. At this juncture, it was thought necessary to establish the district headquarters of the missionaries at Jhabua.

Currently, there are eleven Catholic centres operating in Jhabua district. These centres run schools and hostels for students of higher primary and middle school levels, apart from operating primary health centres. Protestant missionaries also operate in Jhabua. They run a centre named "Salom" at Antaveliya village, which is 15 km from the district headquarters.

Economic and educational profile: Backwardness

Having lost the once-thick forest they had inhabited for centuries, the tribal population is totally dependent on cultivation of their small land holdings. The so-called development of the backward Jhabua tribal region permitted capital subsidy of over 30 per cent for industries located here. This brought in several new enterprises. Most of these industries, which acquired large plots of prime land in the region and enjoyed tax benefits and loans from various financial institutions, conveniently closed down a year or two after starting.

Some important industrial units thus opened now closed are: N.S. Fabrications, Jhabua; the cement factory, Kalyanpur; A.G. Glass Ltd., Bagor —

Kallipur; Global Minerals, Meghnagar; Jalan Iron and Steel, Meghnagar; and Sri Ram Minerals, Alirajpur – Ambuwa.

Today Jhabua is one of the most backward districts of Madhya Pradesh, with very low literacy compared to other districts. Bhils, who constitute 86 per cent of the population, were mainly dependent on forest produce and agriculture. One can see parts of the erstwhile jungle only in the tehsil of Alirajpur. Since the forests have been cut down, the adivasis are wholly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Till the 1980s, the cultivators could raise only one crop, but due to the watershed management techniques introduced in the 1990s, they are now able to yield two harvests. Despite this, however, the yield is not sufficient for a family to live on. Holdings are of one to four acres. The land is hilly and rough.

Thousands of tribals are compelled to migrate to Gujarat to seek a livelihood. The extent of this migration can be gauged from the fact that in the off-season, men between the ages of 16 to 40 are difficult to find; only children, old people and women can be seen.

As they do not have sufficient land, the adivasis are in deep debt. Baniyas, mahajans, goldsmiths and traders charge usurious rates of monthly interest, as high as 10 to 15 per cent interest *per month* is the norm. For example 10 per cent per month may be charged for a regular cultivation loan and 15 per cent per month for emergency loans as for an illness. If Rs. 1000 is borrowed the farmer has to repay a minimum of Rs. 2,200 at the end of one year. If the interest is not paid up on time, then interest on unpaid interest is charged. If the principal remains unpaid for over a year, the borrower has to pay twice the agreed rate of interest on the unpaid capital. Thus if an amount is borrowed at 10 per cent per month, the borrower will then have to pay at the rate of 20 per

cent per month. If the adivasis are incapable of repaying the debt then their cattle and goats get taken away. If grain is taken on credit for sowing from the trader, double the quantity has to be returned at the time of harvest.

Crime rate

Against this background of poverty and massive unemployment/under-employment, it is not surprising that the Jhabua crime graph has risen dramatically in recent years. Murders, dacoities, looting, *maveshi* lootings (cattle looting) are common. Being a border district, gangs from different states operate here. They carry out their raids in one district and then escape to another. Hence the police find it very difficult to nab them. Alirajpur region has the dubious distinction of being the first in Asia as far as murders are concerned. An average of 1.5 to two murders take place here a day.

Since the 1980s there has been a change in the number and types of crimes here. In the early 1980s, a forest mafia with political protection mushroomed to carry out illegal denudation of forests on a massive scale. This not only created an environmental disaster but also robbed the Bhils of their main source of livelihood — forest produce. In this process, however, some Bhil families acquired new wealth. These families are today the village chiefs (called *tadvis* in the local dialect) and the politically powerful elements in the villages.

The forests were mowed down and the wood sold in an organised fashion. The local banias, goldsmiths, traders, politicians and newly-rich adivasis formed a syndicate for this purpose. Subsequently, these sections also began supplying liquor to Gujarat, where prohibition is in force. Every month, crores of rupees worth of brewed liquor is supplied to Gujarat. DSP Meena himself admitted this and claimed that he had confiscated Rs. one crore worth

With massive unemployment, it is not surprising that the Jhabua crime graph has dramatically risen

of contraband liquor in the few months since his posting there. The DSP preceding Meena, one Pavan Srivastava, was transferred because he confiscated a truck-load of contraband liquor.

In order to keep their illegal business flourishing without any hindrance, the banias, traders, goldsmiths, politicians and newly rich adivasis have set up gangs of dacoits composed of tribals, chiefly Bhils. Meena accepted this feature too and also revealed that these gangs have lawyers in their pay who arrange bail for them if they are nabbed. The lawyers accept looted items in lieu of fees for fighting the dacoits' cases. He claimed that it was difficult to nab the dacoits and their godfathers, because their godfathers are rich and powerful.

The people of Jhabua claimed that the following persons had links with the dacoit gangs: The former Congress MP, at present a leader of the BJP, Dilip Singh Bhuriya; the current Congress MP, Kantilal Bhuriya; his son-in-law, Jaam Singh Amaliyar, who is also the president of the zilla parishad; and the Congress district chief, Hariprasad Agnihotri. It is said that Dilip Singh Bhuriya extends his protection to the dacoits of Machaliya Ghat area. These dacoits loot the vehicles on highways and control the dacoities all around. Though now part of the BJP, it is reported that Dilip Singh Bhuriya still maintains good relations with the district Congress chief, Agnihotri. It is also said by some that he protects his dacoit gangs in collusion with Agnihotri. It was reported that the dacoit gangs of Meghnagar area enjoy the protection of the current Congress MP, Kantilal Bhuriya. Prior to becoming the MP, Kantilal was the MLA from Meghnagar. Kantilal's son-in-law, Jaam Singh Amaliyar, is said to extend his protection to the biggest gang in Jhabua district. It is allegedly because of this that he lost the Petlavad Assembly seat to Nirmala Bhuriya (Dilip Singh Bhuriya's daughter). Nirmala Bhuriya is the first

non-Congress candidate to win a major election from Jhabua. The team was also informed that Jaam Singh Amaliyar won the post of zilla parishad president by threatening the sarpanchs for votes through his dacoit gangs.

Police and crime in Jhabua

In the last two and a half years Jhabua has seen *four* superintendents of police. When DSP G.R. Meena (the present DSP of Jhabua) was asked about the transfer of his three predecessors he explained it away by saying that he too had served very short terms in his previous two postings.

In the last two and a half years Jhabua has seen four superintendents of police

A cross-section of the people met by the team told another story. According to lawyers and educated youth met by the team, two and a half years ago, DSP Mr. Marawe was transferred, despite the fact that the illicit liquor trade to the neighbouring dry state Gujarat

flourished unabated with over 150 jeeps operating as passenger transport without licence. The lawyers and youth alleged that this was because SP Marawe, along with additional SP Jaiswal's contractor brother at Indore, had themselves started a lucrative illicit liquor business. Despite his inaction against the illicit liquor trade the politically influential sections at the district level connected with the liquor mafia got him transferred.

Since 1998 the auctioning of liquor shops in M.P. has been abolished, and all liquor sale is now only through Government shops. Since then the illicit liquor trade has multiplied manifold. The liquor mafia, according to Jhabua residents, also engaged in organising bus dacoity and looting along the Jhabua main routes. SP Meena claimed that he has confiscated over rupees one crore worth of illicit liquor since September 1998.

The team also learned that over 1000 arrest warrants are *pending* in Kalyanpur police station. All of the

accused are said to be absconding. The absconding persons are in fact allowed to roam free and continue to engage in crime in the area or elsewhere. They reportedly pay a monthly *bandi* i.e., a fixed amount to the police to continue to evade arrest.

DSP P.S. Thakur was transferred within few months of his posting, reportedly because he started to arrest the illicit liquor mafia leader Jan Singh's people. He was followed by DSP Pawan Srivastava, who also met with the same fate for interfering with the illicit liquor trade. It was also alleged that the sons of Bapusingh Damar, previously an MLA of Jhabua district — minister in-charge of co-operatives in the previous Digvijay Singh ministry — are behind the illicit liquor trade in the district.

BJP sympathisers (who said that they did not want to be named due to fear of reprisal by mafia gangs) whom the team met at Jhabua had also referred to Vesta Patel, Alirajpur block Congress president who is also the municipal president of Alirajpur, chairman of tribal development, finance and co-operation, and has a criminal record. In 1995 he is alleged to have killed people and burnt over 150 houses because they did not pay *kavthu* (protection money). This is well known in the area. Subsequently he was elevated as a cabinet minister in Digvijay Singh's ministry.

The BJP unit of Jhabua has submitted what it claims to be a detailed account of criminal activity in the region to the Home Ministry in a memorandum. The team could not see the copy of the same as it was not readily available. The BJP has been able to set itself up in Jhabua following Dilip Singh Bhuriya's defection; according to the BJP activists, Jhabua had not seen BJP candidates since the 1950s, and in real terms the people have not known the BJP as a party in this belt before the last assembly election.

Crime and dacoity in Jhabua:

Organised dacoit gangs operate with impunity in the region. Four days before the Navapada incident,

a baniya shop in Petlawad and a Jain temple in Meghnagar town were looted.

In 1994, the panchayati raj local self-gov-

ernment system was introduced at the panchayat level in Madhya Pradesh. Under this system, control of a larger than earlier portion of developmental funds could now be exercised at the block level. According to local people, this has merely provided an opportunity for the criminal elements to legalise their stranglehold over the administration and further their organised criminal activities. The panchayati raj has a three-tier system: the sarpanch at the village level, the "janpads" at the block level, who in turn elect the district panchayat president. The district panchayat president is equal in rank to a minister of state.

Nexus between criminal gangs and political parties

A cross-section of people, villagers, youth, police officials and lawyers spoke of the politician-criminal nexus which lies behind all criminal activity in Jhabua district, and which is responsible for the protection being given to the criminals of the Navapada attack. Based on various narrations, the following details of the key political players behind criminal activities were gleaned by the team.

1. Congress party circles blame the criminal situation on Dilip Singh Bhuriya, a Bhil from Machillia Ghat and allegedly a promoter of highway dacoity. His intention, they claim, is to defame the Congress government in retaliation for his defeat in the last parliamentary elections. Bhuriya had won five consecutive parliamentary elections on a Congress ticket but had joined the B.J.P. just before the last election in February

Over 1000 arrest warrants are pending in Kalyanpur police station. All of the accused are said to be absconding

1998. In the last elections he was defeated by Kanthilal Bhuria, another Bhil from Meghnagar. In a one-page memorandum to the government, the Congress alleged that the criminals involved in the dacoity were helped by Dileep Singh Bhuria and his daughter Nirmala Bhuria, who was a Congress MLA but had resigned from the Congress party a year and a half ago. According to Congress sources, the only accused person who was still absconding was a member of the BJP unit of Thandli, a town in Jhabua district. The gang leader, Ramesh Tipriya, a known BJP worker, is still absconding. Dileep Singh Bhuria was allegedly involved in organising meetings of the accused persons prior to the incident. Though the Congress workers spoke against the BJP's gameplan in terrorising the Christian minority, they did not commit themselves to any concerted move to check BJP in this regard. They were more anxious to counter the propaganda "branding" Sonia Gandhi as a Christian.

2. Further enquiries by the team in Jhabua and the surrounding villages revealed that Dileep Singh Bhuria had resigned from Congress in protest against the elevation of rival leaders with a similar criminal background to powerful positions in the state by Digvijay Singh, the Chief Minister of M.P. All enquiries concerning political backing to criminals pointed to Jaam Singh Amliyar (the president of the district panchayat) who contested assembly elections in December 1998 from the Petlavad assembly seat, under which Navapada falls. He lost to the BJP candidate Nirmala Bhuria (daughter of Dileep Singh Bhuria, who was earlier the sitting Congress MLA). Amliyar has a criminal record and is dreaded in the district. According to the local people he controls the sarpanchs of the villages and protects organised crime in the

district by virtue of his election as president of the district panchayat four years ago. In the panchayati raj (local 'self-government') system introduced in M.P. four years ago, the president of the district panchayat is indirectly elected by a 20-member janpat panchayat comprising directly elected members. The president of the district panchayat enjoys the status of a minister of state and has considerable authority over the district administration.

**Two sons of the
district Congress
president of Jhabua are
the defence lawyers for
the accused in the nuns'
rape case**

3. Another important player in the politician-criminal nexus is reportedly Hari Prasad Agnihotri, the district Congress president of Jhabua. He is alleged to have played the role of a mediator between the criminal gangs and the police. It is also alleged that under police pressure, he had arranged for the surrender of the Roonkeda gang members accused in the nuns' rape case.
4. Interestingly, two of Agnihotri's sons (Hemant Prasad Agnihotri and Jintendra Prasad Agnihotri), are lawyers in the district court. Hari Prasad Agnihotri's mediations served to bolster their legal practice. Both sons are among the six lawyers appearing for the accused in the nuns' rape case. They argue that no rape took place (on the basis of the first two medical reports) and that dacoity was the only crime committed. When team members countered this saying that the first two medical reports might have been doctored by vested interests, advocate Saras Shukla, appearing for nine of the accused in the nuns' rape case, asserted that "the poor tribals are illiterate and have no means to do so".
5. According to advocate Saras Shukla, six of the accused persons were not present with the gang on the night of the crime. These are (1) Kalia (2) Chitu (3) Nannu (4) Masaria (5) Pappu (6) Kennu. They are all from Debaur, near

Kalyanpur, except for Nannu, who hails from Narwalia village, next to Debaaur. Shukla accepted the team members' observation that all the above except Nannu had previous criminal records, with two or more cases of dacoity/theft pending against them. Enquiries with other sources also revealed that the accused Nannu seems to be innocent and is being mischievously and wilfully included to weaken the case.

6. Shukla also alleged that the homes of his clients were destroyed together with all their belongings by the police and that their families were presently starving. He has filed a bail petition at the High Court bench at Indore with what he referred to as photographic evidence. Mr. Ramachandra, the sarpanch of the area, would vouch for this fact, he claimed. The team was unable to confirm this.
7. Noted criminals from Kheda village in Jhabua district are alleged to be family members of the present Congress MP, Kantilal Bhuria. They have several criminal cases pending against them over the past few years in the Kalyanpura police station.

Jhabua's new face

The economically, socially and educationally backward district of Jhabua witnessed a significant change in the 1990s. The state and central governments began focussing attention on Jhabua, and funds and schemes began to pour in in the name of tribal development. "Non-governmental organisations" (NGOs) too focussed on this backward district, and today at least 120 NGOs are to be found here. The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation also runs some schemes here. After the advent of the new Act on panchayati raj, control of considerable funds was shifted to the block level. As a result of watershed programmes under these schemes, some of the tribals did no doubt get enough water to reap two harvests a year instead of

only one, which was the traditional pattern. Nevertheless, in the absence of any other change their existence remained hand to mouth.

'Panchayati raj' did, however, mean that panchayat-level leaders had scope to divert larger sums to their own pockets

'Panchayati raj' did, however, mean that panchayat-level leaders had scope to divert larger sums to their own pockets. According to D.D. Mahajan, the district administrative officer, Jhabua has one district panchayat, 12 janpads at the block level, and 612 gram panchayats at the village level. He said that every gram panchayat receives Rs. 3 to 4 lakh a year for developmental work from the state government. Backward area gram panchayats receive higher amounts. Mahajan informed the team that the funds of the Jawahar Rojgar Yojana were used as follows: 65 per cent by the gram panchayats, 20 per cent at the district level for development, and 15 per cent to set up the janpad panchayats. He revealed that from 1994 to 1998, Rs.46.7 crore was spent on 5,466 developmental projects. Under the Indira Awas Yojana, it is claimed that 18,495 families living below the poverty line were provided housing worth Rs. 20.3 crore. Under the Jeevan Dhara Yojana, Rs. 3.5 crore was distributed for the digging of 899 wells. Rs. 35.4 crore was spent under the Educated Unemployed Scheme from 1994 to 1998. Mahajan said that since 1994, the Rajiv Gandhi Jal Grahana Prabandhan Mission was also operating here. Within a span of five years, this mission had spent Rs. 50 crore. The Rajiv Gandhi Primary Education Mission had also spent Rs. 50 crore in the past five years. It is estimated that 70 per cent of the amount is spent through the panchayats. While the claims of actually having provided housing, employment, water, and so on through these schemes are dubious, what is beyond doubt is that the panchayats had become an important arena for powerful interests interested in con-

trolling such funds.

Apart from these government schemes, the different NGOs operating in this area have also poured in money. There is, however, no obvious change in the life of the tribals. There has, however, been a remarkable change in the crime scenario since the advent of 'panchayati raj' in 1994. Crime has increased manifold. The panchayat has become an arena for crime too. DSP Meena accepted this fact. In 1994, following the panchayat election-related violence, he stated there were at least 100 cases of murder of panches and sarpanches in the state. In Jhabua alone, 10 to 12 such cases were recorded.

According to the official crime tally of the Jhabua police, in 1993 there were 193 cases of murder; in 1994 this figure rose to 227. In 1993, there were 180 attempt-to-murder cases; in 1994 the number rose to 205. In 1993 there were seven dacoity cases; in 1994, there were 21. In 1993 there were 45 lootings; in 1994 this figure jumped to 69. In 1993, there were 293 housebreaking cases; in 1994 the number rose to 341. In 1993 3,560 crimes were registered in the district, whereas in 1994 this number rose to 3,839.

Changing political scene

Like various other areas of tribal majority in the country, Jhabua too has been a stronghold of the Congress Party since 1947. Following Dilip Singh Bhuriya's exit from the Congress and entry into the BJP a year ago, the political scene has undergone a slight change. The BJP has gained in the area due to Bhuriya's presence, as he has been MP for five consecutive terms. Even though Dilip Singh Bhuriya was defeated in the Jhabua constituency by Kantilal Bhuriya during the last polls, for the first time a non-Congress candidate, Nirmala Bhuriya won the Assembly seat from Petalwad. As mentioned earlier, Nirmala defeated Jaam Singh Amaliyar, Kantilal's son-in-law, the President of the zilla parishad.

One other factor may be mentioned in describing the

changing political scene in Jhabua. This is the ongoing 'bhagat andolan'. This 100-year-old movement for social reform has in the last seven or eight years acquired a new form. The movement to make "bhagats" out of Bhils came to prominence in Govind Giri's time. Govind Giri preached to the Bhils (the third-largest tribe in India, spread out over what are today M.P., Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra) that they should abjure liquor, meat-eating, robbery and other crime; he also attempted to release them from the debt trap. In 1913 Govind Giri's movement took a militant anti-British turn. The Bhils rose in revolt, and were crushed by the British in a massacre at Mangad hill in Udaipur.

However, over the last seven to eight years the bhagat movement has been revived with a new motive. It has acquired the new distorted dimension of propagating that Bhils should become bhagats and worship Hindu gods and goddesses. This Hindutva-type revival of the bhagat movement is being spurred on by a Seva Samiti based in Kasba on the Rajasthan border in Dhandla. This Samiti has been set up by the RSS. In this district, this move is also being propagated by an adivasi named Khoom Singh Maharaj. Over the last 10 years temples are being constructed in tribal villages. These appear to be the first building blocks of the Sangh Parivar-directed tribal organisation in the region.

Attack on a Catholic priest at Jhamli, Jhabua

The team also visited Jhamli, 50 km away from Jhabua, to enquire into the attack on Father Edward Sarel, who runs the mission station there. Father Sarel is himself a Bhil. His forefathers embraced Christianity. The Jhamli mission is providing medical help and is organising self-help groups among women to save money and help them obtain loans.

On September 26, 1998, at around 8.30 p.m., a group of adivasis from the area surrounded Father Sarel's house and started to break in. He heard many voices calling him to come out. Except for his room, the

rest of the house was not locked. The attackers did not loot any of the belongings, and demanded money from the priest. After finding that they could not break open the door, they climbed onto the roof. Father Sarel told them he had no money. He felt very worried, as he had heard of the incident at Nawapada that had occurred three days earlier. Hearing the sound of a motorcycle, the attackers ran away. According to Father Sarel, the motive of the attack was robbery and was not communal.

Indeed, the priests met by the team emphasised that they felt that the Nawapada incident too was not communal but simply criminal. The team also met a Catholic nun who regularly visits the area to run a *balwadi*, said that her congregation has been working in the region for over 80 years, and that she herself had been a nun for over 40 years. She too described the motive for the Nawapada incident as purely criminal, not communal.

Communalisation of the Nawapada atrocity

How, then, did the atrocity on the Nawapada nuns become known as a communal crime? Ironically, much of the responsibility for this lies on the Sangh Parivar itself. Immediately after the Nawapada incident, Vishwa Hindu Parishad central secretary and former BJP MP B.L. 'Prem' Sharma issued a statement to the press. The statement said that the "assault" on the nuns and the attack on a convent in Baghpat (U.P.) in August were "the direct result" of the conversion of Hindus to Christianity by missionaries. He even claimed the rape to be the expression of the "*anger of patriotic Hindu youth against anti-national forces*" (emphasis added). He charged the Congress (I) government with being "unnecessarily energetic" in dealing with the incident and giving it "undue importance". The VHP leader alleged that "the Congress government is behaving as if India is still under colonial rule." The statement warned: "They, the Congress party, may

close its eyes to the black deeds of the missionaries, to their efforts to convert Hindus, but we in the VHP will not shut our eyes to the activities of these traitors."

This was quickly followed on September 31, 1998, by a statement by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad general secretary, Giriraj Kishore, who said that "Foreign missionaries should be removed from the country", claiming that they were involved in forcible conversions in some states and insurgency in the northeast. "We will first appeal to the missionaries to go".

Not surprisingly, the Congress Chief Minister seized on these statements to make political capital by suggesting that the incident could be the result of a "well thought-out strategy of the VHP, Bajrang Dal and the RSS." As the attacks on Christians in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Orissa and elsewhere grew during December 1998 and January 1999, the suspicion that the Sangh Parivar was behind the deed naturally grew.

Indeed, the Sangh Parivar continued to behave like a guilty party. In December 1998, the Union home minister, L.K. Advani, claimed in Parliament that "out of the 24 accused in the Jhabua nuns rape case, 12 belong to the Christian community", a claim strongly contested by Christian institutions in Jhabua.

The origins of this falsehood are interesting. In fact, the team found that the rumour that "more than half the rapists were Christians" was originally spread in Jhabua by local Congress leaders; the lawyers for the accused then picked up on this, presumably in order to strengthen their case that they could

not have committed the deed. Finally, this story appears to have been picked up by Sangh Parivar leaders at the national level for different reasons: to place a further slur on the Christian community. Thus we find Praveen Togadia, VHP leader, claiming at the Bajrang Dal conference in Bombay in February 1999

**Indeed, the Sangh
Parivar continued
to behave
like a guilty party**

that 13 of the persons involved in the Jhabua rape were Christians.

In fact, the Jhabua police called for verification of this story from the Catholic mission in Jhabua and the Protestant Salom Bhakti Mandali (also known as Sharing Love Mission) representative in the area, Mr Rajesh Chouhan. Both denominations have checked with their local followers the list of names provided by the police, and have refuted thoroughly the claim that any of the accused was a member of their respective communities. Nevertheless the Union home minister chooses to propagate otherwise, in effect communalising the issue further.

While the Sangh Parivar was not actually involved in the nuns' rape, as far as we could determine, its activity has picked up in the region after the incident. The Sangh Parivar released a three-page pamphlet which it sent by post to every sarpanch in the district. In the pamphlet, the Parivar claims that the charges that it is attacking Christians around the country are false. It claims to provide figures of the Christian population in 1951 and 1991 in different states in India, and raises an alarm over the supposedly growing population of Christians. It opposes conversions by Christians, and reproduces various quotations by M.K. Gandhi against conversions.

The Sangh Parivar, then, hardly deserves much sympathy for having been wrongly implicated in the Nawapara case; they have only their own statements and actions to blame.

III. Conclusions

1. The attack on, and rape of, the nuns of the Nawapada mission station in Jhabua was the work of a criminal gang. The gang, according to accounts from a large number of local people, has backing from one or both important political parties in the region, namely, the Congress-I and the BJP. In fact, there appear to be more specific indications linking the gang to Congress-I leaders than to BJP leaders.
2. The motive for the rape does not appear to have been communal, but criminal. The pattern of

steady build-up of anti-Christian hatreds and setting up of Sangh Parivar front organisations, which we see in other sites of violence against Christians, are not to be found here. There is as yet no hatred to be found between Christians and Hindus in this region, and the Christian tribals participate in all the social activities of their respective tribes. Even their marriages and final rites are performed in both styles – tribal and Christian, one after the other. In Jhabua, the work of the Sangh Parivar has hardly begun.

3. The notion that the criminals were "patriotic youth" protesting conversions, as the VIIP claimed, merely offers us an idea of what the VHP consider patriotism and protest. The incident was in no way linked to conversions, which are not a significant phenomenon in Jhabua. There appears to be no truth in the Union home minister's version that 12 of those arrested for the rape were Christian.
4. The Jhabua police were clearly reluctant to record the charge of rape. What is most shocking is that they delayed the medical examination greatly, severely harming the chances of confirming the allegation. The victims deserve support for their courage in having insisted on recording the charge. However, given the police's attitude, and given the suspiciously botched first medical examinations, it is likely that the culprits will not be found guilty of rape, unless sustained public pressure is brought to bear on the administration.
5. In Jhabua, the criminal gangs and the police both appear to have close ties to the two major political parties and the region's mafia. Illicit liquor, diversion of Governmental funds (actually facilitated by supposed 'panchayati raj' measures), and other criminal activity make this backward, poverty-stricken region a source of considerable riches for a small section. Backward agriculture, the tribals' lack of land and other resources, and consequent massive unemployment/underemployment offer a ready recruiting ground for the criminal gangs.

Appendix: The Bhil tribals — background in brief

No chronologically written records are available on the history of the Bhils. The Bhils are divided into a number of totemic clans based on a largely forgotten common descent in antiquity. Today the clan has no common headman. There are many endogamous subsections, with nothing in common but the name, and settled in loose groups, with other clans. In his census reports of 1933, C.S. Venkatachar has enumerated some 122 clan names of the Bhils, with their totemic origin and meaning.

The Bhils are an ancient race. According to anthropologist, S.L. Doshi, the Bhil is now a common name used to refer to the original inhabitants of our country, "perhaps being pre-Munda and pre-Dravidic". "It is generally considered that Bhil is connected to the Dravidian billu meaning a bow. If this assumption is correct, the name is a most appropriate one, for bow and arrow are the characteristic arms of the Bhils". According to anthropologists W. Koppers and L. Jungblut, there are references to Bhils in the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha, the great Hindu epics, as the foremost archers. According to the legends, the Bhils are outcastes and an inferior tribe by their very origin.

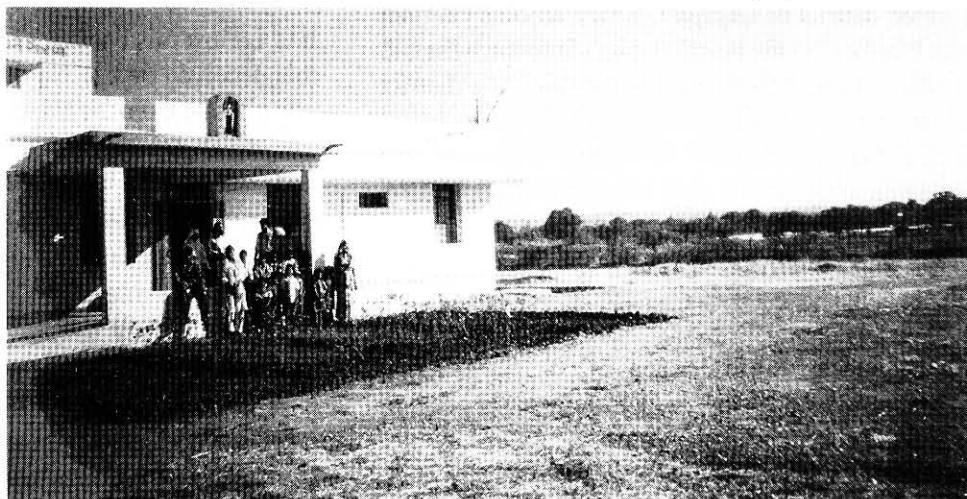
The Bhils inhabited the fertile plains of central India. In course of time they were driven away by the invading Rajput, Muslim, Maratha and British rulers, forcing them to take refuge in the thick jungles of the mountains, their presen habitat. The Bhils put up a brave resistance

against the invaders and continued their fight to the very last against all odds. Driven by hunger and poverty, some of them were forced to take to plunder, looting and highway robbery. They joined hands with Rajput kings, first to fight the invading Muslims rulers, then the Marathas and later the British. The Rajputs dealt with them with cruelty in order to keep them subjugated. But the Bhils with their indomitable spirit of freedom and independence fought tooth and nail against all political control and subjugation. During the Rajput and British rule there were many armed uprisings by the Bhils to regain their homeland and political sovereignty. They were often put down ruthlessly by the Rajputs and the British and when such suppression failed the rulers pacified them through negotiations and conciliation. As a ploy the British set up the Khandesh Bhil Corps in 1824 and the Mewar Bhil Corps in 1836, recruiting the Bhils to its ranks. The last Bhil rebellion took place in 1949, after Indian independence, in which the Bhils set up a parallel government challenging the government machinery; but it was suppressed by strong police action.

The largest and most important tribe in western-central India is that of the Bhils. The tribal community is spread in many independent endogamous subsections over a large part of the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharastra. In Madhya Pradesh, after the Gonds, the Bhils form the largest and most important tribe and are found mainly in the four districts of Ratlam, Dhar, Khargone and Jhabua. The Bhils form the third largest tribe in India after the Santhals and the Gonds. According to the 1981 census, they number 63,95,300.

--from a study by Dr. P.T. Thomas.

The
isolated
dispensary-
cum-
residence
at
Navapada,
Jhabua,
where the
rape took
place



V. What Really Happened at Ramagiri Udaygiri

In December 1998, the newspapers reported a major clash between tribals and Christians in Ramagiri Udaygiri, Gajapati district, Orissa. However so confusing were the reports that little sense could be made of them. On the other hand, the reports of large-scale suffering inflicted upon the Christians, whose homes were attacked, meant that the causes of this 'clash' required urgent investigation. As part of the AIFOFR fact-finding team inquiring into attacks on Christians nationwide, Ganatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sanghatana (GASS), Orissa, sent a team to R. Udaygiri. The team visited R. Udaygiri and its environs and talked with a large cross-section of people, ranging from the district's highest administrator to ordinary working people.

R. Udaygiri is a small town of a tehsil in the newly formed district of Gajapati, which adjoins Ganjam and Phulbani to the north, Rayagada to the west and Andhra Pradesh to the east and south. The district headquarters are at Parlekhamundi. R. Udaygiri as well as Gajapati district, in which it is situated, are predominantly tribal, with a density of population of 151 per sq. km. The rate of literacy is 24 per cent. The proportion of rural population is nearly 90 per cent.

Of the geographical area of 3016 sq. kms, agricultural land is only 76,671 hectares. The region is full of hills and forests. Forests account for more than 70 per cent of the district's geographical area.

The atmospheric temperatures in R. Udaygiri vary between 16 and 45 degrees. The major part of the area is hilly terrain or has undulating topography.

Cultivation is the principal way of making a living here. These tribals engage in their traditional methods of cultivation and collection of natural products from the forest. In the absence of any real industry, a negligible proportion of the people are engaged in the few small and cottage industries, which have an significant influence on the life of people. Though R. Udaygiri's soil and climate are suitable for plantation crops and horticulture, that is of no use to the common people, who are too hard worked and poor even to get enough to eat, what to speak of getting the capital needed for investing in plantation and in horticulture.

It is against this background that the tribals are further deceived by a section of non-tribals who generally operate from the urban and semi-urban centres. The tribals are very often uprooted from their land and pushed deep inside the forest; this is the main source of conflict between the tribals and non-tribals of the area.

Base for communal organisation

The fact-finding team learnt from discussions with a number of people that in the recent period ground-work for communal tensions had been laid in R. Udaygiri. The tensions seemingly revolved around

union rivalry, whereas they actually were connected to the awarding of contract work, the liquor business, and the plans of the Sangh Parivar.

A small number of daily wage workers are engaged in “khalasi” (head-load) work in and around R.Udaygiri. These khalasi workers have their trade union, the Ramagiri Udaygiri Bus Stand and Godown Mozdur Sangha, which was backed by the known trade unionist, Abhir Padhy. One Jaya Singh, who happened to be a Christian, was the president of this union. The fact finding team learnt that in the beginning all the khalasis had been under this union.

Laxmi Bhai, a local R.S.S. leader, appeared on the scene two years back. He was successful in forming a rival union. All the savarna Hindu khalasi workers went over to him. The new union, known as Utkal Sangh, was registered some time in 1996. From then began the rivalry between the two unions as well as the fostering of hatred between the two communities — the *savarna* Hindus and the Christians. But the Harijan khalasis sided with old union.

In the past there was some confrontation between Jaya Singh and Laxmi Bhai regarding the contract work of the sub-jail. It was alleged by the members of Utkal Sangha that most of the works were given to the Mozdur Sangha (Christian Sangha in their terminology) by the administration; but this was flatly denied by the B.D.O and other members of the local administration.

Recently, Laxmi Bhai forced the Mozdur Sangha workers to leave their work. There was much tension in the town. The local administration intervened and negotiations took place between the two unions in the presence of the local administration. The Sangh Parivar was also engaging in various communal activities in this period, which was reported on by several people in and around the township. Thus

political rivalry, complicated with the deliberate communal activities of the Sangh Parivar, was to play a vital role in the final episode of December 8.

Besides, some other interesting developments are to be noted here which the fact finding team learnt and brought to light. Jaya Singh had a criminal record, along with his gang. He had been carrying on various anti-social activities from a long time, which was known to R. Udaygiri police station. Jaya Singh was also involved in the illicit liquor business and had rivalry with another illicit liquor businessman who, incidentally, was a prominent activist of the Sangh Parivar. This rivalry too had generated animosity between Hindus and the Christians. But the local administration as well as the district administration were simply spectators to all this, and some of the local administrative personnel played a substantial part in the rivalry, instead of taking strong action against activities of the Sangh Parivar as well as the criminals and anti-socials. The December 8 attack on the Christian basti should be seen against this backdrop.

The tensions were actually connected to business rivalries

The events of December 1998

The fact finding team reached Parlekhamundi on February 5, 1999 and talked with various district level administration officials. The next day, the team left for Ramagiri, Udaygiri and visited vast area in and around the tehsil, and tried its best to reach the maximum number of people from various walks of life. It has already reported at the outset that the entire episode is quite confusing to any outsider. But it is not in fact so. Rather, it is the media and the press that made it confusing.

The entire episode can be divided into three phases: *First*, the looting of contract laborers and the subsequent agitation of the tribals under the banner of Chasi Mulia Samiti.

The *second* phase was when the revolt of tribals under

the leadership to the Samiti resulted in their breaking into the jail and killing two inmates.

The *final* phase was one in which the looting and burning down of Christian basti was carried out.

First phase: adivasi unrest, unrelated to communalism

A private bus (*preti*) carrying some contract labourers to Kemi, in Arunachal Pradesh, was looted by some anti-socials elements just two kilometers away from the R. Udaygiri police station. It is reported that about Rs. 63,000/- were looted. An F.I.R. was lodged at the R. Udaygiri police station by the conductor of the bus.

The very next day the tribals, enraged at this loot of their hard-earned money, started an agitation under the leadership of the Chasi Mulia Samiti and demanded that the tahsildar arrest all the culprits, whom they had already identified, and that their money including bus fare be returned to them. Two of the culprits, Jaya Singh, the above-mentioned leader of Mozdur Sangha, and Trishanka Beheradalai, a Hindu, were arrested and remanded to jail custody, but the bus owner managed to escape along with his bus with the help of the local administration, and this infuriated the agitating masses.

From December 4 to December 6, the Chasi Mulia Samiti demonstrated in a phased manner in various places of the town. They even gheraoed the tahasildar for a long time and withdrew only after he gave a specific assurance. However his assurance bore no result. Meanwhile the district administration tried to negotiate, and the local administration was entrusted with the task of arresting the other culprits and getting back the looted money and the bus fare for the labourers. But the administration made only half hearted efforts. The most charitable explanation would be to say that the usual apathy and carelessness toward the interests of tribals reigned.

On December 7, the Chasi Mulia Samiti had a public meeting at about 10.30 a.m. in the weekly '*haat*' (market) premises of R. Udaygiri. Some 8,000 people from 150 villages participated. Subsequently, they took out a procession to the local police station and demanded that Jaya Singh and Prishanka be produced so as to try them in a "Praja Court" (people's court). The police station was gheraoed from 11.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. The gherao was withdrawn with the warning that if there was no redressal by December 8, the people would act on their own. Even so, the administration took it very casually; instead of attempting to resolve the adivasis' demands it tried to gear up with additional forces from outside the district to tackle the situation.

Second phase: adivasi upsurge and display of rage

The revolt finally erupted on December 8. The administration had as yet done nothing to resolve the problem. It seemed not to act in any direction except to strengthen its security, in which too it failed miserably, as the adivasis had already blocked roads from either side in the night before their count down by felling huge blocks of timber, at least in 10 to 12 places. The team visited all those spots on either side of the R. Udaygiri town. The roads had been blocked in such a manner that movement of vehicles was impossible. The administration confessed that they were compelled to withdraw the re-enforcement force. By 10 a.m. the entire town was surcharged and under control of the adivasis. A huge crowd of thousands assembled in front of the police station, armed with traditional weapons.

According to the officer-in-charge of R. Udaygiri police station, a sizeable number of local people too participated along with the tribals. In the course of our investigation it was revealed to the team that the adivasis had congregated without any leaders of the Chasi Mulia Samiti.

While this demonstration was going on, a mass of about 2,000 people marched towards the sub-jail of

R. Udaygiri which was on the outskirts of the town. According to the sub-jailer, the violent mob reached there at about 10.40 a.m. and surrounded the jail. They broke the front gate and the gate man was forced to hand over the keys. There were 35 male inmates in the jail. But people did not even wait for the keys to open the gates. They broke the walls of the jail in four places and killed Jaya Singh and Trishanka. Their dead bodies were dragged out with telephone wires and subsequently brought to the police station on a trolley. Meanwhile, the other jail mates were threatened and forced to vacate the jail. The sub-jailer expressed his utter helplessness before the huge crowd.

The two dead bodies were brought inside the police station and there they were burnt along with the records of the thana. The entire staff of the police station were simply mute spectators to the adivasi rage. A portion of the police station was also burnt down. The officer-in-charge of the police station expressed his helplessness to the investigating team members. According to the Block Development Officer, the violent crowd also came to circuit house where one D.S.P. and the sub-collector were present, and intimidated them that they had killed two of the anti-socials. They threatened that they might act once again if the other anti-socials were not punished. Subsequently, having made their point, the mass of adivasis left the town on their own. The team asked the police why the two culprits were kept in jail in the town. The police could not reply satisfactorily. They said that the then sub-inspector would be the best person to reply but he was under suspension and was not available to the team.

Third phase: separate attack on the Christian settlement

At this point the upsurge under the Chasi Mulia Samiti banner ended. But something else suddenly took place: a 500-strong mob suddenly attacked the Christian basti. The houses of Christians unconnected to Jaya Singh were burnt down. In the press coverage of the incident the adivasi upsurge has been

merged with this mob attack on the Christians. Who mobilised this mob? Was it composed of the same people who had attacked the jail? Below we record the team's findings.

The team visited the burnt Christian basti and discussed with a large number of affected people. The team visited most of the razed-down houses. People described their woes with tears and sometimes with anger. The women folk stuttered a lot and they broke down while narrating the deeds of the marauding crowd. The team was told that on the same day, i.e. December 8, about 500 marauding men had suddenly rushed towards the Christian basti, which was just behind the police station.

The local administration as well as the office-in-charge of the police station maintain that it was not the adivasi villagers, but some local people of the town who initiated and participated in the attack. The members of the Christian community told the team the same story. What the fact-finding team came to know from various facts and witnesses from among the local people was that the attack was not a spontaneous attack on the Christian community by the agitating adivasis; rather, it was a coordinated and planned attack on the basti by certain town residents, on the manufactured plea that Jaya Singh belonged to this community and that he stayed there. It was mainly local people of the town who took part in the looting and arson along with only a handful of adivasis. These adivasis are mainly leaders and activists of the B.J.P., and some of whom are connected to the Sangh Parivar's tribal wing, Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (such as Jhapuda Sabar, Kartik Gomango and Kirtan Sabar).

The team visited the basti and saw that about 111 houses belonging to the Christian community had been first looted and subsequently burnt down with help of petrol and kerosene. People showed the team how their iron boxes and almirahs were broken open before the houses were burnt down. Interestingly, eight houses belonging to Hindu Harijan families in the same area were left untouched. The team talked

with Manik Badapujari and Ballar Behra and asked them why their houses were left untouched. They pleaded innocence and said they knew nothing as they too had fled out of fear. The team came to know that the fire brigade was not allowed to operate in the Christian basti, but that it was carefully positioned to guard those eight Hindu Harijan houses.

The team talked with Sen Singh and some others. They alleged that local B.J.P. leaders such as Balaram Ranaltati, Kartik Gomango, Himadri Pradhan, Manamatha Dalapati and Prafulla Das were instrumental in attacking and burning down their basti. They also reported that they had brought it to the notice of the police and the civil administration, but that these culprits were still at large.

The team witnessed that not only were the Christians' houses burnt down, but so too were two churches of the community. After discussion with a cross section of people, the team came to the conclusion that there is virtually no genuine communal animosity between the two communities. Rather communal animosity is being thrust on the people by the communal forces. People also reported that the R.S.S. and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad had been very active for quite some time and that they had been instigating people against the Christian community. The team has also collected some documents of the Sangh Parivar which have convinced the team about the definite role of the Sangh Parivar in this incident.

The team found that 27 persons were arrested under sections 436 and 302 of the IPC, namely, arson and murder. Incidentally, 21 persons out of the 27 are savarna (caste) Hindus who were also members of the rival khalasi union Utkal Sangha. Three persons out of the remaining six arrested were known activists of the Sangh Parivar; and the remaining three persons were tribals who were politically close to the Sangh Parivar as well as its Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad.

The team subsequently visited the basti of those arrested khalasis and talked with various people along with the family members of those arrested persons. The family members pleaded the arrested persons' innocence. The team also talked with the local Bar Association President and the advocate who was looking after the cases of the arrested. Interestingly, the secretary of the advocate Mr. Panigrahi was also arrested on charge of murder and arson. These people were very much aggrieved at the alleged high-handedness of the police. They denied the charges. However, the team came to understand that the khalasis who had been arrested were simply pawns in the hands of the Sangh Parivar.

there is virtually no genuine communal animosity between the two communities. Rather communal animosity is being thrust on the people

The team enquired about the role of the Chasi Mulia Samiti in the attack on the basti and its burning. This was simply denied by each and every person of the Christian basti as well as by the common people of the R. Udaygiri. Even the administration was not alleging the involve-

ment of the Samiti, but merely maintained the role of the local people of R. Udaygiri. But when the team talked with Bar Association members, they accused the Samiti. The Chasi Mulia Samiti itself denied any role in the attack on the Christian basti. Rather, they accused local R.S.S. leaders such as Balaram Rama Hati and Pripati Panigrahi of being involved. They alleged too that these R.S.S. and B.J.P. leaders had taken the advantage of the situation to terrorise the Christian community, using the example of Jaya Singh.

After the incident, the police conducted raids in surrounding villages. The team visited various villages where people complained that they were facing raids and inhuman torture at the hands of the police force. They also complained that the police had taken their household goods. The team enquired regarding such thefts, but the local administration denied it. However, the team was shown some of the evidence by the villagers of Sundarba, Kakraguda, etc.

The team could not meet any of the leaders of the Chasi Mulia Samiti. Nor could it meet those who had been the victims of bus looting. The team came to know that a planned racket exists in the area. Tribals are rounded up and taken as bonded labourers to distant places. The local administration is quite aware of this but is a mere spectator to it, sometimes even giving tacit support to it. The Samiti is launching an agitation against this exploitation.

The entire attack was completed by afternoon. The district administration then appeared on the scene. The road blocks were cleared. Peace committees were formed in and around R.Udayagiri tahsil. But the team was told by a cross-section of the people that there was virtually no communal atmosphere in the area. Before the incident too there had been none. Hence district administration actions were simply administrative make believe.

The administration claimed that it had distributed emergency relief for 14 days: 84 families were eligible for a grant of Rs. 2,000/- each and 23 families for relief of Rs. 500/- each by the Red Cross authority. They have also intimated that each and every family would be allotted a house under "Indira Awas Yojana". Even if these reliefs actually reach the victimised population, they cannot make up for the fear and suspicion fostered by the attack.

The team came to know that the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad has been very much in operation in the surrounding villages under the leadership of Kartik Gomango, Thanipura Sabar, and Sangasi Sabar, and that the police is also aware of their activities. However, the police has not arrested the leaders till now, though their names were specifically mentioned to the police by the people attacked. The fact finding team could not meet any of the three: villagers reported that Sangasi Sabar was at his house but his wife flatly denied it was so.

**the Akhil Bharatiya
Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad
has been very much
in operation in the
surrounding villages**

The team interviewed the District Collector to learn his assessment and views. The Collector's reply was pat: that the incident was not communal, and occurred because of the unusual "apathy and negligence" of the bureaucratic machinery and a "failure" of the law and order machinery.

Conclusion

- 1) The murder of the two jail inmates, Jaya Singh and Trishanka, by the adivasis was not communal in nature. Rather, it was an attack on the criminal racket operating there, and the refusal of the police to meet their demands. Jaya Singh belonged to the Christian community whereas Trishanka belonged to the Hindu community. The adivasi upsurge was in fact on secular issues.
- 2) The looting and burning of the Christian basti was not actually related to the above incident. It was not carried out by the adivasis who attacked the jail, but by a separate mob of people associated with the Sangh Parivar and the Utkal Sangh. This incident was actually the culmination of political rivalry and business rivalry over illicit liquor, both of which were used to near perfection by the Sangh Parivar and its local associates. The communal forces cleverly took advantage of the occasion of the adivasi upsurge against the criminal racket to carry out a communal attack on the Christians.
- 3) The administrative machinery and the law and order machinery both failed to attend to people's demands in a timely way. Moreover, they utterly failed to act early enough against the Sangh Parivar forces, despite having advance indications that they would cause trouble. These communal forces are not finished with their agenda and will continue to create communal tension in the region.

Appendix:

Attack on the Christian community at Ranalai, Gajapati district

Events soon proved that the R. Udaygiri incident was not an isolated one. The attack on the Christian community at Ranalai in March 1999 shows that the Sangh Parivar is systematically working among the tribals of the region to build up communal hatreds.

Ranalai is small village under the Chiligada panchayat. It falls under Ramagiri Udaygiri tehsil and is 15 kms. from Ramagiri Udaygiri town, which had witnessed an attack on its Christian population only three months earlier. The village is situated on the Berhampur–Taptapani road, 10 kms. from Chandragiri. It is located 2 kms. from Cheligada – the panchayat samiti head quarters as well as the police station. Ranalai is surrounded by hills and jungle. Of the nearly 400 homes, 250 belong to the Christians and the rest belong to the Hindus and adivasis. The area occupied by the Christians is called Christian Sahi, and the area occupied by Hindus and tribals is called Oriya Sahi.

Agriculture is the primary occupation, apart from small businesses and collection of forest produce. Most of the villagers are small and marginal peasants and landless labourers.

Background

Before the incident social tension was clearly evident in the area. Forces of the Sangh Parivar have altered the socio-political situation of the area. On March 7, 1999 a meeting was held at Ranalai which was attended by Hindus alone. Villagers reported that people from other villages also attended. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh were reportedly the organisers. Hindus from nearby villages like Kushapal, Gotra, Gangapur, Attar Singh, Lumbar Singh Gao, Sundarba, Raipur, Rupa Singh Gao, Pitha Panasa, Khursa were mobilised for the meeting. The meeting led to a decision to erase a cross painted on Khamari Hill.

In the absence of any church in the village, the

Christians of Ranalai had inscribed a big cross on Khamari Hill which was nearby. They used the hill as a place to hold prayer meetings and for other religious congregations from time to time.

On March 8, 1999 people of the Hindu community assembled again. After the meeting, a large crowd went to Khamari Hill and erased the cross. This incident created tension in the village. The villagers of Ranalai sat together and decided to settle the issue amicably and peacefully. A peace-committee was formed comprising of ten persons from each community and eventually peace and normalcy were restored in the village. The cross was repainted in the original place.

Then, on March 15, 1999, a group of Sangh Parivar followers assembled again at Khamari Hill and wiped out the cross once again. They then inscribed the “Chaka Ankhj” – the symbol of Lord Jagannath, — in its place. This re-ignited the tension between the two communities in Ranalai. Immediately, the village peace committee took up the issue. The committee decided that the hill would not bear any symbol of either community, and it accepted the responsibility to ensure this. It was decided that the Hindus of the committee would wipe out the existing symbol. Meanwhile some members of the Christian community reported the matter to the nearby police station and asked for help and security apprehending an attack.

The attack

Peace was restored on March 15, but it was short-lived. According to the decision of the committee, 10 persons moved towards Khamari Hill. By this time a large crowd of about two thousand people, supposed to be followers of the Sangh Parivar, had already assembled at the hill. They inscribed a “trishul”, the symbol of Siva. People of the nearby villages were present and they shouted slogans like “Jai Sri Ram” and “Jai Ram”.

The crowd also raised some objectionable slogans

and moved towards the village in a procession. They entered the village and encircled the Christian Sahi with country made guns, arrows and various traditional weapons. Apprehending an attack, the Christians began fleeing. They were attacked and their homes were set on fire. Villagers said that the attackers used petrol and kerosene. A total of 147 houses were completely burnt down.

Some villagers pointed out that the two communities had lived amicably for generations. They accused the leaders of the VHP, the RSS and the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad of instigating communal hatred. The Christians openly accused local leaders of the Sangh Parivar such as, Kartik Gomango of Sugadi, Balaram Ranahati of R. Udaygiri, Jhapara Raitha of Sundraba and Isra Pajari of Bhalia Sahi. These very persons were also involved in the attack on Christians in the R. Udaygiri Christian Sahi three months ago. People from Oriya Sahi, who declined to be identified, stated that the leaders of VHP and RSS asked people to erase the cross. They opined that the cross was six to seven years old, while the Christians claimed it dated back to 1971.

Some of the people of the Oriya Sahi claimed that while the peace committee representatives were going to wipe out the symbol of "Chaka Ankhi" as decided, the Christians burnt down their own homes to obtain government compensation. This is a totally baseless accusation, as the burning followed a pre-meditated physical attack on the fleeing Christians.

Villagers reported that at the time of the attack, the

B.D.O, the circle inspector of R. Udayagiri police station., the block chairman, Somnath Majhi, and Jilla Parishad member Ipriyam Pradhan were present. The villagers said that these officials tried to prevent the attack. The main question is: If the local administration was apprehending violence, why was the police force not present?

In all, 14 persons were injured, of whom 11 were discharged after treatment at the primary health centre; three persons with bullet injuries were shifted to Berhampur Medical College. Their names are Bibhudutte Pani, aged 31, Sudhakar Bargi, aged 25, and Hinokir Bira, aged 38 yrs. Significantly all the injured persons were Christians and each of the 147 burnt houses belonged to Christians.

There was absence of speedy relief. The victims were forced to take shelter under trees even though the day temperature was nearly 40 degrees. They were dazed and shattered.

The Orissa Chief Minister visited Ranalai and assured the victims of necessary help to reconstruct their homes and provide other relief for at least fifteen days. He has also acknowledged administrative failure on the floor of the assembly. The state government has also appointed a commission of enquiry headed by retired Orissa High Court judge, Justice Sri Krishna Chandra Jagdeb Roy, to look into the attack. But the people are deeply distressed that even though they had informed the police and asked for security, the administration took no preventive measures.

VI. The Killings at Manoharpur

"I appeal to the missionaries that *they are sitting on a stack of hay. They better be careful.*"

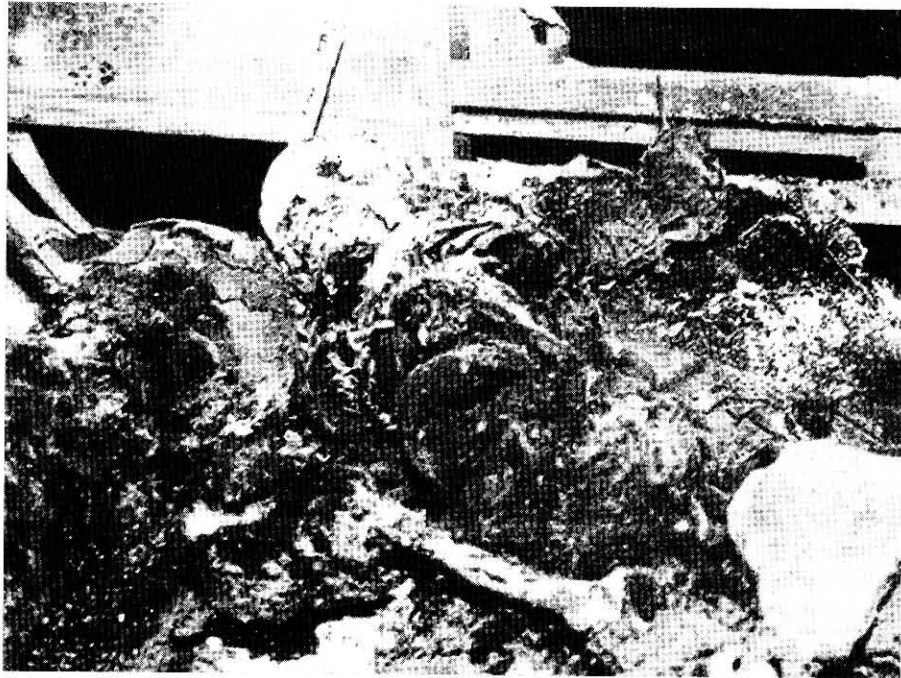
– BJP president Kushabhau Thakre, reacting to the killing of Graham Staines and his two sons.

"I have known these organisations and they have no criminal background."

– Union Home Minister L.K. Advani, on the

accusation that the Bajrang Dal was involved in the killing.

The killing of Graham Staines, Australian-born Christian missionary, and his two sons, in Manoharpur village, Keonjhar, Orissa, on the night of January 22-23, had nationwide repercussions. It



The charred remains of Graham Staines and his two sons

--photo : Asian Age

evoked widespread revulsion, and, coming against the background of recent attacks on Christians in Gujarat and Maharashtra, it was widely perceived as the handiwork of the Sangh Parivar. However, leaders of the BJP, VHP, Bajrang Dal, and RSS were unanimous in denying any connection with the heinous offence. Meanwhile, a section of the press published reports which suggested that the killings were a spontaneous reaction by tribals to Staines' proselytising activities among the tribals. The mystery was added to by the fact that the main accused in the case, one 'Dara Singh', had evaded arrest and proceeded to give a press reporter an interview while in hiding, in which he denied both any connection to the offence and any connection to the Sangh Parivar.

Both because of the nature of the offence, and because of its national importance, Ganatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sanghatana (GASS) decided that, as a part of the AIFOFR all-India fact-finding team investigating various attacks on Christians, it would investigate the Manoharpur killing.

Background :

Manoharpur is a panchayat under Anandpur tahsil of Keonjhar district. Anandpur, a tribal-dominated area, is a subdivisional headquarters. Unlike other tribal-dominated areas of the state, Anandpur tahsil has a population density of more than 200/sq. km. and a literacy rate of nearly 40 per cent, though Manoharpur village is backward by comparison. The village is 185 kms. from the state capital, Bhubaneswar, and about 22 kms. from the state highway. This 22-km stretch runs through hills and jungles. Parasdigha is to the south of Manoharpur and Panasjhada to the east; the northern and eastern sides consist of jungle.

Political background : Most people here live in such poverty that they are today indifferent to political life. The Congress party is known to them, and the Janata Dal has been known for some years. People are now becoming acquainted with the B.J.P.,

particularly after the recent attacks. Surprisingly the people are totally unaware of the existence of any of the left

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panchayat**

political parties and even of adivasi organisations such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha. Though the team could not identify any person associated with BJP, the pattern of incidents suggests that there must be at least one or two BJP supporters in Manoharpur who played the crucial role of identifying Christian homes.

There have been a lot of denials by BJP leaders that the Bajrang Dal existed in the area. But in fact the Bajrang Dal is quite well-known to Manoharpur panchayat. It has some organised activities in and around Manoharpur, in Parasdigha and Panasjhada. While there is no formal organisation of the outfit in Manoharpur village itself, it might have some supporters in the village. Though people reported to the team that all the attackers were outsiders, after the filing of the First Information Report, six persons have been arrested from this village.

Socio-economic background: The village consists of 300 households with a total population of 2,500. Of the total households, 125 belong to landless peasants. Landless peasants and labourers make up over half the village population. Of the total of 300 families, only 30 families are of the Christian community; the rest are either non-Hindu adivasis or Hindu adivasis or plain Hindus. The non-Christian adivasis are mainly Mahanta, Bhumija, Nahuka, Kolha, Santhal and Arach.

Manoharpur panchayat is one of the most backward areas of Orissa. Parasdigha, a village nearby, has 150 households with a population of nearly 1,000. The people belong to the Mahanta, Batudi, Khandual and Dehuri castes. The largest land-holdings are of

five acres, owned by only two to three families; most of the people are small or marginal farmers and landless peasants. Landless peasants here, too, account for nearly 50 per cent of the population. The condition of most villages in the vicinity is similar.

Manoharpur lacks basic facilities like a school, a health centre and a market. The village, however, has a small post-office. Three tube-wells and two small tanks are the only sources of drinking water for a population of 2,500. Agriculture is the chief occupation, with total reliance on rainfall. The single crop harvested is not sufficient to live on. Moreover, over 50 per cent of the population is landless. Therefore, a vast majority has to migrate seasonally to distant places such as Bhadrak, Keonjhar, Baripada, Balasore and Cuttack in search of work as agricultural labourers. Many people go to Cuttack and Bhubaneswar to work as daily-wage contract labourers and return to the village in the agricultural season. The collection and selling of *sal* leaves is another important source of livelihood, providing about Rs. 50 a week. During the lean season, people depend solely on Government work, which is not always available. The condition of the people is so precarious that two square meals a day are a luxury.

Hindu-Christian relations

There is no history of conflict between Christian and non-Christian adivasis. According to Basanti Gagari, a member of the panchayat, "they have no time to quarrel with each other as they are needy people". However, the two groups have little social interaction. The Christians do not observe adivasi festivals but celebrate Christmas and other Christian festivals. The non-Christian adivasis celebrate festivals like "Makar" and "Akhand Shikar" (hunting) as well as "Raja", "Prathamastami" and "Pana Sankranti".

The team members were informed that a few years

back there was a minor misunderstanding between the two communities. The Christians ploughed their land during the "Raja" festival. This upset the Hindus who do not plough their land during this festival which welcomes the monsoon and the start of the cultivating season. However, this misunderstanding was amicably settled.

Background incidents

Before the killing of Staines, there were some unpleasant communal incidents in the area, though not in Manoharpur. The first episode occurred in Jogia Bandh. A Christian priest was attacked and abducted by Mr. Dara Singh of the Bajrang Dal and his followers. The priest was locked up in a room, from where he was rescued by the police. In spite of this, the police did not register a case against the culprits.

The second incident occurred in Satakosia where some Muslims merchants are involved in the business of selling cows. While a group of Muslim merchants were transporting two truck loads of cows, they were attacked by followers of the Bajrang Dal under the leadership of Dara Singh, who stole the cows. Subsequently, they set fire to the trucks killing one helper in the process. Here again, no case against the culprits was registered at the police station.

The team also learnt that an FIR dated February 19, 1998 concerning an assault on Congress workers, had described Dara Singh as a member of the BJP.

During the Makar festival a Santhali Yatra competition is generally conducted. Dancing also takes place at these yatras. For this year's competition, various adivasi yatra (drama) parties attended from distant places such as Rairangpur, Udala and Daitari. The performances continued throughout the day and night. At the time of the

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Staines killing, the festival had been going on for some days.

Jungle fire camp

The jungle fire camp is organised each year during the Makar festival by Father Graham Stewart Staines, who was the missionary chief of Baripada-based Evangelical Missionary Society, Mayurbhanj. An Australian living with his wife and children at Baripada, Staines had been working in Orissa since the 1960s. His daughter and two sons attended school outside Orissa but they came to Baripada for their vacations.

At the jungle camp, each year, Christians from Manoharpur and nearby villages such as Tulsipur, Thalkurmunda, and Dhekoda gathered in large numbers. The camp is a community gathering of Christians where they recite the Bible, sing and dance. Unmarried young men and women sometimes select their future spouses here. Film shows are also screened for light amusement. People also reported that Father Staines came once a year. He usually came on Wednesday night and returned to Baripada on Monday morning.

The attack

As always, this year's jungle camp was organised by Staines. He arrived with his two sons, Philip, aged 12 years, and Timothy, aged nine years, and eight other missionary associates. On the night of January 22, 1999, Staines slept in one of the vans with his two sons, while the others slept in nearby huts and in a big hall behind the church. At about midnight a group of people attacked the van (ORM-1208) in which the father and the two sons were sleeping. Eyewitnesses reported that the van was set on fire and another ring of fire was ignited around it.

The attack was evidently meticulously planned, with advance information. The attackers had cordoned off the entire area and had kept guard around all the Christian homes. Those who were sleeping in the

nearby hall tried to save the victims but they were attacked with traditional weapons. Many fled to the

surrounding jungles. Other villagers also tried to help but they were assaulted and threatened with dire consequences. Most of the villagers expressed their utter helplessness to the team. The villagers reported that the attackers were about 60 in number. A number of villagers informed the team that they were unaware of the incident that night because they were extremely tired after participating in the yatra for the past few nights. Some said that they were very afraid. The Christian families said that when they tried to come out of their houses, they were forcibly pushed back.

A number of tribals did not even know of the incident because they were busy in the Santhali yatra mentioned above. The yatra, with singing and dancing, was going on at the edge of village, about half a kilometre away from the site of the murder, and trees intervened between the two sites. Hence it was impossible for those at the yatra to see the killing. The claim that the Santhali yatra participants watched the killing and gave it their sanction is completely false and diversionary.

The team spoke to several eye witnesses. Pigu Soren, a Santhal, aged 30 years, and a small peasant with one acre of land for a family of eight people, said: "About midnight, the incident took place. At first people did not come forward; after the departure of the attackers, the villagers came out." Radia Soren, another eye witness, ran 25 km through jungle to inform Thakurmunda police station. Bikram Marandi is aged 50 years. His house is adjacent to the church. He claimed, "After hearing a hue and cry we awoke. I wanted to come out of my house but two persons were guarding the doorstep with lathis. They flashed a torchlight in my eyes. I could not see anything. Later I saw that there were seven persons behind the

The attack was evidently meticulously planned, with advance information

vehicle. They were shouting “*mara*” (beat them) — “*pita*” — “*sala*”. When they were setting fire to the vehicle, they were shouting “*Jai Bajrangbali*”. They had sabal, knives, and other weapons. They were pushing bamboos inside the vehicle”. Sakhi Marand said, “I was at home. I could not awake in time due to extreme tiredness after the yatra. I could not recognise them. We have no misunderstanding.”

Some people reported that they heard a few sounds of firing. Some of them also felt that the victims were first killed and then burnt in the van. But the team was unable to obtain substantial evidence of this.

The attackers left the village after burning the vehicle. Though the police was informed of the killing the same night by Radia Soren, they arrived only 8 am the next morning. The police clarification in this regard was that, Thakurmunda police station which is under Mayurbhanj was informed. Since Manoharpur is under Keonjhar district the Thakurmunda P.S informed the S.P. of Mayurbhanj, who informed the S.P., Keonjhar. The S.P., Keonjhar along with other officials then reached the place of the crime.

At the time of writing this report, the police has arrested 51 persons of whom six belong to Manoharpur. They are Mahindra Besra, Gulu Soren, Lalit Marandi, Khitish Marandi, Sudam Marandi and Suhas Murmu. When team members asked the police why these persons were arrested, if the attackers were outsiders, the response was that the attackers had covered their faces. The police claimed that the people were arrested on the basis of the F.I.R.

Later, the team spoke to sub-collector Guru Charon Das who claimed that of the 51 people arrested, 47 were arrested in the first phase and four in the second, all of them on the basis of the FIR lodged. When asked of the involvement of any political party he

said, “I don’t know of the involvement of any party.” About the people’s fear of the administration he said, “Perhaps people are afraid because they think that the police may enquire about the incident and arrest them.” He claimed that an RDC enquiry and a DIG Human Rights enquiry had taken place. Also, a Central Government (Home Dept.) team had visited the place of the killing. He felt, “People are also hiding something. We got the information from S.P. Keonjhar. He got the information from S.P. Mayurbhanj. The S.P. Mayurbhanj got the information from Thakurmunda P.S..”

**Christians made up
0.31 per cent of the
population of
Keonjhar district
in 1991**

On the issue of conversions he said, “I cannot confirm this as the increase in the number of Christians after the 1980s is not clearly known. We heard that the jungle fire was to be performed from the 20th to the 24th. We heard that they converted 31 people within this time. But it is not correct.” In conclusion he said,

“There is no evidence that there will be any attack on Christian people. There is no report about the activities of Bajrang Dal.”

Conversion bogey

After the killing, there was widespread news in local and national dailies regarding conversions of tribals in the region. One of the local dailies, (the Dharitri) reported that about 30 families had been converted from 1980 to January 20, 1999. The team put the same question to the sub-collector who denied any such official information. Team members also discussed with people of Manoharpur and nearby villages but they flatly denied any such occurrence in the recent past asserting that there have been no conversions in the past 20 years. According to Census data of Keonjhar district, the population of Christians was 2,595 in 1971, 3,416 in 1981, and 4,112 in 1991. These accounted for just 0.27 per cent, 0.31 per cent, and 0.31 per cent of the population of Keonjhar in those three years.

Nun abduction case

The fact-finding team also attempted to investigate the case of the abduction of a nun in Baripada.

On February 5, 1999, a Tamil nun and teacher of Saint Mary Girls High School in the Catholic church campus at Langalkota, 15 km from Baripada, came to Baripada to attend an English teaching course at Sarat Chandra Vidyapith. While she was travelling to the bus stand in a rickshaw, a taxi followed her and blocked the path of the rickshaw near the Baripada Municipality office. Apart from the driver, two women were sitting in the back seat. She was offered a lift upto Langalkota by the women who claimed they were on the way to Balasore.

Seeing that women were in the taxi, the nun agreed to join them. After leaving Baripada, the two passengers, who were actually men disguised as women, began molesting the nun. The nun reported that she was raped in the back seat of the taxi. Meanwhile, the taxi was approaching Bethonati, a block headquarters of Mayurbhanj District. The taxi halted and one of the men in the back seat opened the door to take the driver's seat. The nun then managed to escape and ran to the national highway where she blocked a running bus going towards Baripada. She boarded the bus and got down at Gadadewali which has a Catholic church. She went to the hospital attached to the church and reported the horrifying incident to the other nuns. Subsequently, she was taken to Langalkata church hospital by van the same night.

Representatives of Christian Missions met the district administration on February 6. They were advised that a medical examination be conducted. No one has been arrested so far. The nun had informed the police that she did not know the identity of the assailants. The press has chosen to project the entire issue as mysterious.

Observations and conclusions

The Central Government has constituted the one-man Wadhwa Commission to enquire into the killing of Graham Staines and his two sons. However, the Commission is yet to begin its proceedings. In March, Justice D.P. Wadhwa attacked the Central government for not providing the Commission with the basic infrastructure to carry on the inquiry, even after the two months stipulated for the completion of the inquiry had elapsed. Meanwhile, a three-member team of the Union Cabinet, consisting of George Fernandes, Naveen Patnaik, and Murli Manohar Joshi, visited the village for just one hour, and then announced in Delhi that "no organisation was involved" in the killing.

However, our fact-finding team could arrive at the following conclusions:

1. The allegation of involvement of Dara Singh and the Bajrang Dal are widely accepted as true by the local people. The statements by the Sangh Parivar leaders indirectly justifying the deed are further pointers to the involvement of the Bajrang Dal.
2. Though all attackers were outsiders, some people of Manoharpur must have helped in identifying the houses of Christians to prevent any resistance from the Christian Adivasis.
3. There is no conflict between Christian and non-Christian adivasis in Manoharpur which could account for such an incident. The incident is definitely not the result of conversions in the region. It appears to be an attempt to create terror and communal tension for political ends.
4. The administration had long known about the activities of Dara Singh and the Bajrang Dal in the region, yet it failed to take any action against them. Even now, the main accused, Dara Singh, is scot free.

5. Finally, certain details of the burning of the jeeps along with Father Staines and his children point to the *carefully planned nature of the killing*, and to the deliberate attempt to make it look like a spontaneous act of the tribals. (a) The attackers had detailed advance knowledge of the village, the locations of the Christian families, and so on. The killing was executed efficiently. (b) No one reported hearing Staines' or his children's cries while being burnt. It would be natural to shout and attempt to open the jeep doors, but no one has reported that this happened. Eye witnesses have reported seeing the attackers

pushing bamboo poles into the jeep to ensure that the jeep burnt completely. The burning of the jeep with the Staines inside could have been done to erase any evidence of the manner of the killing. (c) There have been some reports that the victims were shot and then burnt in the jeep. This again would suggest advance planning and organisation. (c) Mr. Gurudas Dasgupta, CPI M.P., has in his possession the wrist watch that Mr. Staines was wearing, which he found at a place outside the jeep. If there was no scuffle or resistance how could the watch be found at a place outside the jeep?

Appendix I

Dara Singh's record

As mentioned, the team found that there was no controversy in Manoharpur panchayat regarding the existence of the Bajrang Dal in the region or Dara Singh's affiliation to that organisation. Only the BJP/VHP/Bajrang Dal leaders at the state and national level have denied his affiliation. Fortunately for the Bajrang Dal, it does not maintain membership rolls, which has saved it many an embarrassment over the years.

When Union minister Madan Lal Khurana resigned from the Cabinet and alleged that Dara Singh was of the Bajrang Dal, and that a senior home ministry official had told him that Dara Singh had campaigned for the BJP in Orissa, it is significant that the BJP leadership did not directly contradict his statement. According to a report prepared by intelligence agencies for the Union Home Ministry (reported in *Indian Express*, 26/1/99), Dara Singh was the alias of Rabindra Pal, son of Etawah (U.P.) farmer Mihilal Pal. The report says that Dara Singh was a Bajrang Dal activist. One Chotelal Mohanta, local BJP coordinator of Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts, "utilised Dara Singh's services for canvassing during the last Parliamentary elections." On January 6, Dara

Singh had been booked by the Orissa police for a petty dacoity. Just three days before the killing, according to the intelligence report, Dara Singh led his associates to nearby Tulsi Bani village, held a meeting condemning "missionary activities of conversion" and urged the large gathering to "do something about it". The report says that Dara Singh had been involved in 10-odd cases of wrongful confinement, assault on public servants, rioting, indulging in "obscene acts and songs" at a public place, etc. His acts consisted mainly of "intimidation and criminalisation against members of the minority community."

The Orissa Pradesh Congress Committee president Hemendra Biswal alleged that Dara Singh was the election agent of the BJP for Patna assembly segment in Keonjhar Lok Sabha constituency during the last election. He claimed that Bajrang Dal activists had even staged a dharna in front of the police station demanding the release of Dara Singh when he was arrested in connection with a criminal case some time back. *India Today* (8/2/99) mentions that Dara Singh led an August 16 attack on a truck bearing cattle, during which one of the raiding parties

flaunted a Bajrang Dal banner.

Further, it is reported that the police investigation and the enquiry report of the Revenue Divisional Commissioner, northern range, have revealed the involvement of the Bajrang Dal in the Staines killing.

It is also significant that the Sangh Parivar leaders, while denying any responsibility for the murder, made a number of statements attempting to justify Dara Singh's action. Among such leaders are Subhas Chouhan of Hindu Jagaran Samukhya, Anadi Sahu, vice-president of the Orissa BJP, Aira Kharavla Swain, Balasore MP of the BJP, Giriraj Kishore and Ashok Chowgule of the VHP, and J.P. Mathur, spokesman of the national BJP. (See the chapter of this report "In Their Own Words".)

That Dara Singh has high-level political protection was made evident in April 1999. Although Dara Singh was supposedly absconding and carried a price of

Rs one lakh on his head, he was able to give an interview to a free-lance television journalist, Binay Bhushan Patnaik. According to Patnaik's version, he came across Dara Singh while shooting a video film on the elephant menace in the Judia hills. Dara Singh agreed to the interview after he was convinced of the "good intentions" of the journalist. The conversation convinced Patnaik that Dara was innocent and "could never burn any child alive". Yet Patnaik also mentions that around 50 people carrying automatic weapons were with Dara Singh during the interview.

Outlook (12/4/99) reports that "It is clear that he has friends in the right places and that there is an effort to whitewash him. Dara has sent feelers for surrender, admits director-general of Orissa Police, Dilip Mohapatra. A few days ago, he is believed to have approached Keonjhar district magistrate Saurav Garg through an intermediary, Sushil Agarwal."

Appendix II

Distorted press coverage

Press reports on the Staines killing even in several prestigious publications have been misleading. Here we take just one example, from *India Today* (8/2/99). The article, titled "Burning Shame", begins by condemning the murder. Then it goes on to seek the causes:

But it was his (Graham Staines') role as a Christian preacher that contributed to his grisly end. Overwhelmed by epidemics, malnutrition and illiteracy, Orissa is low on general expectations but high on religious fervour. Roads may be non-existent and starvation deaths not uncommon, but Orissa has become the battleground involving Christian and Hindu missionaries in a war for the hearts and minds of the tribals.... In organising another four-day jungle camp in Manoharpur last month, *Staines was courting trouble*. For the past 14 years, he visited the village during the annual jungle camps

instructing tribals on a range of subjects from public hygiene to the Bible.... A dusty inaccessible village of 150-odd Santhal families, Manoharpur too had been afflicted by the distrust sweeping the rest of the state. With 22 families having converted to Christianity over the years, the village stood clearly divided on religious lines when Staines arrived on January 20 with some fellow preachers and his two sons.

"Graham was never into conversions. All he did was spread the message of the Lord", insists widow Glades. Others, however, believe that his preaching often led to conversions. "He was killed because he was proselytising. People might have killed him in a fit of rage", says state Hindu Jagran Samukhya convenor Subhash Chauhan. "Tempers have been frayed for long", admits local sarpanch Thakurdas Murmu. Yet, contrary to what has been claimed, conversion

was not the immediate provocation. The last conversion in Manoharpur took place a year ago. Tension was brewing over traditional tribal customs between the converts and other Santhals in recent months. In June last year, during the Raja festival – the earth is said to be menstruating then – the converts violated local custom by continuing to till the land. This led to heated exchanges between the converts and traditional Santhals. Things hotted up again early January when conservative tribesmen objected to Santhali Christian carols being played at a Christian marriage in the village.

Known for guarding their customs zealously, the Santhals were incensed by this cultural separation.... All had plenty of time to brood and get angry. Staines' arrival in the village gave them a chance to get even with those who dared to go against the traditional customs. Help came readily from Dara Singh, a Hindu fanatic from Etawah in Uttar Pradesh who was active along the Mayurbhanj-Keonjhar border since 1980. While Staines and his sons slept in the car parked outside the village prayer hall – his companions were sleeping inside – the mob descended on them. About 100 metres away, young Santhal boys

and girls were celebrating their attainment of adolescence by dancing the traditional Dhangri to the beat of drums. They witnessed everything but chose to do nothing. Says a senior police official, "The gruesome act seemingly had the collective consent of the Santhals"....

...the religious map of Orissa has not changed. *The trouble starts when a handful of converts defy age-old traditions and customs.* As missionaries target the farthest and the most inaccessible areas, the violation of tribal customs have ranged the non-converts against the converts. (emphasis added)

The errors in the *India Today* piece are evident when it is compared with the findings of the fact-finding team. The *India Today* article depicts a near-spontaneous act of the Manoharpur tribals in reaction to conversions and local tensions with their Christian neighbours; it claims that the Santhali yatra participants watched and endorsed the killing (this impression is strengthened by a graphic accompanying the article, which is not at all drawn to scale); and it winds up by indirectly blaming the Christians for starting "trouble" by "violation of tribal customs".

VII. In Their Own Words

The recent attacks on Christians are not, as BJP leaders claim, scattered and isolated incidents, but part of a systematic policy by the RSS-BJP-VHP-Bajrang Dal and other arms of the Sangh Parivar. This conclusion emerges not only from the investigation of individual incidents, but also from the statements by the leaders of the Sangh Parivar organisations. Especially since the last quarter of 1998, these leaders have let forth a torrent of inflammatory statements and poisonous disinformation about Christians in India. There is a clear correlation between the rise in incidents of violence on Christians and the proliferation of such statements by the Sangh Parivar leadership.

Below we have culled a few quotations from the press which bear this out. Note that, for example, the Staines murder was preceded by a series of statements vilifying Christian missionaries, as well as open threats to Christians that no one could save them from a "Hindu backlash". Similarly, note that the themes introduced at one point by, say, the VHP or Bajrang Dal are later picked up and developed by Vajpayee, Advani, or other BJP leaders. Thirdly, the BJP leaders repeatedly find direct or indirect justifications for the attacks, even as they claim to have nothing to do with the actual incidents. Finally, many of these quotations offer grounds for prosecution under sec. 153A of the Indian Penal Code, namely, promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion.

Initial focus: the north-east

Within a short time of the BJP-led government coming to power, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) issued a public statement charging the Church with encouraging separatism in the north-east (*Business Standard*, 16/4/98). "The Baptist Mission Church fathers in Mizoram support the separatist agitations and insurgency under the garb of preaching liberation theology. But for them, liberation does not mean salvation or mukti from worldly life, but freedom and separation from national bonds. So there is a growth of insurgency in the north-eastern region", said the statement by senior RSS leader Shrikant Joshi. Mizoram is a Christian-majority

state. There is a cluster of small tribes straddling the borders between Mizoram, Myanmar (Burma) and Tripura. These tribes include the Pnars, Mhars and the Reangs. The RSS claims to champion the cause of these tribals, most of whom are not Christians. The RSS statement says: "Many Chakmas had to run away from villages to save their honour, religion and life. It is because there was no RSS in Mizoram (until some time ago)... The Pnars, Mhars and some Reangs are Christians, but they too were exploited and harassed by the Mizos.... This was the outcome of Christianity and the separatist teachings of the Church."

In the last week of March 1998, the RSS held a three-

day conference of its highest policy-making body, the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha, in Bangalore. The annual report of the general secretary, H.V. Seshadri, to the Sabha specifically mentioned the RSS's "social intervention" in Mizoram, where "a terrible fate awaits its Hindu minority population if they refuse to get converted to Christianity" (*Frontline*, 24/4/98). The RSS claimed that there was a "terrible spree of looting, burning, killing and rape by a couple of Mizo terrorists organisations abetted by Christian missionaries." (*Outlook*, 27/4/98)

At a joint press conference in Guwahati on April 21, 1998, the RSS and the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (AIVKA) charged that Christian missionaries were behind the Bodo tribals' militancy. The president of the Assam unit of the RSS, B.D. Buragohain, declared that his party had launched a campaign all over the region to "at least stop conversions", and the Kalyan Ashram, a front of the RSS, was playing an important role in this mission. He claimed the RSS and the AIVKA had jointly "re-converted" at least 50,000 Christians back to their original religions. (*Asian Age*, 22/4/99) Meanwhile, a letter allegedly written by P.B. Acharya, the BJP man in charge of the north-east, to Vajpayee, found its way to the press. The letter boasts about having made inroads into "Christland": "It would have been commendable to chalk out similar programmes so that we can wipe out this unholy Christianity...." (*Outlook*, 27/4/98) The BJP claimed the letter was a forgery.

"Christians are a greater threat"

It soon became evident, however, that the Sangh Parivar did not intend to limit the issue to the north-east. On September 5, 1998, the national convenor of the Bajrang Dal, one Dr Surendra Kumar Jain, said that Christian missionaries were working against the national interest. "They are helping separatist forces.... *Hum unhe Bharat chodne ke liye vivash karenge* (we will compel them to leave India) by virtually launching a quit India movement against

them", he said. "They do not have a moral right to stay in India." He alleged that Christian missionaries have links with the drug mafia. *The Bajrang Dal was working to identify such missionaries* on the basis of the Niyogi Commission which he claimed had been set up by the Motilal Vohra government during BJP rule in Madhya Pradesh. (*Asian Age*, 6/9/98; the Niyogi Commission was actually of 1956)

When Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) activists stormed the I.P. Mission School at Rajkot, in Gujarat, and burnt about 300 copies of the Bible, the Chief Minister of Gujarat made clear his bias by ordering a probe into why and how the school authorities had provoked the violent backlash by the VHP. He asked: "The volunteers have certainly overreacted. Burning the Bible is certainly an offence. But why is there no demand for action against the school authorities?" (*Frontline*, 11/9/98) Displaying his ignorance, he also said that what was burnt was not the Bible, but only the New Testament (!).

When Bajrang Dal activists stormed a convention of the Alpha Missionary Movement in Vadodara, Gujarat, and beat up the participants, the VHP leader Praveen Togadia claimed that the VHP had merely rescued a few delegates who had complained that there was an attempt to forcibly convert them. "Our movement is not limited to only missionaries, we will fight it out against anyone trying to forcefully convert Hindus to other religions". (*Asian Age*, 31/10/99) After the rape of four nuns at Nawapada in Jhabua district, M.P., Vishwa Hindu Parishad central secretary and former BJP MP B.L. 'Prem' Sharma said that the "assault" on the nuns and the attack on a convent in Baghpat (U.P.) in August were "the direct result" of the conversion of Hindus to Christianity by missionaries. He even claimed the rape to be the expression of the "*anger of patriotic Hindu youth against anti-national forces*" (emphasis added). He charged the Congress (I) government with being "unnecessarily energetic" in dealing with the incident and giving it "undue importance". (*Frontline*, 23/10/98; 4/12/98) Later, in December 1998,

the Union home minister, L.K. Advani, claimed in Parliament that “out of the 24 accused in the Jhabua nuns rape case, 12 belong to the Christian community”, a claim strongly contested by Christian organisations. (*Asian Age*, 14/12/98)

On September 31, 1998, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad general secretary Giriraj Kishore said that “Foreign missionaries should be removed from the country”, claiming that they were involved in forcible conversions in some states and insurgency in the northeast. “We will first appeal to the missionaries to go” (*Times of India*, 1/10/98), leaving unstated what they would do if the missionaries did not respond to this “appeal”.

At an RSS camp in Meerut on November 22, RSS leader Rajendra Singh warned that “Muslims and Christians will have to accept Hindu culture as their own if Hindus are to treat them as Indians” (AFP, *Asian Age*, 23/11/98). Expressing a significant shift in Sangh Parivar strategy, VHP general secretary Giriraj Kishore announced in Chandigarh on November 25 that “*Today the Christians constitute a greater threat than the collective threat from separatist Muslim elements.*” (*Asian Age*, 26/11/99; emphasis added)

On December 14, the RSS general secretary K. Sudarshan accused a section of Christian missionaries in India of spreading false information about the RSS and VHP as part of a worldwide conspiracy called “Evangelisation 2000 and beyond”. Sudarshan claimed that the plotters intended to provide a church for every village and a Bible for every individual by the year 2000. An “incredibly large array” of missionaries, equipped with the most modern and sophisticated devices were already engaged in this task, he added. (*Economic Times*, 15/12/98)

Escalating into a major offensive

It was at this juncture that the attacks on Christians in Gujarat escalated. This was also reflected in the tenor and frequency of the Sangh Parivar leadership’s statements.

On December 27, the VHP working president (also sometimes referred to as the “international executive president”), Ashok Singhal, alleged that the Nobel Prize awarded to Amartya Sen was part of a “Christian conspiracy to propagate their religion and wipe out Hinduism from this country.” He said that considering the present state of the country, the award to Sen was clearly “politically motivated, like the peace prize to Mother Teresa earlier.” He said Mother Teresa did not do anything for peace, “and we all know what she really did.... These Nobel Prizes were only intended to give sanction to Christianity to spread its base in the country.” Referring to Sen’s assertion that literacy was essential for a country’s development and prosperity, Singhal said this was only intended to enable Christian missionaries to spread their network of educational institutions and take over the country’s development. He warned of the “increasing domination of the leadership of the country by Christians”. He claimed that Christians and Muslims would not allow any other religion to survive. “Hindus are targeted in these states (Nagaland and Mizoram)”, he claimed. “But nobody wants to become a Christian. Wherever our workers approached (them) with our programmes and campaigns, people have returned to our fold in thousands and churches have been replaced by temples”, he said, referring to the VHP’s re-conversion campaigns in Banswara, Rajasthan, and other places. Accusing Christian missionaries of carrying out conversions through force and allurements, Singhal alleged that the Naxalite outfits active in the country were “protective shields of Christianity”. “Christianity is being spread in the country at gunpoint”, he alleged. The VHP joint general secretary in charge of Gujarat, Pravin Togadia, said that the missionaries had the backing of the Naxalites. (*Indian Express*, 28/12/98)

On the following day, that is, December 28, Singhal alleged a conspiracy by the World Council of Churches to create discord among Hindus and Christians. He said that there was an effort going on for unification of various “warring” Churches, and the trouble in Gujarat was being fomented by Christian

groups to bring them together. He claimed that it was the "militant" elements within the Christian population who were attacking the Hindus there. Further, he said, 19 "militant Christian organisations" were active in the northeast. These groups were abetted and financially assisted by foreign agencies and divisive forces. (*Hindu*, 29/12/98) Further, Naxalite organisations in Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and now in Gujarat are also private armies of Christians. (*Indian Express*, 29/12/98) "The Naxalites and various liberation forces set up by small groups in the northeast are being used as private armies by the Christian missionaries. The VHP is opposed to any such forced conversion of the poor." He said "Christian militancy", which had been confined to some states, was now spreading to all states, particularly those with a sizeable tribal population. A number of foreign nationals had arrived in India from abroad to facilitate the conversions and these persons were funding "Christian militants" with a view to terrorising the poor who had been refusing to accept Christianity. He said that the "evangelisation programme" of various churches had not succeeded to the "desired levels" "due to the awakening of Hindus". (*Times of India*, 29/12/98)

According to a resolution passed by the board of trustees of the VHP, the funds brought into the country for the propagation of Christianity were used for the purchase of arms and other equipment to "conduct a violent assault on the Indian State". (*Times of India*, 30/12/98) (The "Naxalite" theme came up again in a statement of January 31, 1999, by Mahendra Bhatt, VHP secretary in charge of Gujarat and Rajasthan. He said that the VHP was planning to set up 150 schools in the tribal belt this year with the aim of "saving the tribals from foreign influence." Although he clarified that the schools would neither have trained teachers, nor seek Government recognition, they would instruct tribal children in "the Hindu way of life" up to standard III. "This is necessary if we have to save the tribals from being guided and influenced by foreign missionaries.... If we don't reach them, either the Naxalites or the missionaries

will", said Bhatt. – *Indian Express*, 1/2/99)

On December 29, information and broadcasting minister Pramod Mahajan declared that the alleged attacks on churches in Gujarat were "scattered incidents blown out of proportion by vested interests to defame the Bharatiya Janata Party". (*Times of India*, 30/12/98) Meanwhile Janubhai Pawar, Dangs district chief of the Hindu Dharmajagran Manch (a front for the Sangh Parivar), said that "If the administration does not throw them (Christian priests) out, we will." (*Indian Express*, 2/1/99)

On December 30, Mahajan strongly defended the VHP: "Missionaries are indulging in conversions under the cover of service to the poor. How can we justify it? Even Jesus Christ would not justify the use of missionary services for religious conversion.... The objection of the VHP (to) such gross misuse of services for such purposes is totally justified." (*Indian Express*, 31/12/98)

On December 31, Mahajan refused to condemn the VHP for its role in the attacks on Christians in Gujarat: "Don't ask me to condemn the VHP. When I don't have proof of its involvement, I will not condemn it". When asked by interviewers about earlier press reports of his having defended the VHP in relation to Gujarat, he said he was "misquoted". (*Indian Express*, 1/1/99)

The Gujarat chief minister Keshubhai Patel gave a revealing interview to the *Times of India* (5/1/99), in which he parroted malicious and false stories about the violence in Dangs: "If there was any tension, then my government wouldn't have given permission for the rallies. How were we to expect that there would be stone-throwing incidents by some Christians during the procession. The situation took a turn for the worse and on the same night, a temple was attacked. Hence, it was natural for a retaliation in four places in Dangs district." (emphasis added) Regarding the churches that were burnt in the district, he said: "What is there to destroy as only huts existed there.

When there are reports that a church was attacked, people imagine many things.” As for the demand for a judicial inquiry, “There is no need for that. No deaths have occurred. Besides, only the door of a prayer hall in a place was destroyed.” He repeated this theme on January 7, when he said the Dangs incidents were “very, very minor since no person had died and the extent of damages was only Rs four lakh, including Rs 2.5 lakh to vehicles.” (*Indian Express*, 8/1/99)

In an interview with *Frontline* (29/1/99), Patel was even more virulent. He claimed that the Christian population in Dangs had risen to 60,000, or about 60 per cent of the population: “This is because Christian missionaries are at work here. It is against this work that emotions have been aroused. The situation turned violent because of this work.” He followed this with a bizarre anecdote claiming to show how uneducated, poor adivasis are tricked by missionaries into converting. “It is because of the highly charged emotions of these adivasis that the (Dangs) incidents took place. Should the Government allow these missionaries to go about converting people? Should a person be induced with bribes into changing his religion? This cannot be allowed. We have been able to control this sort of activity in Baroda.” He came out clearly against conversions *as such*, saying that he told Christian missionaries that if Christian “religious practices are done for conversions, there is bound to be internal conflict. This is because when an adivasi changes his religion, his relations turn against him.” He made clear his support for the activities of the Hindu Jagaran Manch, which is the main accused in the cases regarding the attacks: “When the Government takes action (against “forced” conversions) it leads to confusion. Initially we thought that we would leave alone those who had become Christians. There is no question of taking them back. But *now the HJM is spreading awareness by way of preaching. Till today they (Christian missionaries) had it easy. There was no one to stop them. But now someone has come to counter them.*”

VHP propaganda effort

The RSS mouthpiece *Organiser*, in its December 27 and January 3 issues, carried a two-part article titled “A message to Indian Christians”, written by one N.S. Rajaram. The article concludes: “*The best protection for Indian Christians is the goodwill of the majority. Don’t sacrifice it simply because some self-serving ‘leaders’ instigate you by creating a climate of fear and making false promises. They will not be there to defend you when there is a backlash, which one hopes will never be. How many ‘secularist’ intellectuals and Muslim ‘leaders’ were around at Ram Janmabhoomi when the kar-sevaks demolished the Babri Masjid? In short, don’t become pawns in their game, they have their own agendas – as part of the global agenda. Another point I would like to make is that Christian leaders must not try to fool the public into believing that they can bring international pressure to bear on India with their propaganda tactics. They must realise that the tension today is not between them and the government, but between their offensive activities and the natural reaction of the tolerant Hindu community. They would be committing a very great mistake if they think the West will come to their aid, which seems to be in the back of the minds of some Indian Christians. Even in Pakistan, where the persecution of Christians is open and widespread, the US and other countries have not lifted a finger, despite Pakistan’s desperate dependence on American aid.*” (quoted in *Asian Age*, 30/12/98; emphases added)

On January 1, the VHP demanded that the Centre issue a “white paper” on the activities of Christian missionaries across the country in the last ten years. Quoting reports published in local newspapers and FIRs registered at various places in Gujarat, VHP media centre chief Lokesh Singh alleged that the attacks were, in fact, planned by Christian missionaries. “It began with an attack on a small temple in Dangs, in which a prominent ‘sant’ was critically wounded”. The VHP, he said, had identified 200 sensitive districts all over the country for the reconver-

sions. "These are located mostly in the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and the North-East. We have also identified 50,000 villages in these districts for launching a public awareness campaign against the activities of the Christian missionaries. We have already established contacts with 10,000 villages. There will be one 'shakti-kendra' (power-centre) for every 25 villages. These centres will work as the nodal point for regulating reconversion work in these districts." He said that, realising the importance of this task, the VHP had earmarked a corpus of Rs five crore for it. "About a thousand youth, mostly hailing from the tribal-dominated areas, will be trained for the job of propagating the Hindu religion in these districts", he stated. (*Indian Express*, 2/1/99)

These claims are also made in a series of *parichay mala* booklets circulated at a nine-day meet of the VHP in Jaipur which ended on December 30, 1998. The booklets also claim that the VHP has already "reconverted" 1,80,000 people to Hinduism. They make clear how the VHP drive will be carried out: the "achievements" listed in booklet number 5 mentions forcible occupation of places of worship and schools run by missionaries of other religions, physically assaulting them at times, and the "demoralising" effect all this has on them. It cites an incident in Hazaribagh-Chatra area in south Bihar where the VHP occupied a school run by Christian missionaries in Darwera village. Two other villages also similarly "handed over" the Christian schools to the VHP. In one village in the same region, a VHP-led mob forced Christians to tender a written apology after a clash. In Kospara village in Gopali Ashram, West Bengal, the VHP took possession of a school building set up by Christians "who have fled the place". In Halfong in Assam, a family that converted to Christianity was forced to leave the village. The booklet mentions an incident in Kota district of Rajasthan where VHP student workers beat up Christian missionaries and gloats over the fact that they successfully evaded legal action despite a police case, as the

police could not find any evidence against the miscreants. The Christians have since stopped going to that village, the booklet says. (*Indian Express*, 1/1/99) This is in line with the view of the Bajrang Dal chief and VHP leader Vinay Katiyar that "the Muslim and Christian evil" needs to be tackled not only through "peaceful and creative activities but also by using might, as that is the only language that these divisive forces understand." (*Frontline*, 1/1/99).

On January 2, at the BJP national executive meeting in Bangalore, BJP president Kushabhau Thakre described the incidents of attacks on Christians as "sporadic incidents" and denied they were part of a plan: "An unrelated development... is the charge that a grand conspiracy is afoot against India's Christian community. Nothing could be farther from the truth." Meanwhile, in Delhi, VHP general secretary Giriraj Kishore similarly said that "The canards being spread by Christians against the VHP and Bajrang Dal are part of a well-calculated global conspiracy to lower the BJP's image and bring infamy to the VHP and Bajrang Dal." (*Times of India*, 3/1/99) On January 4, Thakre again said that the reports were "one-sided" and were "blown out of proportions". On January 31 Thakre said the "campaign" against minorities in the country was part of a "conspiracy" to defame the BJP; the conspiracy was hatched by foreign powers who were not happy with this government because it was not "pliable". (*Asian Age*, 1/2/99)

The VHP president Vishnu Hari Dalmiya, dropping the pretence of opposing only "forced" conversions, made it clear on January 7 that "we are strongly opposed to conversions and would not allow it to take place anywhere in the country." (*Indian Express*, 8/1/99) He used the tested Sangh Parivar method of manufacturing 'evidence': "Huge amounts of money", he claimed, "are coming from the U.S. and England to missionaries which are being used to lure tribals and backward people to Christianity. Thanks to their activities, the north-east is slowly slipping out of our hands." Claiming to cite the Catholic Dictionary of India, he said that of the 22.5 million Chris-

tians in India, over 2,00,000 (two lakhs) are active missionaries. "Their aim is to set up nine lakh more churches in India by 2001. Who knows how much money is needed to accomplish this mission? The 1994 edition of the Mission Book says Christian institutions and missions in India received Rs 4,000 crore in one year (1984) alone". The VHP would counter this: "For getting funds from abroad, we are urging the government to treat us on a par with Muslim and Christian organisations." (*Times of India*, 9/1/99)

Maharashtra

On January 5, the "Dharma Raksha Samiti", a Sangh Parivar front outfit, held a conference (a "Vishal Hindu Sammelan") in Peth taluka of Nashik district, Maharashtra, and gave Christian missionaries an ultimatum to wind up their activities, close their offices, and leave the tribal areas of the region by March 31, 1999. If they did not do so by that date, "stern action" would be taken against them. The Sammelan warned that these institutions will be responsible if "fights break out by mistake" after the expiry of the deadline. The head of this outfit, one Janu Aware, said that after the missionaries left, the Samiti would reconvert the tribals and "return" them to the Hindu fold. One "Swami" Aseem Anand, leader of the Sangh Parivar-affiliated Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, notorious for his role in the Gujarat incidents, also addressed the rally. He claimed that tribals in the Dangs who had converted to Christianity were "re-converting" to Hinduism and within a month not a single Christian family would be left to be re-converted. At the function, the Shankaracharya of Karveer Peeth, Vidyashankar Bharati, carried out a ceremony 'reconverting' 37 Christian tribals to Hinduism. He said: "*Request them (the missionaries) once, twice, thrice and if they do not refrain from their activities, then take the next step.*" Retaliation against "injustice" is perfectly justified, he added. "*Hindus have the power to reduce the whole world to ashes. But the power is to be kept under control*". (*Indian Express*, 5/1/99 and 6/1/99; *Times of India*, 6/1/99; emphases added)

When asked to comment on the Peth rally's ultimatum, VHP president Vishnu Hari Dalmia claimed that nobody had asked Christians to leave the area. "It was a rally against conversions." (*Hindu*, 8/1/99)

On the same day as the rally, Maharashtra chief minister Manohar Joshi gave token assurances of protection to the Christian community. However, he said: "I will maintain that the forcible conversion of tribals to Christianity will not be allowed." He added that he had received complaints from "some Hindu groups" (which he did not name) that the missionaries working in the area were forcibly converting tribals to Christianity. (*Asian Age*, 6/1/99)

After the rally, Samiti convenor Janu Aware announced in a signed statement that the cries of tribals against Christian missionaries are not "squeals of foxes but roars of tigers." "The mountain has woken up and the Mountain God has possessed the tribals, who will not tolerate insults (to their traditions) any more", the statement said. (*Indian Express*, 10/1/99)

Vajpayee's visit to Dangs

A very important juncture in the series of developments was the visit of the Prime Minister to Dangs on January 10, 1999. His statement there provided crucial backing to the Sangh Parivar campaign in the region. He rejected the demand for the dismissal of the Gujarat government, called the allegations against it "baseless", and indeed commended it for "effectively" controlling the situation in a short span of time. He even said that "to some extent, the incidents have been overplayed". Secondly, he said that the "root cause of the violence in Dangs was the conversion issue." He hinted at plans for a change in the Constitution: "For 50 years we have followed the Constitution, but in 1998 the incidents in Dangs have brought the issue of conversion to the fore." He said an "open-minded debate" both inside and outside Parliament would help in evolving a broad consensus which would be in the interest of all communities. He said that two local "Gandhians" had sought

a law to ban conversions. When a Christian delegation complained against the “reconversions” being carried out by the Sangh Parivar organisations, he said that if Christian missionaries continued religious conversions, the Government could not stop “reconversions” (*Times of India*, 11/1/99) – thereby giving his blessing to the terror tactics of the VHP.

Vajpayee’s remarks were immediately welcomed by the VHP president Ashok Singhal. Gujarat’s aggressively communal minister of state for home, Haren Pandya, said, “Initially, we wondered why the Prime Minister was coming here, but now we are happy.” (*Times of India*, 13/1/99) BJP vice-president J.P. Mathur also welcomed the Prime Minister’s call for a national debate on conversions and said: “We urge the government to go a step further and ensure greater transparency in the flow of foreign funds to all organisations, irrespective of their religious identities. The loopholes in the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act need to be plugged.” He alleged that foreign funds were being pumped in to allure poor people into embracing Christianity. “Or else, why don’t the missionaries work in cities. Why only in tribal areas, where people are poor and ignorant”, Mr Mathur said. (*Asian Age*, 12/1/99)

Labelling Christians the “foreign hand”

The next day, VHP secretary Praveenbhai Togadia declared that since Sonia Gandhi had become Congress president, conversions to Christianity had increased. Charging that she had only met Christians on her visit to Gujarat, he said that “By her action, she has established herself only as the leader of the Christians.” Demanding central intervention to ban conversions, Dr Togadia said the constitution should be amended to prevent forced conversions (apparently unaware that use of force is already against the law). While describing the “reconversion” of Christians to Hinduism as a “homecoming”, he described the conversions to Christianity as a “change of nationality”. Through the church, which was headquartered abroad, foreign powers could do whatever

they wanted in India, he alleged, emphasising, “*Conversions challenge our national unity.*” (*Times of India*, 13/1/99; emphasis added) Togadia went on a nationwide tour to spread his gospel. At Bangalore on January 19, he reiterated his demand for a ban on conversions, and added a demand for a judicial probe into the foreign funds obtained by the Church in India. “The Church is endangering national unity and integrity by supporting and funding terrorists in north-eastern states and Jharkhand.” He simultaneously washed his hands of the Gujarat violence and gave it tacit endorsement: “What is happening there (in Dangs) is retaliation against the forced conversion. It is a conflict between converted tribal and non-converted tribals.” Asked if what was happening in Gujarat was a trial run of a larger plan to attack churches all over the country, he noted: “I do not think this will spread to the rest of the country, because Hindus are known for their tolerance and patience. *But if conversions continue, this cannot be ruled out.*” (*Times of India*, 20/1/99; emphasis added)

VHP president Vishnu Hari Dalmiya also made clear the organisation’s opposition to conversion *per se*: “...we are strongly opposed to conversions and would not allow it anywhere.” He said that there had been large-scale conversions in Gujarat and the VHP was determined to stop it and also reconvert those who had become Christian. (*Asian Age*, 8/1/99)

The Sangh Parivar continued to spread poisonous propaganda about Christian missionaries. K.R. Malkani, BJP leader, wrote in the *Economic Times* (19/1/99): “Nor did the missionary activity abate after independence. They farmed out the whole country to different Christian denominations for concentrated efforts at conversions. The simple device is to advance money to tribals and then write off their loans if they embrace Christianity, but charge them interest if they don’t.... Why do foreign missionaries come with tons of money? To run schools and hospitals?... *The Church will have to come clean*

on these issues if it is not to be viewed as a dangerous state within a sovereign state.” (emphasis added)

Just ten days after the VHP had demanded a ‘white paper’ documenting the activities of Christian missionaries in India over the last decade, Union home minister L.K. Advani announced on January 11 that his ministry would present a ‘white paper’ on the violence in Dangs: “The ministry plans to delve into the root of the conflict in the area, going back by nearly 10 years. Among other things, it will examine what the Christian population in Dangs was then, how much it has shot up since then, what factors led to the tribals’ ire over alleged forced conversions, and why the violence did not erupt earlier. The white paper will also detail the spread of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence in India over the years, its links with known criminals and mafia dons and its hectic efforts – particularly during the last few years – to forge links with regional insurgent groups.” (*Indian Express*, 12/1/99) In other words, responsibility for the violence was to be laid at the door of the Christians and Pakistan.

Shifting stands of George Fernandes

It is interesting to trace the shifting stands of George Fernandes, Samata party leader and Union defence minister, as he nestled closer and closer to his larger alliance partner. On December 31 he said in an interview with the *Times of India* (1/1/99) that “I see a great danger to the Government because, if *the organisations which are associated with any of the parties in power*, get into situations where the Constitution is challenged, then the Government runs into trouble. I am deeply worried about it.” (emphasis added) According to the *Times*, he censured the VHP for its alleged involvement in the anti-Christian violence, and demanded action against some of the VHP functionaries for making provocative statements. (However, in the quotations actually given in the article, he does not mention the VHP by name.) He stated that “What is happening (in Gujarat) has dealt a big blow to the secular character of our polity.

The national agenda of our Government speaks of a secular polity”. He also criticised the state government for its failure to protect the rights of citizens. On the other hand, he praised the stands taken by Vajpayee and Advani on this issue.

By January 21 Fernandes stated that, however, “he did not appreciate attempts to politicise the issue” of the attacks on Christians. In the context of international criticism of the attacks, he hinted at an international conspiracy: “It is only because India has become a nuclear country and successfully carried out (a) nuclear test, which is unpalatable for nuclear countries and hence they have mounted (an) attack on our country”.

By January 28, after visiting the site of the Staines killing, Fernandes no longer worried about the activities of “organisations which are associated with any of the parties in power”, and claimed that in fact there was no evidence about the involvement of Hindu communal groups. Instead, he told a press conference in Delhi that anti-Christian violence had been blown out of proportion as part of a “deep-seated international conspiracy” to overthrow the Vajpayee government. “I can see not just a political party but I see a whole lot of forces.... forces in this country which would like to see the Government go. There are forces abroad which are not prepared to tolerate this Government”, he said. He refused to identify these forces. (*Asian Age*, 29/1/99) “I believe the conspiracy is not confined to what has happened in Orissa, it is meant to crucify everyone, Atal Behari Vajpayee onwards.” He was able only to point to a report in the American newsmagazine *Newsweek*, in which “the facts are wrong... the figures are wrong.” (*Times of India*, 29/1/99)

Justifying the Staines killing

About the Staines killings, there are of course a number of statements by leaders of the Sangh Parivar denying involvement of any wing of the Parivar in the incident. *But there are also many revealing state-*

ments by leaders of the Sangh Parivar which attempt to justify the killings.

Subhas Chouhan, convenor of the "Hindu Jagaran Samukhya", Orissa (described by the *Times of India* as a "frontal organisation" of the RSS), alleged that Staines was killed because he was "proselytising". Saying that people may have killed him in a "fit of rage", Chouhan said that the issue should not be communalised(!). (*Indian Express*, 24/1/99) Speaking to the *Times* (7/2/99), Chouhan said that Staines "died because he was into conversions. He might have been killed in a fit of public rage." Chouhan claims that "Innocent tribals are being weaned away into Christianity with an admixture of Ladies, Padies and Hens." The *Times* correspondent explains that "Ladies, if Chouhan is to be believed, means the promise of women. Padies is free supply of paddy and Hens are grand non-vegetarian feasts hosted free for the starving tribals."

Other Sangh Parivar leaders spoke along similar lines. Anadi Sahu, Orissa vice-president of the BJP and member of the party's three-member fact-finding team to the site, the act was "a result of a conflict of culture between the Hindus and Christians. He also said that a group of Australian missionaries of which Staines was a member has been proselytising in the area since 1980. (*Indian Express*, 25/1/99) BJP president Kushabhau Thakre ominously warned Christian missionaries that they were inviting trouble through their activities. In a grotesque reference to the burning of the Staines family, he said: "I appeal to the missionaries that *they are sitting on a stack of hay. They better be careful.*" (*Frontline*, 26/2/99; emphasis added)

No doubt Union home minister L.K. Advani leapt to the defence of Bajrang Dal and the VHP, saying dismissively on January 25 itself that "I have known these organisations and they have no criminal background." He pointed out that "They have categorically denied their involvement." But on the same day, BJP spokesman J.P. Mathur stated in a press brief-

ing at Delhi that Staines had converted 31 persons to Christianity. (*Free Press Journal*, 26/1/99) Note that Mathur was ready with this "information" within two days of the news of Staines' death.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, while denying involvement in the killing, said on January 25 that "The incident in Orissa should be seen in terms of an intra-tribal conflict, with the Hindus among the Santhal tribe resisting the attempts of the converted tribals (Christians) and the foreign missionaries to spread their influence." (*Times of India*, 26/1/99) VHP leader Giriraj Kishore claimed that Staines was involved in proselytisation in the tribal belt; the leprosy hospital was a façade, since there were no such people within a wide radius of where he lived and worked. (*Times of India*, 29/1/99; *Frontline*, 26/2/99) Bajrang Dal convenor S.K. Jain said that all efforts would be made to stop the Christians' "changai meetings" (spiritual healing sessions). He threatened: "*Hum kisi ko cherege nahin aur koi cherega to chorenge nahin*" (We will not provoke anyone, but if provoked we will not spare them". (*Indian Express*, 28/1/99) Aira Kharavala Swain, BJP MP from Balasore, Orissa, went further and termed Staines a "social criminal". He claimed that there had been a lot of resentment against Staines because of his role in "mass-scale conversions". Swain alleged that Staines had converted several "Hindu" tribals to Christianity and was responsible for clashes between the two communities in the past. Staines' killing was a fallout of the bitterness against him. He further alleged that the missionaries were destroying Hinduism because of its liberal attitude, and challenged them to convert Muslims. (*Midday*, 31/1/99)

Items appeared in Orissa local newspapers that Graham Staines had pulled a gun on those who attacked him on the night of January 22/23. Who might have planted this theory in the press? On January 27 the Maharashtra state unit chief of the VHP, Ashok Chowgule, claimed, on the basis of reports his organisation had allegedly received from Manoharpur, that the tribals had burnt Staines after

he had pointed a gun at them. The VHP claimed that Staines used to carry out conversions at his jungle camps. It further claimed that, angered by the conversions of the last 18 years, the Santhals and Kolhas gathered in the area shortly after midnight on January 22/23 and began attacking the vehicles in which Staines and his family were sleeping. Staines allegedly threatened the mob by firing his pistol. This angered the tribals and they then set the vehicle on fire. (*Asian Age*, 28/1/99)

If indeed the Sangh Parivar had nothing to do with the killing, why did its leaders strain to provide rationales and justifications for the heinous act, and attempt to harm the image of Staines? What, moreover, were its sources for so quickly drawing the conclusions it did?

It is also interesting to follow the shifting stands of Union minister M.L. Khurana. On January 25 he "sought permission" from BJP chief Kushabhau Thakre to "atone" for the attacks on Christian missionaries. On January 31 he claimed *a senior home ministry official had told him that the Bajrang Dal was involved in the Staines killings, and that Dara Singh campaigned for the BJP in Orissa.* On February 2, addressing a meeting organised by the All India Catholic Union, he appeared to change his stance. Now he played down Bajrang Dal involvement: "Dara Singh (the main accused) is said to be a Bajrang Dal worker, but you cannot blame the entire organisation for a crime by one or two people." Addressing a meeting organised by the All India Catholic Union, he shifted the blame on the Christians: "You stop these forcible conversions and the problem will be solved." He said that where there were forced conversions, there would be a reaction. (*Times of India*, 1/2/99 and 3/2/99) Significantly, BJP vice-president K.L. Sharma was apparently unable to deny Khurana's allegation outright. When asked about it, Sharma said: "He (Khurana) has tried to explain that, and in a way he has contradicted himself. Although he has quoted a Union Home Ministry official, the statement has to be ascertained.

His remarks have been overplayed by the media." (*Frontline*, 26/2/99)

It appears some Sangh Parivar leaders admitted responsibility off the record: "Sangh Parivar activists in Orissa, who spoke to *Frontline* over the telephone, however, conceded that the killings may have been carried out by Bajrang Dal activists. An Orissa-based VHP leader told *Frontline* that some of the tribal communities in the Keonjhar region resented the activities of the missionaries, since there were allegations of large-scale proselytisation efforts. 'It is quite possible that some of our activists got carried away'." (*Frontline*, 12/2/99)

Significantly, BJP leaders did not suspend their anti-Christian rhetoric in the immediate aftermath of the Staines killings. On February 1, using a phrase reminiscent of the Nazis, BJP general secretary K. Govindacharya said that a "trait of *exclusive Judaic thinking*" had led to violence and tensions following conversions in many parts of the country. According to him, "The Judaic paradigm and notions of superiority over Hinduism were contributing to intolerance in Indian society". Govindacharya, like several other Sangh Parivar leaders, dropped the pretence of opposing only "forced" conversions, and opposed all conversions: "the working of the Church (in some quarters) has been detrimental to social harmony (and) conversions have far-reaching impact on the social and cultural components of society which threaten communal harmony." He called for a national debate on "religious conversions which create schism in society and social unity." (*Times of India*, 2/2/99; emphasis added) Speaking in Bhopal, Govindacharya termed the Church a "semi-political and commercial organisation". He said Christianity discriminated between believers and non-believers, and the concept of tolerance was alien to the Christian faith. Christians, he claimed, used "fraud, allurements and fear" to bring about conversions. (*Economic Times*, 11/2/99)

BJP MP Arun Shourie launched a long attack on

Christian missionaries in his column in the *Asian Age* (19/3/99). He concluded: "When the Church sets out to convert on such a scale, when its little agents go about 'boldly declaring before the idols' their calumnies, is it at all possible that the targeted society will not react?"

Ominous preparations: 'Dharma Sansad'

The high pitch of physical attacks on Christians was during December 1998-January 1999. Since then, there appears to be a deliberate lull. After the February 2 coordination committee meeting of BJP and its allies, during which the allies made noises critical of the attacks, L.K. Advani briefed VHP leaders Ashok Singhal and Giriraj Kishore on February 3. BJP spokesman, J.P. Mathur, explained that "Since Advaniji has briefed them, the VHP is only talking and not doing anything.... *Maidan mein koi apriya ghatna nahin honi chahiye*. (There should be no unpleasant incident.) And I hope there is no unpleasant incident." (*Asian Age*, 7/2/99)

From this, it is evident that the lull is because an escalation in the violence would not be expedient *at the moment* for the BJP. But equally, Advani's instruction is to keep the issue simmering, to be escalated in the future. Indeed, *there are ominous signs that the various wings of the Sangh Parivar, far from retreating in the face of the widespread revulsion at the Staines killing, are making careful preparations for a major escalation of the campaign against Christians*. This is evidenced by the series of all-India preparatory moves by Parivar outfits during February 1999: the "Dharma Sansad" (religious parliament) of the VHP in Ahmedabad, the Bajrang Dal conference in Bombay, and the start of the nationwide door-to-door campaign by the RSS against conversions. Let us look at the content of the speeches and propaganda in the above activities.

The eighth Dharma Sansad of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad began on February 5 at Ahmedabad. It demanded that the Centre issue a 'white paper' on the

"foreign conspiracy" behind conversions. The number of Christian missionaries, it claimed, had grown from 1,744 at the time of independence to over 1,50,000 at present. The Sansad demanded a 'religion bill' to "secure the Hindu religion". VHP "international vice-president" Giriraj Kishore termed Christian missionaries as "traitors", and said that those converting to Christianity and Islam had extra-territorial loyalty.

While the VHP considered the conversion of Hindus to Christianity an anti-national act, it evidently did not feel the same way about *Christians* abroad abandoning their own religion in favour of Hinduism. Giriraj Kishore "revealed an ambitious plan of the Parishad to form a strong allied force of 200 crore (ie two billion) people comprising followers of Hinduism, Buddhism and people from Europe and the U.S., who were '*sanatanis*' prior to the Christian era, and now wanted to give up Christianity. He described this move as the rise of a new Hindu-Buddhist power."

The VHP announced an "action plan" to counter conversions to Christianity. It identified about 120 specific areas in various states and allotted these to different *sants*. Acharya Dharmendra told the *sants* not to look to the Centre or state governments for help, but to regard themselves as "the army of God", spread out in the country, and expand the "kingdom of God" by working for tribals' welfare, reconverting those who had strayed away, and countering the influence of "beef-eaters who are financed by European countries, or petro-dollars". The target areas are in Gujarat, Karnataka, Assam, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, U.P., Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Jammu, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. He told them that "money will come to you, you just have to collect it."

Apart from this action plan, the Dharma Sansad also voiced its opinions on a number of other issues, which, while not of immediate relevance, give a glimpse of the world-view it wishes to project.

Paramhansa Ramachandra, one of the leaders of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, said that the Dharma Sansad “would now be committed to seeing not only the Ramjanmabhoomi liberated, but also Kashmir, Krishnajanmabhoomi, Kashi Vishwanath, Kailash, and the portion occupied by China.” However, by contrast with the immediate action plan against Christians, construction of the Ram temple was put on the back burner: Ramachandra said construction would be taken up only after completion of the work of stone carving, which would take three years.

Acharya Dharmendra criticised Vajpayee’s bus trip to Lahore, and said that “India’s Prime Minister should go to Pakistan but not in a bus, but on tanks, to hoist a flag of victory in Islamabad, Lahore and Rawalpindi.” Further, matches between India and Pakistan should be played not on cricket pitches but at the front. Moraribapu’s next *katha* should be held on the banks of the Sindhu (Indus) and in Lahore. The Acharya exhorted the Government to put the Bofors gun to the “right use”.

The conference called for the implementation of a 40-point “Hindu agenda”. Endorsing the practice of “voluntary” *sati*, Giriraj Kishore explained that “There is nothing wrong if a woman cannot bear separation from her husband and commits *sati*.”

The Gujarat government provided a warm welcome to the convention. On February 6, the Gujarat chief minister Keshubhai Patel visited the Sansad to seek “darshan” of the *sants*. “I, the chief minister of Gujarat, bow down to you”, he said, announcing that his life and the land of Gujarat had become pious due to their visit. He announced that the state government would set up a ministry to look after cows and their progeny and protect temples, as the VHP had demanded. (*Times of India*, 6, 7 and 8/2/99; *Indian Express*, 8/2/99; *Asian Age*, 8/2/99)

Bajrang Dal convention

As the Bajrang Dal is merely a wing of the VHP, with office-bearers in common, it was only to be

expected that its convention in Bombay on February 21 would be on similar lines. The Dal called for the removal of all loudspeakers from mosques by May 15 and preventing the slaughter of cows on March 29 (which is both Mahavir Jayanti and Bakr-Id this year). But the focus was on the issue of conversions to Christianity. VHP leader Praveen Togadia, calling for a ban on conversions, said “*Conversion is as reprehensible as murder* because it amounts to breaking a person’s identity.... Conversion to the Roman Catholic faith is a conspiracy to install an imported Prime Minister like Sonia Gandhi in the country.... Christians have decided to convert the whole world to their faith and have unleashed 41 lakh Christian missionaries across the world for their task. Can an ancient civilisation like Bharat accept conversion of Hindus to Roman Catholics?” Togadia claimed that the Church had huge resources and infrastructure and that *their aim was to wipe out Hindu culture*. The national convenor of the Bajrang Dal, Dr Surendra Jain, said Christian missionaries were working as a mafia in the country, and vowed that the Bajrang Dal would get rid of their activity: “*Balidaan denge nahin, lenge* (We will not sacrifice ourselves, but seek sacrifice)”. The Dal’s Maharashtra convenor, Deepak Gaikwad, said that his organisation would not hesitate to force the closure of schools run by Christian missionaries if they issued directives contrary to Hindu culture.

Togadia charged that there was a conspiracy to defame the Bajrang Dal: “We were held responsible for the rape of nuns in Jhabua. But now it has been established that 13 of those responsible were Christians.” He claimed that the alleged rape of a nun in Orissa had turned out to be a hoax. “The medical report showed that the nun had never been raped.” (*Times of India*, *Asian Age*, and *Indian Express*, 22/2/99)

One journalist recorded statements from various speeches at the convention: “1. Cut off the hands of those who kill cows. 2. Halt trucks carrying cattle for Bakri Id and teach the truck-drivers a lesson. 3. See to it that not a single animal is cut on Ahimsa

Day (March 29). Nobody will question you if you go to any extremes to ensure this. After all, Ram did not shout at Hanuman for burning Lanka when he went to rescue Sita. 4. *Main to kahta hoon, sala gaddaar Musalman hai.* 5. Come out on the streets and show your strength. If they show knives, show swords. 6. Hindus are compared to cows. But once the cow charges with its horns, nobody can stop her. 7. Drink the blood of sinners. 8. It's time to lay your hands on weapons. 9. Let Salman Rushdie come to India, 75 crore Hindus will protect him. 10. Ours is not a Ganga-Jamuna culture. When the Yamuna river meets the Ganga, it becomes the Ganga. So also the mainstream in Bharat is Hindutva and everyone has to accept it. 11. Until Hindus react, no one will listen to us. 12. *Ayodhya to sirf jhanki hai, Mathura Kashi baaki hai.*" And finally: "It is time once again to show our strength as we had on December 6, 1992." As the author noted, in February 1999, as in December 1992, "the police did nothing at all". (J. Punwani, *Midday*, 23/2/99)

RSS campaign: Christianity, Islam unconstitutional

Meanwhile, on February 21, the RSS launched its all-India campaign against Christians with a door-to-door campaign in Delhi. The Sangh's target is to reach about one million households. A booklet prepared for the campaign, "*Sewa ki aadh mein Church ka shadyantra*" (The conspiracy of the Church under the garb of service), claimed that Christendom had three distinct tactics in "conquering" India: to demolish the tolerant image of Hindus and portray them as illiberal, aggressive and intolerant; to drive a wedge among the various Hindu organisations; and to distribute millions of copies of the Bible published in regional languages. The literature warned that if conversion to Christianity continued, Christians, like Muslims, might also grow to a "menacing percentage" and succeed in getting a separate state for themselves. The only difference, the booklet said, is that Islam spread at the point of a sword, while missionaries carry on their "devilish proselytisation" under

the garb of social service. The booklet calls upon Hindus "to see that no member of the Hindu community falls into the Christian trap". (*Asian Age*, 22/2/99)

The RSS national executive meeting held at Lucknow on March 12 gave a call to expose the "dangerous, dubious and unethical evangelising tactics of the Church." It dismissed the allegations of attacks on Christians as "fake, concocted and... blown out of proportion" with the aim of tarnishing the image of Hindu organisations and put the entire Hindu society in the dock. The RSS further charged that conversions were due to inducements given by the Church to converts: "It is proved by an uninterrupted inflow of money to various church agencies, as confirmed by the Union home ministry." (*Times of India*, 13/3/99)

What was the "proof" supplied by the Union home ministry? When asked about the Gujarat incidents, Union home minister L.K. Advani said on January 16 that more than 70 per cent of privately made foreign donations that had come into the country between October and December 1998 were for Christian missionaries. He provided no further details, despite protests by several organisations at this deliberately mysterious statement. A subsequent press release issued by the home ministry claimed to give the details of funds received between October and December 1998 by what it called 'Christian organisations'. During these three months, foreign contributions amounting to approximately Rs 19.8 crore were received in the country; of this Rs 14 crore was received by 'Christian organisations', the press release said. However, the ministry neither gave details of the activities of the 'Christian organisations' nor provided evidence about the use of such funds for forcible conversions. (*Frontline*, 26/2/99) (Certain points need to be made in this context. First, Rs 14 crore, or even four times that figure, is a relatively paltry sum for a country of India's size. Funds running into thousands of crore are channeled to the non-governmental organisation — NGO — sector

annually. All such foreign funds are regulated by the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, and the recipients of such funds must obtain registration from the Government; an FCRA registration also requires clearance from Mr Advani's home ministry. Thus the Government has ample power to stop any funds it feels are being used for improper purposes. It also has the machinery to trace and make public details of any such past misuse. Why did Advani not provide details for the full year, and details of all foreign contributions? Why did he not provide details of which recipient organisations he considers 'Christian organisations'? Why did he not provide details of the foreign contributions received by the VHP? Unfortunately, such questions have not been followed up by the press.)

To date the RSS has been unable to produce instances of 'forced conversion'. But the RSS national executive meeting made clear once again that the Sangh Parivar opposes conversion to Christianity *per se*, whether forced or not. The meeting passed a resolution demanding *a national debate on Article 25 of the Constitution, which gives an individual the right to profess, practice and propagate a religion of his choice*. Explaining this resolution, M.G. Vaidya, member of the RSS executive, said: "While we have no objection to the right to profess and practice religion, we want the people to debate on the right to propagate a religion. Should those religions, which do not believe in the validity of other religions, be allowed to propagate their faith?" (*Asian Age*, 13/3/99) In fact the RSS goes even further: according to it, *Christianity and Islam are unconstitutional*. Presenting the annual report of the RSS at the meeting, senior leader M.V. Seshadhari said that conversion to Islam and Christianity violated the secular principles of the Indian Constitution, which believed in equality of all religions. "*Both Islam and Christianity claim to be superior to other religions and are therefore violative of the principles of secularism.*" (*Asian Age*, 12/3/99; emphasis added)

Preparing to target Christians

The RSS outfit, Akhil Bharatiya Vanwasi Kalyan Ashram, declared in Delhi on February 4 that it had decided to 'reconvert' from Christianity to Hinduism over 2,000 people at Dindori in Madhya Pradesh on February 14. According to the VKA 'media co-ordinator' Natwar Rateria that the "historic event" would take place under the leadership of Dilip Singh Judeo, the BJP leader, at Dindori, a district headquarters in M.P. Mr Rateria said his organisation had identified Hindus converted to Christianity during a survey. "*Our organisation has been maintaining an information update through filling up prescribed forms for data collection.*" The Sangh Parivar, he explained, has already identified 200 districts to "liberate" from the influence of Christian missionaries (*Asian Age*, 5/2/99; emphasis added). As it turned out, the Dindori programme of 're-conversion' flopped miserably, with under 200 attending; newspaper investigations revealed that hardly any of those being 're-converted' were Christians. — *Indian Express, Asian Age, Times of India*, 15/2/99).

On March 31, the VHP announced in Delhi that it had started collecting district-wise data on the financial status, sources of income and contacts of Christians and minorities, after a two-day meeting of its central working committee held recently in Bangalore. The VHP said, however, that it is using different banners to collect the data. The work will be done through local committees comprising prominent persons at the district level. Each district committee will have 10 to 12 people "who have a good reputation" in their respective areas of work and can easily find out which people the minorities maintain links with. *Such district committees will update information about the population of Christians and minorities and their places of worship*, they said. The number of VHP service projects functioning in tribal and hilly areas over the last six months has gone up to 10,000, a VHP leader disclosed. (*Asian Age*, 1/4/99)

callous and has failed to protect the victims. (In Madhya Pradesh, the Chief Minister has deliberately attempted to mislead the public by pointing to the Sangh Parivar. The case here too has not been energetically prosecuted.) The Central government has played down the seriousness of the crimes, and has attempted to falsely link the crimes to an international conspiracy by Christian missionaries and Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence. The Prime Minister, no less, has provided crucial political backing to the anti-Christian campaign in Dangs.

5. Fake issue of 'conversions': In order to provide a justification for its sudden decision to attack Christians, the Sangh Parivar has manufactured a panic about conversions of Hindus to Christianity. Much of the time this is phrased as opposition to 'forced' conversions. To date, the Sangh Parivar leaders have been unable to produce instances of such forced converts. The team could find no instance of forced conversion in the areas it visited. Indeed, in the areas it visited in M.P., Orissa, and Maharashtra, the Christian missionaries were engaged not in conversion but in social work (education and health services) and in ministering to Christians there. The number of conversions was negligible, and even the number of Christians small. In Keonjhar, where Staines and his two sons were killed, the Christian population was 0.31 per cent of the population in 1991, the same as a decade earlier. In Dangs, the number of conversions has been substantial over the last two decades, but there is no evidence of force, fraud, or material inducements leading to conversion. The reasons for such conversions as take place have to be sought in the actual wretched conditions of tribals, and how they view the adoption of their new faith.

National census data provide no support to charges of mass conversion to Christianity. The nationwide percentage of Christians has fallen from 2.60 per cent in 1971 to 2.32 per cent in 1991. While the percentage of Christians has grown in certain states, it has fallen in others, such as Goa, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh. Faced with this reality, the RSS has now begun claiming that the Census data is false, and that tribal Christians do not reveal their reli-

gious identity to the census-takers.

A careful study of Sangh Parivar leaders' statements, however, reveals that they oppose not only 'forcible' conversions, but *any* conversions from Hinduism. They have called for legislation to ban conversions *as such*. They have gone even further, terming Christianity and Islam themselves as violating the constitutional principle of secularism. The RSS has passed a resolution in its latest national executive meeting asking for a debate on Article 25 of the Constitution (freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion). Clearly, the 'debate' being urged by the Sangh Parivar is in order to further this communal fascist agenda, and to entrap the rest of society into allowing such a diversion.

It is worth noting that all the areas where the VHP alleges large-scale conversion from Hinduism to Christianity are tribal areas. Tribals do not in fact practise 'Hinduism', but have their own religious practices, such as worship of the mountain god, the tiger god, the village goddess, and so on. (Hindutva organisations' attempts to get the tribals to worship Hanuman idols and thus find their slot in the Hindu hierarchy have not met with much success, and the VHP has had to adapt its propaganda. For example, we find the VHP front organisations issuing appeals to the tribals to protect, not Ram or other Hindu gods, but the tribal gods and goddesses.) Hence there is no question of tribals leaving Hinduism at all. The VHP is organising tribals' 're-conversion' to a religion which the tribals had never avowed in the first place.

In some of the areas the team visited, including Manoharpur (Orissa), there was no tension between Christian and non-Christian tribals. In several cases, different members of the same family are Christian and non-Christian. In some areas the team visited, such as Peth (Maharashtra), there was tension, but the tension was recent, and could be traced to deliberate efforts to whip up anti-Christian hatred (including specific propaganda campaigns and meetings conducted by Sangh Parivar outfits and their front organisations). Minor local issues have been cleverly manipulated to create friction between the

two communities. But there has been no *spontaneous* reaction against conversions. For example, although conversions have taken place over the last two decades in Dangs, there was no reaction to it till the Sangh Parivar began its campaign, and the first incidents of violence against Christians took place in March 1998.

While no instances have been produced of forcible conversion to Christianity, what is being witnessed is the open, explicit threat by the Sangh Parivar to 're-convert' (or rather, convert) tribals to Hinduism. Targets for numbers of 're-conversions' are being openly set, lists of target districts are being announced, and information is being gathered at the district level. The cutting edge of this campaign is the record of violence and the threat of future violence. This threat of forcible mass conversion is virtually unique even in the ugly history of twentieth-century Indian communalism.

6. Point of entry into adivasi areas: The Sangh Parivar's drive against Christians is explicitly targeted first of all at the adivasi regions, which are being made into the testing-ground for the Sangh Parivar's anti-Christian campaign. These regions are the most backward and poverty-ridden in our country, even though they harbour enormous natural wealth. The BJP has been making a determined effort to enter and build up a base in these regions, where the Congress has traditionally been the most prominent parliamentary political force. In areas of adivasi unrest and struggle we also find various leftist and anti-establishment political groups organising the adivasis around their burning economic/secular issues such as land, forest produce/resources, wages, and displacement. As yet such struggle-areas are not the majority of adivasi areas, yet the VHP evidently considers them a grave threat, repeatedly alleging that radical political groups form the "private army" of Christian missionaries.

It is commonplace to point out that communalism diverts from people's burning economic/secular issues. Nowhere is this more striking than in the case of the BJP's current attempt to rally one section of

desperately poor adivasis against another. The BJP has managed to devise a point of entry into the adivasi areas that does not bring it into conflict with the powerful vested interests who exploit the labour and natural resources of these areas. The diversionary story being whipped up by the BJP will also have damaging implications for any adivasi struggle over the economic issues. Even the marginal relief got by small percentage of adivasis from the health and education activities of Christian missionaries is now under threat of being snuffed out. Contrary to its name, the Vanvasi 'Kalyan' Ashram is by no means really concerned with welfare activities among the adivasis.

7. Preparations for stepping up the attacks: It is clear from the team's findings that the Sangh Parivar's campaign against the Christian community has neither ended nor peaked. We have seen how the Ayodhya movement was systematically built up from January 1986 till the horror of December 1992. January 1993. Today, we see a communal fascist campaign against Christians manufactured in a matter of months, when the BJP-led alliance faces internal wranglings as well as popular resentment over unprecedented price rise. We have seen what happened in Bombay in January 1993, when the attackers combed localities, armed with lists of Muslim names. And now, in March 1999, we see the VHP announcing a nationwide drive to collect information about Christians, particularly in tribal areas.

In the recent spate of conferences and national meetings of the VHP, the Bajrang Dal, and the RSS, and the speeches and plans made therein, *there is clear evidence that the various wings of the Parivar are readying themselves for another terroristic adventure*. Their choice of a propitious hour is probably related to the fate of the Government at the Centre

History, and even the very recent past, teaches us that democratic forces cannot afford to wait for the attacks to take place: it is urgent that they organise opposition and resistance, day to day, to this fascist campaign without delay.

I

Appendix I

Christianity: An Indian Religion

— Dr. M.D. David, Professor and former Head, Department of History, University of Mumbai.

No religion except what is today known as “Hinduism” has dominated India over the last four thousand years. Any effort to challenge Hinduism either by indigenous offshoots like Buddhism, Jainism, or Sikhism, or by immigrant religions like Christianity or Islam, has not succeeded in replacing it as the dominant religion. Though Buddhism enjoyed a short-lived popularity under the patronage of Asoka, it ultimately became near-extinct, finding instead more adherents outside the land of its birth. After initial opposition, Jainism soon fell in line with Hinduism and was absorbed, though its identity as a distinct sect is maintained.

Among the two proselytising religions that came to India, *viz.* Christianity and Islam, the former came to India even before it traveled to Europe. If we accept the tradition of the visit of St. Thomas, one of the apostles of Jesus, to Cranganore, Kerala, in 52 A.D., Christianity has been in India for almost two thousand years. Despite Christianity's presence in India for twenty centuries, Christians constitute only a very small percentage of the Indian population. In 1951 they were 2.6 per cent, but dwindled to 2.32 per cent in 1991. By comparison, Islam has been in India for a shorter period of nearly twelve centuries. Muslims constituted about 20 per cent of the population of the country at the time of the vivisection of India, though they now constitute about 11 per cent of the Indian population. This clearly indicates that though Christianity is a proselytising religion it has not spread as much in India as Islam. Indeed, the propaganda that Christians indulge in forcible conversions is a myth.

Eastern Christianity

Christianity came to India in three phases. During the first phase, it came as an eastern religion. Whether St. Thomas came to India in 52 A.D. or not, the Syrian Christians of Kerala claim their descent from the few hundred who came under the leadership of Thomas of Cana, a merchant, sent by the Bishop of Edissa in the middle of the 4th century A.D. These Christians were welcomed by the Hindu ruler, and they came to be absorbed as one of the higher castes in the local commu-

nity and remained a useful business community. These Christians do not seem to have been involved in proselytising, but remained a self-sufficient and insulated group. The Syrian Christians always depended on Persia, Chaldea or Syria for their bishops, and never had any direct relations with Rome, thus remaining eastern until recently.

Second phase

During the second phase, the Christianity that came along with Portuguese colonialism was western Christianity, aggressive, proselytising and supported by the State. It is well known that when Vasco da Gama landed at Calicut, Kerala, in 1498, some Moor merchants questioned him about the purpose of his visit. He replied that he had come to seek Christians and spices.

The Portuguese went on to conquer and establish their empire on the west coast, with Goa as their headquarters. Portugal was keen on evangelisation and spent much of its energy and resources on this, unlike other western powers. The rulers of Portugal were themselves interested in the expansion of the Kingdom of Christ. The Portuguese King John III sent St. Francis Xavier to India with all powers and fully supported his missionary work. The Jesuits, Franciscans and Dominicans converted many to Christianity and built churches and seminaries all over, remnants of which can be seen still today. St. Francis Xavier achieved phenomenal success in his missionary efforts in Goa and other parts of East Asia. For example, he converted the *paravas* of the fishery coast of Malabar. The *paravas* accepted Christianity in large numbers in the hope of receiving help from the Portuguese power against their Muslim rulers.

It was in the Portuguese empire that conversion was undertaken by missionaries in an overzealous manner and in undesirable ways. “Public worship other than Christian was banned in the earlier period in Portuguese territories of Goa and its adjacent islands.... This resulted in a considerable migration of the Hindu population from these areas. Hundreds of Hindu temples were destroyed in 1541 and the temple funds confiscated to

support chapels, churches and newly converted Christians, thus giving the Christian effort a bad name all over the country for centuries to come.” (Subramanyam Ka Na, *The Catholic Community in India*, Madras, 1970, p. 17.) The establishment of Portuguese inquisition in India (1560-1812) severely punished those native Christians who wanted to return to Hinduism. The Hindus were prevented from practising their religion and worship as it was made punishable. *Ironically, the medieval methods once adopted by a marauding colonial power of the sixteenth century are now, at the end of the twentieth century, being employed to 're-convert' to Hinduism those who have voluntarily adopted Christianity.*

Emergence of the community

The Indian Christian community has emerged as a result of the conversion of persons from other religions to Christianity. The Indian Christian community is most heterogeneous, and consists of persons who became Christians from practically every religious group, sect and tribe in India. While they came from all castes of Hindu society, most of them came from the lowest castes. The conversions from the lower castes can be attributed to various reasons, most importantly, the hope of gaining higher social status and equality with upper castes in the social hierarchy, and secondly, the hope of obtaining educational opportunities and escaping degrading hereditary occupations designated for the lower castes. Forcible conversion to Christianity after the Portuguese period is a myth. The East India Company was keener to make profits in India, and hence was in fact against conversions. Anxious that conversions might offend Hindu religious sensitivities, it strictly prohibited evangelisation in the Company's territories from the very beginning till 1813. The Company strongly argued in the British Parliament against sending missionaries to India. However, the Evangelicals in England succeeded in getting Parliament to pass the Charter Act of 1813 permitting Christian missionaries to come to India to spread Christianity. The same Act also provided a lakh of rupees to be spent by the Government of India on promotion of literature and learning. The missionaries set up schools to begin with to educate people so that they could read the Gospel. Nevertheless, even after 1813, and particularly after the Great Rebellion of 1857 (which many British administrators attributed to British interference in social and religious matters), the British rulers maintained neutrality toward Christian

proselytisation in India. This was for reasons of expediency: they were anxious that proselytisation should not create any problems for their administration and rule.

In their endeavour to spread Christianity, one of the methods used by the missionaries was to criticise Hinduism and highlight its drawbacks and dehumanising social and religious practices, so that Hindus would be persuaded to give up their religion and take to Christianity. Several Hindu scholars responded with refutations of these arguments, and many theological debates took place. A few upper castes in Bengal and Maharashtra were convinced by the arguments of the missionaries and became Christians. Raja Ram Moh Roy, the Bengali intellectual and social reformer, responded positively to Christianity and admired Christ while not accepting his divinity. He went on to establish the Brahmo Samaj, which later gave rise to the Prarthana Samaj. Both became upper-caste socio-religious reform movements in 19th century India. However, on the whole Christian missionaries failed in their efforts to win over the upper castes. It was among the lowest castes, suffering from the curse of untouchability, that Christianity had the greatest appeal. However, even among the lowest castes, only a small percentage have converted to Christianity.

Until 1860 the missionary work that was largely directed toward the upper castes met with little success. The missionaries thereafter turned more and more to the rural masses, especially the Dalits, who began to convert to Christianity in significant numbers, hoping to obtain social upliftment, education, and opportunities for advancement. Among the Dalit communities from whose sizeable numbers embraced Christianity are the following: Maharashtra: Mahars, Mangs, Chamars; Karnataka: Pulayars, Holers; U.P.: Chamars, Jatavas; Punjab: Chuhars; Andhra Pradesh: Malas, Madigas; Tamil Nadu: Nadars, Shanars, Vellalas, Parayas; Kerala: Parava Ezhavas. As these conversions among the untouchables continued during the early decades of the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi, who had risen to the helm of affairs in Indian politics, said he was not in favour of conversions. Perceiving what attracted the Dalits to Christianity, he started the Harijan Sevak Sangh and called the “untouchables” Harijans, making removal of untouchability one of his five programmes. However, these steps did not really help much in uplifting the Dalits.

The American Baptist Mission and the Welsh Presbyterian Mission were the first two Protestant missions to begin their work in the north-east in the 1830s. More than two-thirds of the Christians in north-east India trace their origin to these missions. Catholic missionary work started there in the 1890s. Christianity in north-east India till 1947 remained isolated and for the most part outside the mainstream of the Christian movement in India. Tribals have their own religion, and resisted conversion to Hinduism, but Christian missionaries had greater success for a number of reasons. They set up educational institutions in the region. Tribals accepted more easily Christianity, for it did not have the rigid caste hierarchy of Hinduism. Tribal society was matrilineal, and the Christian missionaries adapted to allow the tribals maintain the matrilineal system.

The tendency since the end of the nineteenth century to identify Indian nationalism with the Hindu religion (for example the Ganapati festival in Maharashtra) has had damaging consequences for the participation of non-Hindus in the national movement. The Indian Christian community was treated as suspect and as associated with the British. The active participation of Indian Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, in the freedom struggle is unfortunately little known and recorded. It is not prop-

erly understood by many that during the nationalist struggle an Indian Christian was in fact waging a double freedom struggle – one against the British imperialists and another against the Western (European and American) missionaries. Independence for an Indian meant freedom from the British imperialist yoke but for an Indian Christian it meant not only freedom from foreign rule but also freedom from foreign missionary dominance and control over his religious and church life.

The Indian Christian community, which constitutes in all 2.32 per cent of the nation's population, is divided into two main groups – namely, Roman Catholics and Protestants. The former constitutes 1.32 per cent and the latter constitutes one per cent of the population.

Among the Protestants there are a number of denominations. Kerala Christians are mainly divided into Marthomites, Jacobites, Chaldeans, Church of South India, and Catholics. The main Protestant denominations in other parts of India include the Church of North India, Church of South India, Methodist Church in India, Lutheran Church, Alliance Mission, Seventh Day Adventists, Salvation Army, Pentecostal groups, and others. These groups are autonomous and function independently of each other.

Appendix II

A chronology of recent communal attacks

The following list appeared in the February 12, 1999 issue of *Frontline* ("A catalogue of crimes", Praveen Swami). The author points out that the compilation, "put together from newspaper reports, human rights investigations and documentation prepared by independent and community groups", is far from comprehensive. The incidents were concentrated in Gujarat and Maharashtra. The author notes that attacks on Muslims account for just over a quarter of the total, which "marks a shift from the pattern of single-minded attacks on Muslims that spear-headed the Hindutva campaign in the early 1990s.... The vast majority of attacks, in which damage to property and injuries were common, were aimed at Christians." From the list we have altered the information relating to two attacks in Jhabua in September. In these two cases, our investigations indicated that the motive for the attacks was not communal but merely criminal (see the chapter on Jhabua in this report).

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March 2, Gujarat: People distributing leaflets about a Christian meeting at the Vadodara Polo Ground are attacked by Bajrang Dal, Durga Vahini, and VHP cadre. Among those injured is a pregnant woman, who is repeatedly kicked in the stomach. The police detain the people who are attacked, but not the attackers.

March 4, Gujarat: A meeting of evangelists at the Vadodara Polo Ground is disrupted by VHP-Bajrang Dal cadre, who injure several people. (A day earlier the same activists attempted to set the stage on fire.)

March 13, Maharashtra: Alleged Hindu fundamentalists attack Christian pilgrims in Khanvel.

March 16, Uttar Pradesh: Bajrang Dal activists attack a Christian meeting in Kanpur, resulting in injuries to several people and loss of property.

March 19, Jammu and Kashmir: Four Muslims are beaten to death in Karara near Doda by RSS workers in reprisal for the killing of an RSS worker two days earlier by a different group of Muslims for allegedly molesting a local girl.

April 11, Gujarat: Alleged VHP-Bajrang Dal activists armed with hockey sticks, cricket bats and rods, attack a Christian group observing Passion Week in Palanpur.

April 16, Gujarat: A church under construction brought down at Naroda near Ahmedabad. (The structure appears to have been built without legal approval but temples nearby, which were also constructed without the necessary legal approvals, were not touched.)

May 3, Maharashtra: Shiv Sena activists disrupt a concert by Pakistani ghazal singer Ghulam Ali in Mumbai.

May 8, Jammu and Kashmir: Mobs of RSS workers in Poonch destroy Government buildings and attempt to attack Muslim homes in protest against the killing of four people by terrorists in Surankot.

May 11, Maharashtra: Shiv Sena activists assault a missionary, Octavio Nevis, in Ambernath.

May 15, Bihar: Modestus Tirkey, headmaster of a Catholic school, is attacked in Ranchi.

May 18, Gujarat: Hindu fundamentalists attack a Catholic priest, Xavier Amalraj, at Pilpilvada near Zankhav.

June 16, Maharashtra: The St. Savariyar Church in Srilankapada slum in Mumbai's Malad suburb is demolished. Unauthorised Hindu structures are, however, left untouched.

June 17, Gujarat: St. Xavier's School and Lourd Convent in Surat are served with orders by the Collector, Surat. Records of admissions and applications are confiscated. School officials claim that this is done to harass them.

June 21, Gujarat: A prayer hall is burnt down in Singana village, Dangs district.

June 23, Gujarat: After two Muslim youths elope with Hindu girls from Randhikpur village, VHP and Bajrang Dal squads force over 400 Muslim villagers to leave their homes in an act of collective reprisal. The administration and the police stand by and watch as independent fact-finding teams and journalists visiting Randhikpur are attacked.

June 29, Gujarat: A prayer hall in Umerpada village in Dangs district is attacked by assailants who, however, fail in their attempts to set it on fire.

July 3, New Delhi: News breaks of the plans of the BJP government of Delhi to remove churches from the list of recognised places of worship on the pretext that wine is served (as a holy sacrament) in the churches.

July 8, Gujarat: The body of Samuel Christian is exhumed from a graveyard in Kapadvanj in Nadiad district, allegedly by VHP activists, and dumped near a Methodist church nearby.

July 11, Maharashtra: Two Christian workers are reportedly beaten in Bhind.

July 12, Gujarat: Christians gathered for worship at a prayer hall in Dhavalivod are threatened by the village leader. The church's lock was broken later the same day and a cross removed.

July 17, Karnataka: VHP activists raid at least 11 Christian-run schools in Bangalore, Mysore, Mandya and Mangalore, disrupting their functioning. In one case, a nun who protested was spat at.

July 18, Gujarat: The Shantiniketan High School in Zankhav near Surat, run by Christian missionaries, is vandalised. The playground is ploughed with a tractor. (Violence follows false reports in the Gujarati language press that the school's adivasi students are forcibly converted, whereas only 152 of the school's 750 students are Christians.)

July 18, Gujarat: A prayer hall is burnt down in Bhapkal village in Dangs district.

July 18, Tamil Nadu: An Assemblies of God church is attacked and church materials are looted in Anaipalayam.

July 20, Gujarat: Copies of the New Testament are burnt allegedly by VHP and Bajrang Dal activists at IP Mission School in Rajkot. The VHP says that the request on a page in the copies of the Bibles distributed by the Gideons International asking believers to sign as proof that they have accepted Jesus Christ as their saviour is evidence of forcible conversions.

July 23, Gujarat: Mobs allegedly led by a low-level revenue official attack adivasis at a prayer meeting in Borkhal village.

July 24, Gujarat: Bajrang Dal and RSS activists attack Catholic priests in Isar, a small adivasi village near Zankhav.

July 25, Gujarat: The body of a Christian is exhumed from a graveyard in Gandhinagar, allegedly by Bajrang Dal activists.

August 9, Gujarat: A church is destroyed allegedly by RSS cadre in Ahmedabad.

August 15, Gujarat: Communal riots break out in Sanjeli against the background of the BJP-VHP's efforts to communalise inter-community weddings. The home of a Christian priest, Joe Vas, is attacked. (Riots follow a Dharam Sabha organised in the town three days earlier, where BJP-VHP leaders made speeches inciting adivasis against Muslims. Independent investigators found that in this case the root cause of the riot was the local panchayat's refusal to honour court orders granting a Muslim fishing rights in a local pond.)

August 15, Uttar Pradesh: Bajrang Dal and VHP cadre attack church activists in Robertsganj.

August 25, West Bengal: Bikash Das, a church worker, is allegedly assaulted by a Trinamul Congress leader.

August 31, Bihar: A church is demolished in Kobatoli village in Gumla district.

September 5, New Delhi: The Bajrang Dal announces that it will launch a 'new Quit India Movement' to remove all Christian missionaries from the country. The organisation, along with the VHP, demands an end to forced conversions they allege are taking place.

September 23, Madhya Pradesh: Nuns are raped at a mission station in Jhabua. Although the Sangh Parish appears not to have been involved in the incident, the VHP leader 'Prem' Sharma defends the action of the rapists. Police delay the medical examination of the victims, and pressurise them to drop the rape charge.

September 23, Uttar Pradesh: Nuns at the Clarist Convent in Baghpat are assaulted.

September 26, Uttar Pradesh: Police and local administration officials barge into the Jiwan Jyoti Christian Hospital campus in Robertsganj and allegedly misbehave with patients and hospital staff.

September 26, Madhya Pradesh: A crowd attacks the house of Edward Sarel, a Christian priest, in Jhamli vil-

lage, Jhabua, in an attempt to rob the house.

September 26, Uttar Pradesh: Activists of the Hindu Jagran Manch, the Bajrang Dal and the Rana Tharu Parishad break into the Union Church at Amaun near Khatima in Udham Singh Nagar district and install a Siva idol.

September 26, New Delhi: A statue of St. Bernard is broken and thrown out of the grounds of Jesus and Mary College in New Delhi.

September 30, New Delhi: Acharya Giriraj Kishore, secretary-general of the VHP, asks Christian missionaries to leave India.

October 1, Gujarat: The VHP and Bajrang Dal ban pop *dandiya ras* dancing in several cities of Gujarat and forbid Muslim film stars from participating in these events.

October 1, Rajasthan: School books are found to have been rewritten to suit the Hindu Right's agenda. Articles by RSS chief Rajendra Singh, his deputy K.S. Sudershan, *Panchjanya* editor Tarun Vijay and the Swadeshi Jagran Manch's Jalam Singh Rawlot are found to appear in Class 9 textbooks.

October 1, Karnataka: Convent schools in Karnataka and some other states begin to receive threatening letters and in some cases visits by local VHP leaders demanding that they stop their supposed proselytisation activities.

October 1, Uttar Pradesh: The Uttar Pradesh government issues a Government Order making the singing of Vande Mataram mandatory in schools in the state. Public outrage and the threat of legal action by the Minorities Commission and independent groups force it to back down and lead to the resignation of the Education Minister.

October 7, Uttar Pradesh: The staff of the Christy Jyoti Convent School in Baghpat is threatened by villagers who have been told that children are forcibly converted there.

October 18, Maharashtra: Christian villagers in Kayre Sadadpada village near Peth are attacked after they refuse to make contributions of cash and rice for an adivasi festival. A church is destroyed.

October 27, Uttar Pradesh: The BJP-dominated Mu-

nicipal Corporation of Ayodhya passes a resolution banning burials within the city limits. Ayodhya has a large Muslim population and is the site of several graveyards.

October 30, Gujarat: Bajrang Dal-VHP members armed with belts, chains and lathis attack delegates at the National Christian Conference in Baroda.

October 31, New Delhi: A spokesperson for Vidya Bharati, the pro-RSS educational body, says that 14-year-old schoolchildren should not be taught "salacious texts", which in its view includes poems by Alfred Noyes.

November 3, Gujarat: VHP members attack social groups seeking to end anti-women exorcism rituals at the Kaliyaji temple in Shamlaji.

November 4, Gujarat: Miscreants, allegedly instigated by VHP-Bajrang Dal workers, attempt to set fire to a chapel in Baurigautha village in Dangs district. Churches in Nirgumandal village are also damaged.

November 5, Gujarat: A church is burned down at Gadhavi village in Dangs district.

November 9, Haryana: A convent in Khera Khummar village in Jhajjar district is broken into and two nuns are beaten and asked to leave the district.

November 11, Gujarat: Hindu fundamentalists force residents of Daghunja village near the Satpura road in Dangs to enter hot springs for ritual purification. The village sarpanch also issues orders barring adivasi Christians from drawing water from the community well, grazing their livestock on community land and gaining employment in Government projects.

November 12, Gujarat: Churches are burned down in Kamath village.

November 13, Haryana: A missionary team from Punjab is attacked by VHP activists in Beri town while distributing leaflets on the gospels.

November 24, Karnataka: Forty armed Hindu activists, allegedly affiliated to the RSS, attack a Christian service at Kulai near Mangalore.

December 1, Maharashtra: Lumpen elements belonging to the Shiv Sena storm cinemas in Mumbai and stop screenings of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* on the grounds that it is "anti-Hindu".

December 3, Karnataka: Police action terminates a rath

yatra organised by VHP activists with the public support of Karwar's BJP MP Ananthakumar Hegde to storm the Sufi shrine of Hazrat Abdul Azeez Macchi at Chikmagalur. The VHP and the BJP claim that the shrine is in fact a Hindu temple, which they wish to call Datta Peetha.

December 3, New Delhi: Shiv Sena lumps attack cinemas screening *Fire* and follow this up with attacks on a cinema in Patiala, Punjab.

December 11, Maharashtra: Shiv Sena corporators in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation move a motion to make singing of Vande Mataram mandatory in Greater Mumbai's schools.

December 12, Maharashtra: Shiv Sena protestors throw stones at Dilip Kumar's house for saying that *Fire* has a right to be screened. Vulgar slogans are chanted by Sena activists who strip down to their underwear. The police stand by.

December 14, Gujarat: Churches are burned down at Lachanchariya village and several other places.

December 24, Maharashtra: Christmas celebrations in Mumbai's Borivli suburb are disrupted by Bajrang Dal activists.

December 25, Gujarat: A VHP-affiliated Hindu Jagran Manch rally in Ahwa town in Dangs district, timed to coincide with Christmas gatherings, ends with attacks on schools and churches throughout the district. The attacks last several days.

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January 5, Maharashtra: The VHP-affiliated Dharmaraksha Samiti holds a rally in Peth to "re-convert" adivasi Christians and asks Christian missionar-

ies to leave the area.

January 6, New Delhi: Shiv Sena activists dig up the pitch at Ferozeshah Kotla cricket stadium to prevent an India-Pakistan match from being played there. The Sena also threatens to disrupt a New Delhi-Lahore bus service.

January 18, Maharashtra: The office of the Board of Control for Cricket in India in Mumbai is stormed by Shiv Sena activists and trophies of historic value are damaged.

January 18, Tamil Nadu: The Shiv Sena unit in Chennai threatens to disrupt "at any cost" the first India-Pakistan cricket Test scheduled to be held in the city.

January 19, Maharashtra: Members of the Cable Sena, a union of Shiv Sena-affiliated cable television operators, threaten to cut off broadcasts of the India-Pakistan cricket series and boycott the ESPN sports channel.

January 19, Maharashtra: Political activists and journalists protesting against the Shiv Sena's attack on the BCCI office are arrested, but no action is taken against the group that indulged in violence. The police refuse to file First Information Reports from protestors who allege brutality.

January 20, Mumbai: Shiv Sena leader Uddhav Thackeray announces that Kashmiri Muslim traders will not be allowed to set up shop in Goa.

January 23, Orissa: Graham Stewart Staines and his two sons, Philip, 9, and Timothy, 6, are burnt to death at Manoharpur village.

January 23, Gujarat: A mob attacks and burns down two Christian prayer halls in Songarh taluk in Surat district.

Appendix III

Demographic Profile of Christian Population in India

The tables on the following pages are taken from S.M. Michael, "Demographic profile of Christian population in India at the close of the second millenium", *Impact of Christianity on North East India*, ed. J. Puthenpurakal, Shillong, 1996.

The tables reveal that Christians are not growing as a percentage of the total population. While the percentage of Christians is growing in certain states (in the north-east), it is declining in other states (A.P., Goa, Kerala). The changes in the demographic profile nationwide have little to do with mass conversion, and more to do with fertility rates among different communities. These in turn are related to economic status and education: those who are better off and/or have more access to education tend to have lower fertility rates.

While Christians constitute a majority of the population in three states (Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland), these states constitute only 0.45 per cent of India's total population. The Christian population in Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland constitutes only 14.71 per cent of India's total Christian population.

These statistics are adequate to counter the RSS propaganda and attempts to whip up hysteria over the supposed growth in percentage of Christian population.
