News
Religious Life



Sister Bhagya, principal of Sacred Heart Convent High School in Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, central India, is accused of trying to convert a Hindu staff member to Christianity. (Courtesy of Sacred Heart Convent High School)



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Two Catholic nuns and two postulants were forced out of a train March 19 and paraded to a police station in Jhansi, a town in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. They were interrogated for five hours for allegedly violating a state law against forcible religious conversion before they were released without being formally charged at around 11:30 p.m. after senior police officials intervened.

Bishop Peter Parapullil of Jhansi sheltered the nuns and the postulants from the Sacred Heart Congregation at his residence that night. The four resumed the journey next day on another train with a police escort, sharing two seats for the remaining 20-hour journey. The nuns changed out of their religious habits and put on civilian dress to avoid further harassment.

In a similar incident in June 2017, Sr. Beena Joseph was detained at Satna station in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh while traveling on a train with four tribal girls. The railway police acted on a complaint from a Hindu who accused the nun of abducting the girls for conversion. Joseph, a member of the Carmelite Sisters of St. Teresa, was charged with taking the girls for conversion and released after a 12-hour interrogation. The case was dropped when the girls' parents sided with Joseph.

Cases of Christians being targeted have been increasing over the last few years because of anti-conversion laws in eight Indian states, including Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, now ruled by the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party).

The Uttar Pradesh government enacted its law in December 2020, Madhya Pradesh a month later. Madhya Pradesh had enacted a law to restrict religious conversion decades earlier but replaced it with more stringent provisions, such as a 10-year jail term for religious conversion done through allurement, force or coercion.

Uttar Pradesh enacted the law to discourage "love jihad," a term used to refer to Muslim boys who feign love and marry girls from other religions to convert them to Islam.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has enacted similar laws in all states where it rules. The party also plans to impose the law throughout the country.

"Christians and Muslims have become an easy target," said Divine Word Fr. Babu Joseph, a former spokesperson of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India and

current director of a media communication center in Indore, Madhya Pradesh.

The new laws make it "easy to point a finger of suspicion at any Christian," as happened to the Sacred Heart nuns, Babu Joseph told Global Sisters Report.

Parapullil said the nuns' harassers knew Christians in India do not have the power to challenge the majority community. Just 2.3% of India's 1.3 billion people are Christian and 13.4% are Muslim, compared to Hindus' 80.5%.

"We are working to uplift the poor and downtrodden without any discrimination, and therefore, we are targeted," Parapullil told GSR.

The attacks, he said, are "a message to minorities to be submissive to the hegemony of majority community."




Sacred Heart Convent High School is managed by the Sisters of the Destitute Congregation in Khajuraho in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. (Courtesy of Sacred Heart Convent High School)

Some use the anti-conversion laws as a means to avenge, as happened to Sister Bhagya, principal of Sacred Heart Convent High School in Khajuraho, a town in Madhya Pradesh's Chhatarpur district. A Hindu staff member who had been fired because she was not qualified to be a teacher told police Feb. 22 that the Sisters of

the Destitute nun had promised to double her salary if she became a Christian. Sister Bhagya went into hiding to avoid arrest.

"I spent the time praying for God's intervention in my case," said Sister Bhagya, who came out of hiding March 16 after the Madhya Pradesh High Court granted her anticipatory bail, which is granted to a person who believes he or she may be arrested for an offense that usually does not receive bail.

"I never asked her to become a Christian," Sister Bhagya told GSR over the phone.

Sister Bhagya is now subject to a police probe and faces prison time if she is convicted.

Violence against Christians continues unchecked across India "despite many efforts by various individuals, groups and organizations to stop them," said A.C. Michael, a human rights activist and former member of Delhi Minorities Commission.

Michael said such incidents increased after 2014, when a federal coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in New Delhi. That year, India reported 127 attacks on Christians, and by 2020, the number had increased to 279.

"This year has witnessed 58 incidents so far," Michael told GSR.

Uttar Pradesh, he added, has reported five anti-Christian incidents this year, including the nuns' harassment on the train in March.

The state recorded 18 anti-Christian cases in 2014 and 104 incidents in 2018, the highest so far. Among them was forcible closure of about 80 churches by mobs. The churches were reopened through courts' intervention, said Michael, who is associated with the Indian unit of the Alliance for Defending Freedom, an American Christian organization that promotes religious freedom, sanctity of life, and marriage and family.

While all incidents against Christians have by and large gone unnoticed, the Sacred Heart nuns' harassment was widely condemned, especially after videos of the incident went viral on social media.

People such as Rajmohan Gandhi, a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi who is now based in Illinois, have expressed shock and dismay at the nuns' harassment.

In an opinion piece for New Delhi Television, Gandhi said the young Hindu activists who attacked the nuns were brainwashed and "conditioned to see Muslims and Christian compatriots not as partners in a great enterprise, but as open or secret enemies, and encouraged to spy patriotically on them."

Several women's groups, including the Indian Christian Women Movement, condemned the incident, which they said indicated the "growing communal hatred" spreading with "the active support of the current government" forcing religious minorities to live in fear and insecurity.

A joint press release from the women's groups March 23 appealed to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and federal Home Minister Amit Shah to take "decisive and stern action" against the culprits "so that such incidents will not be repeated."

Two days later, Sr. Jessy Kurian, a Supreme Court lawyer and former member of the federal National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions, pressed the National Human Rights Commission to act against the nuns' harassers. The commission, which is responsible for the protection and promotion of human rights in India, has asked the Uttar Pradesh government to submit a report on action taken within a month.

In her letter to the human rights commission, she said the incident has shocked her "as a woman and a nun" and said Catholic women religious have fundamental right to travel freely throughout India.

Meanwhile, the four victims of harassment have not recovered from the trauma, said Sr. Usha Maria, their New Delhi-based provincial.

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Sr. Libya Thomas and Sr. Hemlata Hembrom were accompanying the postulants, Preeti and Sweta, to their homes in Odisha for annual vacation. Maria did not give the last names of the postulants for privacy reasons.

They boarded the train in New Delhi, and as they were about to reach Jhansi, a couple of Hindu activists traveling in the same coach questioned the nuns, who were in their religious habits.

The Hindu activists "forcefully took their identity cards, clicked their pictures and started accusing them of taking the girls to convert to Christianity," Maria told GSR.

Maria said around 150 slogan-shouting Hindu radicals had accompanied the sisters and postulants to the police station.

"Now let us see how Jesus will save you," the mob mocked the four in Hindi, Maria said.

The incident has created "immense amount of fear in our hearts" to practice "our religion freely," Thomas, a native of the southern Indian state of Kerala, where the congregation is based, wrote in a petition she submitted to the police.

Maria said she regretted that the sisters and postulants had to face harassment and humiliation "for no fault of theirs."

She said the nuns always wear habits while traveling, "but this is the first time our sisters faced such hostility," she said.

The incident had political repercussions, especially in Kerala, which was then preparing to elect its legislative assembly. Its chief minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, said March 24 that the incident tarnished India's image and ancient tradition of religious tolerance. He urged home minister Shah to take strict action against the attackers.

Shah, who was then campaigning in Kerala, assured the Kerala people that he would take stern action against the nuns' attackers.

Under mounting criticism from political leaders and others, the Uttar Pradesh police April 2 arrested three Hindu radicals. They were released on bail April 7, a day after the election finished in Kerala.

The incident also helped showcase the role of Catholic nuns in India.

Markandey Katju, a retired judge of India's Supreme Court, condemned the incident in a March 25 opinion piece in The Week news magazine and urged Indians to emulate Catholic nuns' spirit of service and sacrifice.

"In my opinion, the nuns are our role models, for if India is to progress, our people must develop the spirit of service and sacrifice that the nuns have," he wrote. "Far from harassing them, we must give them the highest respect and learn from them."