In India, a pattern of attacks on Christians

Yesterday, a top Indian official acknowledged the violence and called for action.


NEW DELHI. It began slowly in 1998. The attacks seemed isolated; no one had heard of such a thing. A church altar destroyed in one town. Nuns raped in another. Bibles burned.

But today, attacks against Christians in India appear part of a systematic, and often violent campaign against a mostly peaceful and relatively powerless minority - just 2 percent of India's population.

The violence began after the 1998 accession to power of an Indian government whose ideological underpinnings include anti-minority teachings, writings, and theories. The result is a new and uncharacteristic climate of fear among Christians - in a nation long fabled for its tolerance.

Today, despite a mixture of official denials and what often seem oblique and reluctant official censures, the incidents are occurring almost weekly - with Hindu radical groups one day gloating in the press over killings of Christian believers, and the next denying any part in them. Some 35 attacks against Christian targets are recorded by the Delhi-based United Christian Forum for Human Rights (UCFHR), between January and June.

In June, matters got worse. On June 7, a Catholic priest, George Kuzhikandam, was killed while sleeping in a church compound in a town called Mathura in Uttar Pradesh.

A week later, four churches in different parts of India were bombed. The morning after the bombings, a young evangelical preacher from Punjab, Ashish Prabash, who worked for India Campus Crusade for Christ, was found stabbed to death in his bed, and partially burned. A week later, church grave sites in Andhra Pradesh were desecrated. Three days ago the sanctuary of a church in Maharashtra was ransacked after threats severe enough to cause the terrified head priest to run away without filing a police report.

PUBLIC PROTEST: Nuns and
priests took to the streets of Bombay Saturday in protest of the killing of George Kuzhikandam, a priest who was murdered last week in his sleep.
SHERWIN CRASTO/AP

In areas where attacks take place, Christians describe a pervasive atmosphere of hate against them that is created by Hindu radical groups. They describe a neglect or even acquiescence to the crimes by local authorities. In the Mathura killing of Brother George, as he is known, the police brought in the church cook, Vijay Ekka, for "interrogation."

Mr. Ekka had slept near the slain priest and reported the murder. A week later, while in police custody, Ekka died. The police first said he committed suicide; but an autopsy indicates he was strangled. Theories about the custodial killing of Ekka have circulated - some blaming him for complicity, and others suggesting he knew who committed the murder. In any event, the cook is no longer around to tell his story, one local Christian points out.

The Bharatiya Janata Party-led government of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, has largely adopted a position of silence and official perplexity. Until yesterday, the government had not explicitly acknowledged violence against Christians per se. Mr. Vajpayee's spokesman, Brijesh Mishra, said in Italy this week the attacks are "isolated" and "aberrational" and have no pattern. Often they are attributed to a law-and-order problem, a local issue like a land dispute or a love triangle.

But yesterday, in a meeting of state officials, Home Minister L.K. Advani said the Christian attacks need to be addressed, possibly in a meeting of state chief ministers in August. Mr. Advani suggested that terrorists and foreign agents from Pakistan were the chief culprits.

Still, a growing chorus of Indian voices say that the attacks have come after the rise of a Hindu nationalist government in New Delhi, whose affiliated organizations of radical foot soldiers now openly speak of "driving Christians from India."

"There is a definite pattern of attacks, and I think it is now clear there is a corollary between these attacks and the election of the BJP," states social activist C. Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of Mohandas Gandhi, regarded as the father of India. "The silence is unfortunate. One longs to see the central government clearly oppose these attacks. This is a major development in this country, a dangerous one, and if it is not stopped, it will get worse."

On June 12, a delegation of the United Christians for Human Rights (UCFHR), representing India's 18 million Catholics and 6 million Protestants, requested a meeting with the prime minister. Led by the most popular figure in Indian Christendom, the late Delhi Archbishop Alan de Lastic (who died in a car accident in Poland on June 20), they...
asked Mr. Vajpayee to condemn the attacks. Vajpayee stated that Christians are safe in India, but did agree to investigate attacks and the hate literature.

Such an investigation might start in the Delhi bookshop of Vajpayee's own BJP party. "Bunch of Thoughts," a book by M.S. Golwalker, mid-century leader of the RSS, the parent organization of the BJP, is on sale there for about $4. It identifies Muslims, Christians, and communists as the three "enemies" of India. Mr. Golwalker states that "Wherever [Jesus’ followers] have gone, they proved to be not blood-givers, but blood suckers." Another states that if Christians don't "offer their first loyalty to the land of their birth ... they will remain here as hostiles and will have to be treated as such."

Historians point out that the church does have much to answer for in its colonial days. But the attitude and entire social context of Christians has changed dramatically in India since then. Today, the Christian community in India is known mainly for charitable organizations and rigorous, excellent schools.

Other than Sonia Gandhi, leader of the Congress Party, there are not many high-profile Christians in India's political elite. Christians have, however, made some inroads into the military: Admiral Sushil Kumar, head of the Indian Navy, a former Army Chief of Staff S. F. Rodriguez; the No. 2 in command of the Army in Kashmir, John Mukherjee.

Still, pamphlets, handbills, reprints, and other literature denoting Christians as hostile to India are easy to find in the streets. Experts say it is clear an ideology and a rationale for hate have be fed to ordinary Hindu masses in many mid-size cities and rural areas. A leaflet dated May 25 states: "Warning: Put a stop to the evil deeds of the Roman Catholic devils."

The attacks are not viewed as an overarching Hindu-Christian clash of civilizations," say those monitoring them. Rather, they are an example of "manufactured hatred," says one. In his last interview, the late Archbishop de Lastic said, "I will never accept the general statement that it is the Hindus who are attacking Christians. A few fanatics are destroying the age-old religious tradition of peace that is characteristic of India."

Christians provide a "soft target" for growing Hindu nationalist forces. Unlike the Muslims, Christians have no history of fighting back, since their numbers are small and there has been little history of violence against them. (Also, Muslims have an important 15 percent voting bloc.) Ardent Hindu's object to efforts to convert lower-caste Hindus and the 8 percent tribal community in India. Christian missionary schools often educate tribals who learn to read, save money, buy land, and get better jobs - which creates resentment.

"If you attack Christians, you get mileage by being seen as antiforeign, since Christians are presented as part of the hated colonial legacy," says Pramod Kumar, a social-science researcher in Chandigargh.
Attacks on Christians began systematically after the spring 1998 election of the BJP. Churches in Gujarat were attacked and Bibles burned in the summer; that fall, four nuns in Madhya Pradesh were raped. But not until the January 1999 murder of Australian Protestant Graham Staines, who worked with lepers in a rural eastern state, did the issue receive much attention. Mr. Staines and his two young sons were burned alive in a jeep while sleeping.

"When the government says there is no pattern to these crimes, I feel complete exasperation," says John Dayal, national convener of the UCFHR. "There is not just violence, but there is also a hate campaign. Each hateful statement is signed - so there is no ambiguity about it. The right-wing groups are condemned by their statements."

One such statement made to a Times of India reporter last Thursday is an example. Dharmendra Sharma, a local leader of the Bajrang Dal, one of a network of Hindu radical groups operating near Mathura, where Brother George was killed, stated that Christians were "bigger enemies" than the Muslims, and said, "We are prepared to use violence. There is no limit."

Speaking of the death of Staines, Mr. Sharma added that, "The two boys should not have been killed, and the way Staines was killed was not good. We should be prepared for any eventuality. But I think a good beating is sufficient to do the job."

This week, following headlines and a letter from the National Human Rights Commission of India, a Bajrang Dal leader denied his group was anti-Christian. He admitted that firearm training of Hindu militant groups had started in northern India. But in a qualification, he said the training was being done "with air guns."

In Western societies that have had bitter ethnic and sectarian violence, antiminority violence is officially condemned - even if incidents continue, experts point out. Today, for example, attacks on Jews in the United States are met with official censure and prosecution. During the spate of black church burnings in the American South in 1997, President Clinton held national seminars. Even in Europe, which largely tolerated a four-year aggression by Serbs against the multi-ethnic Bosnian state in the mid-1990s, elected leaders jointly condemned the pro-Nazi hate rhetoric of Austrian right-wing politician Joerg Haider.

Last week, in an unusually frank statement to the Foreign Correspondents Club in New Delhi, American ambassador to India Richard Celeste said the attacks on Christians raised a "very discordant note" in the country. Ambassador Celeste praised the newly warm relations between India and the United States. He also admitted the attacks send "a contrary message" regarding "India's commitment to secularism and tolerance."

REJECTING A BIAS: The Monitor's Robert Marquand first reported on attacks on Christians in India in 1998. But he says, because the newspaper has "Christian" in its
title, he has tended to stay away from reporting most incidents. "I don't want to be typecast here as a reporter dedicated to pleading the case for a specific interest group," says Bob. But the attacks on Christians are headlining major Indian news outlets and "no objective journalist could ignore recent events."

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