

PUNJAB

T h e T r u t h i n B a t a l a

[A fact finding team comprising John Dayal, Madhu Chandra, M Adeed and Marang Hansda visited the affected region, including villages deep in the rural hinterland and filed an executive summary report on March 2, 2010. Excerpts :]

Punjab police are hiding the fact that Sangh Parivar-led hoodlums in Batala, Punjab tried to burn five Christians alive. The Christians were from two families who live in the Church of North India's historic Church of the Epiphany compound built in 1865. Batala is a small business town in Punjab's Gurdaspur district. On February 20th, the CNI church was set on fire and all its furniture burnt. Attempts were made to destroy a nearby Salvation Army church, raised in 1958, where the pastor was seriously injured. "We pleaded with the police to help, but they did not," said the Pastor, Maj Gurnam Singh.

Even as the larger group of attackers focused on burning the CNI church, a group of men armed with sticks and rods, and came to the CNI Deacon's house. The deacon, Victor Gill, and his wife Parveen, hid themselves under the bed. The assailants damaged the doors, tried to enter the room forcibly, and told the couple they would be burnt alive if they did not come out. Meanwhile, at a second CNI house, the group overturned a scooter, took out the petrol, and doused teacher Christopher Morris and his daughter Daisy with the fuel while the mother, Usha, cringed in their home. They tried to set the two on fire, but the matchbox had also been soaked in the petrol and despite three attempts to strike a match, the matchsticks would not ignite saving the family from being burnt alive. The police were watching. The fire brigade came later but was blocked by a mob for quite some time.

No police report has been filed on the attempted murders even as the top police and administrative officers enforced a one sided "peace accord" on the local Christian leadership. Christians were instructed not to press for charges immediately so that a number of Christian youth who were arrested—together with a few Hindu men—could be released. The strategy of the assailants was eerily reminiscent of what was practiced and perfected against churches in Orissa in 2008. Police forcibly cleaned up the Church of the Epiphany. They removed burnt furniture and made the presbyter whitewash the walls to remove traces of fuel oil used in the blaze. This was done before a formal enquiry could be conducted by the government.

The Christians, all of them of Dalit origin, were trying to enforce a closure or "bandh" in Batala markets to protest a blasphemous picture of Jesus Christ holding a can of beer in one hand, a lit cigarette in another which appeared on roadside banners to celebrate the Hindu "Ram Navmi" festival. The banners were sponsored by a coalition of local political, media and business leaders, together with the trading community which is almost entirely Hindu.

The Sangh Parivar reacted to the Christian protest by mobilising shopkeepers and youth in attacks that left many injured, two churches damaged, and clergy traumatised.

Timeline

16-17 February—people noticed Jesus Christ image on banners, newspapers, posters

18 February—Jalandhar protests; two people arrested for printing posters
19 February—road protests in various villages, violence in Majitha
20 February—Batala churches burnt; widespread violence
21 February—police firing on Christian protesters in Tibbar village and others
places; many arrested, injured; peace accord reached in Batala
22 February—curfew partially lifted
23 February—curfew completely lifted

The police force was outnumbered and looked on during the violence. Despite intelligence reports of the Christian anger and the Hindutva plans to counterattack, the sub-divisional magistrate of Batala, Mr Rahul Chaba, PCS, said he could not enforce a quick curfew until late on 20 February 2010 because most of the police force were sent to the Pakistani border nearby where Union Home Minister P Chidambaram inaugurated a defence outpost. By the time the police returned and a curfew was imposed, violence had already occurred. The curfew was relaxed on 22 February 2010.

On February 21st, protest rallies were held across the western districts of Punjab and in Chandigarh against the desecration of the churches. There were reports of police who broke up protest meetings in villages with lathi charges and indiscriminate arrests. At present, there are no Christians or Hindus in police custody barring the printer and publisher of the banners.

On February 23, Punjab Chief Minister Sardar Prakash Singh Badal assured the aicc delegation's head, Dr John Dayal, aicc Secretary General and member, National Integration Council, that he viewed the matter seriously and has ordered officials to unravel the "entire conspiracy". Dr Dayal demanded a judicial enquiry into the incidents during the meeting.

At the last meeting of the National Integration Council in New Delhi on 13 October 2008 chaired by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Dr Dayal had personally briefed Mr Badal on the tension brewing in the rural districts of western Punjab where tens of thousands of Christians, most of them of Dalit origin, live and are suffering from caste oppression and attacks on their freedom of religion. Church meetings are routinely denied permission, for example, and caste epithets are used against the Christians. The chief minister had promised to have the situation investigated and remedial action taken.

The recent incidents also exposed the utter lack of Christian representation among the Punjab government. Less than half a dozen Christian leaders, many of them related to each other, hold positions in the Akali Dal, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Indian National Congress. They have little connection with the masses living in villages, slums and poorly constructed ghettos outside some villages. Most live in shadow of mansions owned by local Jat Sikhs with relatives living abroad or the trading classes. Class and caste barriers are clearly evident. In some villages, the team members were shocked to find Dalit Christian working under bonded labour conditions with family in brick kilns, and many employed in the fields during the sowing or harvesting season where they compete with cheaper labour from Bihar. The exception is Christians who have risen to high positions in academics, the military, and the Church, with one becoming a CNI bishop some years ago.

Punjab's Christian population is around 300,000, about 1.2% of the state population, mostly concentrated in Amritsar and villages in west Punjab. The government is Akali-BJP coalition elected in February 2007. □