

MINORITIES – CHRISTIANS - 2005

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Religion census in Gujarat schools (7)

Ahmedabad, Jan. 21: A controversial decision to make primary students fill in a village-wise religion-based questionnaire has raised suspicions about the Gujarat government's "hidden agenda". The Opposition Congress has dubbed the census in rural areas as the BJP's "attempt to disturb communal harmony". Education minister Anandiben Patel denied any religion-based survey in village schools. She, however, admitted students are being asked to fill in a questionnaire, but argued the exercise is aimed at making them aware of their social and cultural surroundings. The four-page questionnaire seeks to find out how many people belong to which religion in a village, the festivals that are celebrated, the number of religious places and their historical importance. The survey is being conducted as part of the government's district primary education project's documentation exercise in each of the state's 18,000 villages. District education officials have been directed to send the details in the form of a "village diary". (Telegraph 21.1.05)

US pastor braves protests (7)

Bangalore, Jan. 21: American pastor Benny Hinn launched his controversial three-day prayer meeting, Festival of Blessings, on the outskirts of the city this evening with more than 60 mega-screens and an 1.5 lakh watt sound system criss-crossing the venue. Among the VIPs at the rally were chief minister Dharam Singh, state minister M.V. Rajasekhar and Maharashtra leader Chhagan Bhujbal. Union minister for programme implementation Oscar Fernandes, his wife and several Congress MLAs were also there. The venue, Jakkur airfield, was turned into a fortress with more than 10,000 policemen and 2,500 private security personnel standing guard. At least half a million people were accommodated at the venue, spokesperson Sajan George said. Hinn, the founder of the World Outreach Centre in Orlando, Florida, has pledged to donate \$250,000 for tsunami victims in South Asia. This morning, around 500 BJP workers were arrested when they blocked traffic to protest the prayer meeting. Members of the Hindu Jagaran Vedike, which had called a bandh, stoned more than 20 buses of the state transport corporation. (Telegraph 22.1.05)

Church attack in Mumbai (7)

Mumbai, Jan. 23: In a shocking incident in the wee hours of Sunday morning, miscreants attacked the Teresian Carmelites Convent which runs a home for the elderly at Ambernath. It was 2 am in the morning when one of the two sisters heard some noises. They kept quiet and saw that the doors were secure. The mother superior had gone to her village as her mother had expired. In the morning when they opened the door they saw the holy cross outside was broken and smashed. The miscreants also left handwritten pamphlets in English and Marathi asking the nuns to leave the country. The two nuns Sisters Margaret and Smitha panicked and waited for their superior to return. The pamphlets read, "Run away, we will come back. Go away, this country is ours, now it is the cross, next time it will be your heads." The ones in Marathi read, "Pallun ja nahl tar amhi sodnar nahi. Nighun jaa ha desk aamcha aahey. (Run away, otherwise we will not spare you. Leave the country, this is ours)." The Ambernath police registered a case of threatening and damaging private property, against unknown persons. The police have also posted two police personnel outside the convent as a security measure. Talking to The Asian Age, Sister Diana said, "It is for the first time we have received such threats from anyone." The convent was set up a year ago and 12 senior citizens have made it their home. (Asian Age 24.1.05)

Staines wife 'humbled' by Padma Shri (7)

Bhubaneswar, Jan. 26: Social worker Gladys Staines, who has been conferred with the Padma Shri award, on Wednesday described it as a "rare honour" and a "humbling experience." "I am absolutely overwhelmed and stunned by the news. But I am feeling very humbled at the same time," she told PTI from her home at Ipswich, Queensland, Australia, over the phone. "It's a rare honour and a humbling experience." Ms Staines said she was grateful to the government for considering her for such an award. I'm simply overwhelmed, she said. (Asian Age 27.1.055)

Tribal Christian Villagers Caught In A 'Re-convert Or Die' Situation In Maharashtra (7)

AMRAVATI, Maharashtra : A tribal Catholic village is living in fear after religious fanatics stormed into the village, February 7, and issued threats and warnings of attacks if the villagers did not reconvert to Hinduism. Rajura is the only Catholic village in Amravati, one of the six divisions of Maharashtra with an independent municipal administration. The Catholics, all tribals, are descendants of migrants from Madhya Pradesh and their families have been living in the village for centuries. Bishop Edwin Colaco of Ahmedabad said the saffron-clad *munni* had attacked the Catholic Church and denounced the missionaries. "He launched into a tirade against the Adivasi (tribals) of Rajura, alleging that missionaries had originally converted them by force, and said that it was his mission to reconvert them to Hinduism." According to a news report, February 7, the *munni* had allegedly urged the Hindu villagers to "kill the Christian Adivasi with swords". (SAR News 9.2.05)

Christian meet at Kochi to discuss conversions (7)

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 11: AS PART of a series of interactions with minority communities, the National Commission for Minorities has invited around 50 Catholic clergymen for a meeting in Kochi on February 14. The country's leading demographer Prof Ashish Bose will address the community leaders on the basis of his scientific findings from the report of census on religions released by the government last year. Bose and his team are reported to have dwelt at length on the controversy regarding the mass conversions by the Christian missionaries. (Indian Express 12.2.05)

SC to examine-legally of quota for Dalit Christians (7)

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 11: BRUSHING aside the Centre's opposition to judicial intervention over inclusion of any particular community in the SC list, the Supreme Court today agreed to examine the legality of the issue raised in a petition seeking reservation for Dalits even after their conversion to Christianity. "It is a crucial issue and we would examine the legal side of the issue on the basis of the rulings cited by the petitioner and the Attorney-General," a bench of Chief Justice R.C. Lahoti and Justice G.P. Mathur said, while adjourning the matter for four weeks. Opposing the petition filed by the Centre for Public Interest Litigation (CPIL), A-G Milon Banerjee said: "It's a matter of policy and legislation and the courts should keep out of it." Banerjee also cited his correspondence with the government urging it to consider the issue "sympathetically". The bench took possession of the A-G's letters to the government even as Banerjee said the apex court itself had ruled that any amendment to the Presidential order of 1950 regarding inclusion of any particular community in the SC or ST categories was within the purview of legislative action. (Indian Express 12.2.05)

Christian density abnormally high in N-E' (7)

Kochi: The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) on Monday said there was "abnormally high" growth of Christian population in the North-East and this could be due to illegal Bangladeshi Muslim migrants reporting themselves as Christians. NCM chairman S Tar-lochan Singh said that scientific analysis of Census 2001 of the Christian community, conducted by NCM expert committee chairman Prof Ashish Bose on 'Census data on religion', showed "there was abnormally high growth of Christian population in N-E, especially bordering Bangladesh", while the proportion of Christians had remained the same — at 2.3% — for 1991 and 2001. Singh said he had held a meeting of Christian leaders to discuss the analysis prepared by Bose and sought

details from them in understanding this phenomenon through the help of Church records on births and deaths. The report said: "There is startling aspect of growth rates which is inexplicable unless we know the grass-root reality." In terms of percentage, Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya have the highest percentage of Christians, Singh said. (Times of India 15.2.05)

Veteran Italian Missionary Arrested In West Bengal (7)

KRISHNAGAR, West Bengal: The West Bengal police arrested a veteran Italian missionary on a complaint filed by a doctor over the running of a Church-run centre for the physically handicapped persons in Krishnagar. Vicar General of Krishnagar Diocese, Salesian Father Luciano Colussi, 83, was arrested by a posse of 12 policemen from the Bishop's House, February 12 morning, for questioning over the functioning of the handicapped centre, Daffodil. A group of Christians told SAR News, February 13, that Father Colussi had requested the police to allow him to go to the police station in his car but the police personnel abused him, bundled him off into the police van and drove away to the Katwali police station. Immediately, a group of Christians rushed to the police station and demanded the release of the priest. But the police officer in charge, Mr. Sunil Guha, defended the police action saying they had a verbal order from the sub-divisional officer, Krishnagar, to arrest Father Colussi in the "Daffodil case". However, after about 3 hours of interrogation, the police released Father Colussi around 2 p.m. (Sar News 15.2.05)

RSS Activists Attack Bible College Students In Kerala (7)

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Kerala (SAR NEWS) -- Six students of a Bible college at Thiruvalla in Kottayam district were allegedly attacked by Hindu activists, February 13. The students of Gospel For Asia College – Jaykumar, Simon Toppo, Imans Naik, Yogendra Tappa, Narendra Rai and Kiran Chakma – were preaching the gospel on the streets in the locality when activists of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh bundled them off in two auto-rickshaws to Budhanur RSS Centre and brutally beat them up causing severe injuries, police said. According to Global Council of Indian Christians, the six students hailing from northern India and Nepal were sharing the Gospel with kiln workers from West Bengal when they were picked up by the RSS men. "The attack has resulted in permanent impairment of hearing to some students who were denied immediate medical aid," GCIC national convenor, Mr. Sajan K. George, told SAR News, February 13. Political leaders, including the CPM district committee member, Mr. P. Viswabhara Panicker, have condemned the attack by the RSS against Christians. (Sar News 15.2.05)

Christian Preacher Murdered Near Mysore (7)

MYSORE, Karnataka: A Christian preacher was found murdered in Hunsur near Mysore, February 11. Pastor Narayan, 25, was serving as an evangelist for the last four years in the small town, which has turned into a hotbed of communal attacks, particularly on the Christians. There was no information on which Church the pastor belonged to. Locals say pastor Narayan was the latest victim of the hate campaign against the minorities of the area. The postmortem report points to broken ribs and teeth and injuries in the navel area suggesting a cold-blooded murder, Global Council of Indian Christians, a premier Christian rights organisation, informed SAR News, February 12. "What is intriguing is Narayan was buried hurriedly before the arrival of senior pastors from the nearby Srirangapatna town," said national convenor of the Global Council of Indian Christians, Mr. Sajan K. George. "There are many unanswered questions in this case; I have reported the matter to the National Commission of Minorities for action," he said. Mr. George has also demanded an inquiry into the murder by the Central Bureau of Investigation, India's top investigating agency. (Sar News 15.2.05)

VHP/brings 5000 Christian converts back to Hindu fold in Etah (7)

Etah: VISHWA HINDU Parishad (VHP) activists here on Sunday oversaw the reconversion of about 5,000 Christians, including priests, to Hinduism after a "purification" ceremony. Tills ceremony took place on Sunday after activists of the Dharma Raksha Samiti of the VHP spread out to 26 villages of Etah and Firozabad districts, spreading over 14 churches being run by

Christian priests. The church priests were then made aware of their "moral duty" towards Hinduism which they had forgotten after being "misled" by Christian missionaries. In a grand "purification" ceremony, at least 5,000 Christian "conyertecs" were brought back to the Hindu fold, including the priests of the 14 churches which have now been transformed into Arya Samaj Gurukuls for dalit children. The reconverted priests have been assigned the duty of operating these Gurukuls as teachers. During the ceremony, the priests, who had been tattooed with a "cross" at the time of their conversion were again tattooed with the sign of "Om" on their forearms. Later, all the assembled con-vertees and VHP activists participated in a communal feast to indicate that although the coiivertees had been rein-ducted into Hinduism as dal-its, they would be treated as equals in society. The "purification" ceremony took place in full knowledge of the Etah administration which declined to interfere in the matter claiming it to be a religious matter entirely driven by the will of the conver-tees. Etah District Magistrate RP Shukla said religious freedom is a fundamental right and the administration could only interfere if anyone's religious freedom is being forcibly challenged. (Pioneer 16/2/05)

Day after burial, priest's body goes missing (7)

AMRITSAR, FEBRUARY 17: A DAY after Roman Catholic missionary Father Mark was buried on the premises of St Mary's Church School at Gumtala after a dispute with the Jalandhar Diocese, the body was reported missing this morning. SDM Gurwaryam Singh visited the site today but refused comment. SP City II H.S. Gill said the police hadn't been informed. Father Mark had been closely associated with the Gumtala school over the past 40 years and villagers had wanted him buried at the school. The Jalandhar Diocese had objected and approached the court to stop villagers from taking possession of the body. But by the time the judge called for status quo last evening, the priest had already been buried with the consent of his England-based sister Anne Waikling. The 74-year-old missionary, known to be fond of hunting, died on Tuesday after sustaining injuries in a blast while filling empty cartridges. Charging the Jalandhar Diocese, school authorities said the grave had been dug up and body exhumed Rev Dr Symphorian Keeprath, Bishop of Jalandhar Diocese, in turn, condemned the "alleged burial" in the school compound. The Bishop, however, said he was not aware of the "exhumation" but promised "strong action" against the culprits. Blaming the Punjab Christian Association for kicking up a row, he said a schoolground can't be turned into a burial ground (Indian Express 18.2.05)

VHP drive for mass conversion (19)

Lucknow, Feb. 18: Reconversion is back in focus after a VHP-affiliated outfit organised a "purification camp" for Dalit and extremely backward caste Christians in western Uttar Pradesh this week, reports our special correspondent. Over 3,000 people from more than 17 villages of Etah district have been reconverted to Hinduism over a period of time, prompting Alope Sinha, principal secretary, home department, to seek a report from the district administration. Even Christian prayer halls, 14 of them across the 17 villages, have been reportedly taken over and converted into schools for Dalits. On February 13, the Dhar-ma Raksha Samity organised the "purification camp" in the villages where the reconverts were allowed to return to temples after being washed in the Ganga and made to sit for a special puja. Yagnas, too, were organised for them to offer prayers. The organisation has been holding camps and educating villagers about the need to return to their "mother religion". (Telegraph 19.2.05)

Steamy Sin scenes upset Catholics (7)

Mumbai, Feb. 18: Catholics in Mumbai have condemned attempts by filmmaker Vinod Pande in his latest movie Sin to "sensationalise the so-called fictional sexual escapades of a priest" and urged the director to withdraw the film. A statement issued on Friday by the All-India Catholic Union, or AICU, and the Bombay Catholic Sabha, or BCS, said: "This portrayal of an ordained priest in such light will hurt the sentiments of the Christian community, as there appears to be a fine dividing line between pornography, truth and fiction." The film is due for release next Friday, February 25. Speaking to The Asian Age, Catholic Sabha president Dolphy D'Souza said "the storyline shows a priest having a sexual relationship with a lover who is half his age. We are not worried about the scene. (Asian Age 19.2.05)

Sangh activists stop tribals on way to conversion function (26)

JAIPUR | FEBRUARY 19: RSS and Bajrang Dal activists on Saturday went on a rampage at Kota railway station to prevent nearly 275 tribals from attending a ceremony organised by a city-based Christian mission. Succumbing to pressure from the activists, the district administration has detained the tribals at a police station. The Emmanuel Mission, which is organising the ceremony, has been booked under several Sections of the IPC for "forcing tribals to convert to Christianity". Trouble began in the early hours of Saturday when activists of the saffron brigade surrounded passengers who had alighted from the Bangalore-Kota Express and stopped them from boarding buses of the mission, sources said. The activists also allegedly beat up mission employees and pelted stones at the buses. Later, the tribals were taken to the railway police station, where they are still being detained. According to the FIR registered by police, the tribals had been brought to Kota by the mission with the promise of a bicycle and Rs 250 for converting to Christianity. The district administration has now asked the mission to send the tribals back to Andhra Pradesh from where they had come. (Indian Express 20.2.05)

RSS beats Christians over Andhra boys on train (7)

Jaipur, Feb. 19: Tension prevailed in Kota city after workers of the RSS, BJP and Bajrang Dal descended on a train and beat up workers of the Emmanuel Mission early on Saturday morning. The BJP government, meanwhile, has dispatched a four-member team to Kota to look into the saffron outfits' charges that the mission was trying to convert a large group of boys from Andhra Pradesh to Christianity. According to eyewitnesses, a group of 200 Sangh Parivar workers arrived at Kota railway station at 4.30 am on Saturday and started raising slogans against the mission. The group, which had prior information, descended on the train and took a group of 250 youth, who had come from Andhra Pradesh under the supervision of the mission, to the police. The mob led by senior BJP leaders, handed over the Andhra youth to the police saying they were Hindu dalits brought to Kota for conversion. The youths were unable to speak any language but Telugu. (Asian Age 20.2.05)

Nun kidnapped, released (7)

Bangalore, Feb. 19: A 35-year-old nun from Raichur was kidnapped and released in a matter of a few days this week, according to Karnataka Women's Commission chairperson Phelomena Peris. Speaking to reporters here on Friday, Ms Peris said Sister Jasmy Francis of Assissi Convent in Raichur, was kidnapped from Bangalore city railway station on Tuesday and released in the early hours of Friday in Sindhanur, Raichur district. "I have complained to the Director General & Inspector General of Police as well as the Bangalore police commissioner about the incident," she said. When contacted by The Asian Age, Bangalore city police commissioner S. Mariswamy said Ms Peris had spoken to him of the incident but had not lodged a written complaint. Giving details of the incident, Ms Peris said, "Ms Francis, who had arrived from Kerala after visiting her family members, was waiting at the Bangalore city railway station to board the Karnataka Express on Tuesday, when two Hindi-speaking women befriended her and offered her a cup of coffee. She became unconscious after consuming it. Later Ms Francis was blindfolded and abducted in a vehicle." (Asian Age 20.2.05)

Bible students sent back after violent protests (7)

JAIPUR, FEB. 20. All the 275 people from Andhra Pradesh, who arrived at the Kota railway station in southern Rajasthan to attend a Bible course of the Emmanuel Mission, were sent back on late Saturday night without being allowed to attend the ceremony after violent protests by the activists of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Bajrang Dal. The Sangh Parivar workers alleged that they had been brought for religious conversion. The State Social Welfare Minister, Madan Dilwar, has ordered an inquiry into the allegation regarding the Emmanuel Mission indulging in conversion activities and sent four senior officials of his department to Kota for holding a detailed probe. The team arrived in Kota this evening. The Bible graduation course of the Mission is scheduled to be held from February 23 to 27. Hundreds of people reached Kota today to attend the curriculum reportedly without any protest by the Sangh Parivar activists. However, eight persons were injured on Saturday when the activists manhandled them and prevented them from proceeding to their destination in the town. The passengers who

disembarked from the Bangalore-Jaipur Express train at the early hours on Saturday were kept confined to the railway station premises by the Government Railway Police for the whole day and were sent off in late night by the Kota-Beena train. The Emmanuel Mission has claimed that they were forced to alight from the train on the way and their whereabouts were not known. (The Hindu 21.2.05)

'Conversion' to blame for girl's death: Bajrang Dal (7)

BHUBANESWAR, FEB 20: THE murder of a 14-year-old girl in Orissa's Dhenkanal district recently took a new twist today with the Bajrang Dal alleging that she had been killed as her parents had refused to embrace Christianity. The mutilated body of Jyotirmayee Bez, who was reported missing from her school on Wednesday last week, was found on a railway track the next day. The police had registered a case the same day. State Bajrang Dal convenor Subash Chouhan demanded that the Crime Branch inquire into the girl's murder. He claimed that the family had been asked by "some Christian families" in his village to "convert to Christianity". Jyotirmayee's parents, Alekh and Jashoda Bez, at a news conference, claimed these people had visited their house asking them to "change" their faith as it would "fetch them lot of money" and help them in getting their daughter married. On their refusal to convert, they claimed, they were threatened. Chouhan said a "fact-finding" team of the Bajrang Dal had visited the murder victim's village near Dhenkanal town. (Indian Express 21.2.05)

N-E- church leaders protest NCM remark (7)

Guwahati, Feb. 21: The Church leaders of Northeast have strongly objected to the remark of the National Commission for Minorities where it claimed an abnormal growth of Christian population in the Northeast, particularly in districts bordering Bangladesh. In a hard-hitting letter to the chairman of the commission, four church leaders including Archbishop of Guwahati Rev. Thomas Menampampil and general secretary of the Baptist churches in Northeast Rev. Nugul Khan Pau have questioned the veracity of their claim and pointed out that the commission never contacted the church leaders here to verify the facts. The chairman of the minorities commission Mr S. Tarlochan Singh had made this statement while discussing census data pertaining to the Christian community at a recent seminar at Kochi in Kerala. Claiming it an irresponsible and provocative statement of the commission, the church leaders regretted that the commission, which was set up to safeguard the rights and interests of the minorities, has undermined the image of the church. (Asian Age 22.2.05)

Sangh again stops Christians (7)

Jaipur, Feb. 22: Trouble erupted again in Kota when a group of 600 Christians from Kerala were stopped by Bajrang Dal activists when the group was on its way to the Emmanuel Mission compound. The day-long drama ended with 37 Bajrang Dal activists courting arrest. The Sangh Parivar outfit had set up checkpoints and pressed into service a "flying squad" to check "conversions". The Rajasthan government, meanwhile, is contemplating the introduction of an anti-conversion law to appease Hindu organisations. The Bajrang Dal has resolved to stop the Emmanuel Mission's main function, which is scheduled to start from Wednesday. "We asked our workers to oppose such activities, we gave a call for tomorrow," said Mukesh Joshi, the chief of the Bajrang Dal's Kota unit. According to sources, the trouble began when 600 Christians got off a train in Kota and boarded 10 buses for the mission compound at Raipura, on the outskirts of Kota. "The Bajrang Dal workers stopped our buses in the presence of the police and humiliated Christians. They were taken to some rest house where they were repeatedly forced to answer questions," said Archbishop M.A. Thomas of the Emmanuel Mission. "Their names speak of their identities... they are Philips, Matthews or Georges and they were allowed to enter the compound only after facing humiliating questions," said Archbishop Thomas. (Asian Age 23/2/05)

Uproad over attack on Christians (7)

JAIPUR, FEB. 23. The Congress today alleged collusion of the administration and the police in the attack on Christians in Kota this past week-end in the Rajasthan Assembly. Amid noisy protests from members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, the opposition leaders said that the State was witnessing "a reign of terror" with the Government allowing the Bajrang Dal and the

Vishwa Hindu Parishad to have a free run. The Assembly witnessed uproarious scenes when the Congress member, Chandra Shekhar Baid, raised the issue of attack on Christians from Andhra Pradesh, through an adjournment motion during Zero Hour. The charge of religious conversions at the scheduled programme at the Emmanuel Mission Society in Kota was either the result of prejudice or merely a bogey to harass the Minorities, he said. "The minorities are feeling insecure in Rajasthan. These kinds of attacks have taken place earlier also. Such acts of terror are against the culture and tradition of Rajasthan," said the Leader of the Opposition, B.D.Kalla. "The Government should have given protection to those who have come from outside." The Chief Minister, Vasundhara Raje, sat quietly in the House when the bedlam took place. The Minister for Home, Gulab Chand Kataria, said the "police are doing their duty". The initial purpose of the programme at Emmanuel Mission Society was "religious conversion" though today in a written assurance the organization promised to "not to have conversions", Mr.Kataria said waving a sheet of paper. (The Hindu 24/2/05)

Film: NCM seeks Minister's intervention (7)

NEW DELHI, FEB. 23. The National Commission for Minorities today urged the Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, S. Jaipal Reddy, to delay the release of the controversial film, Sins, till the concerns of the Christian community — which is objecting to certain portions of it — are addressed. The NCM chairman, Tarlochan Singh, wrote to Mr. Reddy requesting him "to stop the release of the film for a few days and get it examined at your level in order to satisfy the sentiments of the Christian minority community." The NCM decided to intervene in the matter after the Archbishop of Delhi, Vincent M. Concessao, lodged a complaint with the Commission about some portions in the film. Mr. Singh said the complaint was that the film hurt the sentiments of Christians. With similar complaints being sent to the Commission against many serials and films by other minority communities, the NCM has decided to meet the Chairperson of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). The NCM, he said, had organised a similar meeting with the then Chairperson of CBFC three years ago and secured an assurance that portions which offended the sentiments of different communities would be deleted. Catholics in Mumbai have over the past week raised objections to film-maker Vinod Pande's 'attempt' to "sensationalise the so-called fictional sexual escapades of a priest" in Sins, due for release on Friday. Their contention was that the portrayal of an ordained priest in such light would hurt the sentiments of Christians. (The Hindu 24/2/05)

Jaipur plans anti-conversion bill (7)

Jaipur, Feb. 23: The Rajasthan government has decided to formulate a law to curb "forceful conversions" amid growing tension between the Emmanuel Mission and the Sangh Parivar in Kota. The Opposition Congress criticised the move, saying the anti-conversion law would be used to target the minorities. The police resorted to a lathicharge in Kota to disperse Hindu activists on Wednesday. The Emmanuel Mission, meanwhile, gave an undertaking that "no religious conversion or baptism" would be held during its two-day programme, news agency reports said. The state government also asked foreign delegates who had reached Kota to participate in the missions programme to refrain from such activities. There are over 90 foreigners, most of them from the US, the government said. The issue rocked the state Assembly when the Opposition Congress raised the issue and charged that the BJP government had given a free hand to the VHP and Bajrang Dal to arm-twist the Emmanuel Mission. Raising the issue, Dr Chandarshekhhar Baid said the police remained a mere spectator when VHP followers beat up Christians coming from south India. Ruling BJP members immediately opposed it and said the Congress always sided with the minorities. The house witnessed noisy scenes and heated arguments for 20 minutes. Leader of the Opposition B.D. Kalla also echoed the same sentiments, saying the incidents reported in Kota were against the cultural diversity of the nation. "Why was a free hand given to the VHP and Bajrang Dal," Mr Kalla asked. The Congress claimed that one BJP minister provoked Hindu activists. (Asian Age 24/2/05)

Catholic Forum moves court to stall film's release (7)

MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 23: TICKETS are on sale, the promos are being aired and the film is all set to be released in theatres on Friday. But protests against Sins, a film that deals with a

Catholic priest's love for a woman half his age, are gaining momentum. On Wednesday, the Catholic Secular Forum (CSF) filed a PIL in the Bombay High Court, asking that the screening of the English film be stalled. The matter will be heard by Justices H.L. Gokhale and S.C. Dharmadhikari on Thursday. Director Vinod Pande said he too will appeal to the court. "I am sure the court will hear our side too," he said. 'As a filmmaker, I am allowed to tell a story as long as it has not targeted a single person. I think it should be okay. I have full faith in the judiciary,' Pande said. The film's storyline has ruffled the feathers of several Catholic organisations. On Monday, the Bombay Catholic Sabha demanded that the film be withdrawn. "We believe in freedom of expression. But we will not tolerate our community being misused so an artiste can make money," president Dolphy D'Souza had said. The CSF has also threatened to stage demonstrations outside theatres that will screen the film. CSF general secretary Joseph Dias said they have demanded a government ban on the use of religious figures "in the media and related industries like advertising". (Indian Express 24/2/05)

Rein in sinning moviemakers (7)

New Delhi: IN THE wake of the Catholic community up in arms over certain scenes in the movie sins, National Commission for Minorities feels only a clear-cut policy on do's and don't's for film-makers vis-avis religious symbols can redeem the situation. The NCM seeks to put the onus on film-makers for preempting such recurring grievances from the religious minorities and the suggestion has a potential of upsetting the movie directors. The NCM chairperson Tarlochan Singh shot off a letter to the Censor Board chief Sharmila Tagore on the need for 'firm policy' for what he says is becoming a 'tendency'. He has sought a meeting with the newly-appointed chairperson of Central Board of Film Certification for discussions. Directed by Vinod Pande, Sins revolves around the sexual escapades of a Catholic priest who has relationship with a much younger woman. The film drew the ire of the Christian community which said it hurt their 'religious sentiments'. But it is not just about Sins. Recently, the censor board used its scissors against a few scenes in the big-starrer Shabd. Certain scenes in the Aishwarya Rai-Sanjay Dutt movie were objected by certain Sikh organisations as these scenes were against their sentiments. Addressing Ms Tagore, Mr Singh has written in his letter, "You have taken prompt step in getting objectionable portion deleted from the film Shabd and it will definitely set a new trend." (Pioneer 26/2/05)

Rajasthan Govt acts tough on conversion (7)

Jaipur: FOLLOWING THE controversy over alleged conversion attempts by a Christian Missionary organisation in Kota, the Rajasthan Government has decided to enact an anti-conversion law. Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje said, if possible, such a Bill would be passed during the current Budget Session of the Assembly itself. It is understood that she has directed concerned officials to study similar laws, particularly in Gujarat and Orissa, among other States, before preparing the draft of the proposed Bill. The issue of alleged conversion attempts by the Emmanuel Mission International (EMI) was debated in the Assembly on Wednesday and Home Minister Gulabchand Kataria said no one in the State would be allowed to indulge in conversions by force or bribe. He gave details of last Saturday's incident in Kota in which activists of Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad forced the authorities to send back about 300 children. The activists alleged that these Hindu children had been brought from Andhra Pradesh with the intention to baptise them into Christianity. Each children was offered a bicycle and some cash for becoming a Christian, they alleged. EMI Chairman Dr MN Thomas, a Padmashri awardee, has said none of the children is a Hindu. They are all Christians and were here to attend a Bible Graduation Week, an annual training camp, organised by the EMI for the past several years, he said, adding that about 8,000 to 10,000 Christians from various parts of the country attend these training camps where after completion of the course they are given certificates. (Pioneer 26/2/05)

Christians in Mumbai locality need place of worship (7)

Mumbai, Feb. 26: Christian residents of Kandivali (E) are having a difficult time fulfilling their Sunday obligation. Attending mass has become difficult due to the absence of a place of worship in the suburb. Medical facilities, water and sanitation apart, a place of worship remains one of the basic necessities of any community, including members of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord,

as this parish is called. "When a Christian goes house hunting, one of the first things he/she looks for is a good Church," says Loklandwala Complex resident and Small Christian Community member Ms Lorna Jain. The 1,500-strong Catholic population in Kandivali (E) is spread across from the Times of India press towards the South, to the defunct Bhor Industries in the North. Members of the parish started 12 years ago by Father Christopher Goveas, have found different avenues to hold the mass service. The Saturday evening service is held at the apartment in a residential complex, and a gymnasium in Akurli village. (Asian Age 27.2.05)

A new trend seen in attack on Christians (7)

JAIPUR, MARCH 2. Various Christian groups here have expressed concern over the recent attacks on members of the community in Kota and the "unsympathetic" attitude of the State Government and the local administration during the period. The developments in which the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party "sided" with the tormentors of Christians and the complicity of the local administration and police are "worrying", they have said. The representatives of Protestant and Orthodox churches who met the media persons today to discuss the attack on those had come from various parts to attend the graduation ceremony at the Emmanuel Mission International in Kota last week termed it "pre-mediated". They alleged the complicity of the administration, the police and even the local media in the attacks. "The attacks were preplanned. How did the activists of various Hindu fundamentalist groups reach Kota railway station at the middle of the night on February 18-19? The media too were taken to the place," Anand Choudhary of the Rajasthan Bible Institute alleged. The charge that the EMI was planning to carry out conversions was a bogey, he said. "Why should people from Andhra Pradesh and Kerala be brought to Kota for conversion," he asked. "The attitude of the State Government had been disappointing. The Government treated Christians as if they are not citizens of this country," Z.R.Masih of St.Andrew's Church said. "What reminded us of Gujarat was the collusion/silence of the law enforcement authorities. Even the railway police acted in a way which only aggravated the plight of those who were attacked at the station," he pointed out. (The Hindu 3/2/05)

Catholics demand Sins probe (7)

Mumbai, March 6: The Catholic Secular Forum on Saturday sent a memorandum to the President of India Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, AICC president Sonia Gandhi and the Union minister for information and broadcasting Jaipal -Reddy and other prominent personalities to set up an inquiry as to how the film Sins was passed by the Censor Board. The memorandum said, "The board and its chairperson should be summoned by the I&B ministry and asked how and under what conditions such a film was passed. It said Sins was made by a non-Christian with no involvement of Christians at any stage and passed by a censor board comprising non-Christians. This grossly violates our rights as Indian citizens. The film is rated 'Adults only.' (Asian Age 7/3/05)

Concern over move to introduce anti-conversion Bill (7)

JAIPUR, MARCH 9. Three Bishops in Rajasthan have expressed concern over the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Government's move to introduce an anti-conversion Bill in the State Assembly. The Bishops have said that the Bill would aggravate the sense of insecurity and fear in the minds of minorities as all the activities thereafter could be interpreted as "for conversion". In a joint memorandum to the Chief Minister, Vasundhara Raje, Bishop Ignatius Menezes of the Catholic diocese of Ajm-er-Jaipur, Bishop Joseph Patha-lil of the Catholic diocese of Udaipur and the Bishop of the Church of North India(CNI) for Rajasthan, Bishop Collin C.Theodore termed the move to introduce an anti-conversion Bill a "matter of serious concern". The Bishops, who have asked the Christians in the State to launch a signature campaign to press the Government to drop the move, told Ms.Raje that they were not interested in forcible conversions and none of their churches indulged in such practices. "We believe such practices are sinful and displeasing to God and against human dignity. We will not do anything unprincipled and unethical just to add a few more to our numbers. We would gain nothing from such practices as we know too well that we would not be able to keep such members within our flock for long," the Bishops said.

"In Kota and elsewhere the attacks and harassment of minorities took place in the absence of any such law. Thanks to the lack of interest on the part of the police to book the real culprits and anti-

social fanatic religious bigots, they are encouraged to go on harassing the religious minorities," the Bishops pointed out. "We do not know why your Government should become a party to this continued harassment by bringing a law to protect these groups who will find an easy weapon to beat the minorities," they said referring to the recent attacks on Christian groups in Kota and in other places in the State in the past. The existing laws were sufficient to deal with any malpractices in this regard, they asserted. (The Hindu 10/3/05)

Conversion Bill to harass minorities (7)

JAIPUR, MARCH 16. The Communist Party of India (CPI) has termed the move by the Rajasthan Government to introduce a Bill against religious conversions as an "excuse" to harass the minorities. The attack on a Christian group in Kota last month was part of a pre-planned strategy by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and the Sangh Parivar prior to the introduction of such a Bill, the party charged. "We are opposed to an anti-conversion Bill in Rajasthan. Every citizen has a right to choose his faith. It should be left to the individuals to decide on their religion," Dushyant Ojha, the newly elected secretary of the Rajasthan State Council of the CPI, said. Mr.Ojha was briefing media persons on the just concluded State conference at Bhilwara which elected the 41-member-strong new State Council. Mr.Ojha and the outgoing party secretary, Tara Singh Siddhu, said the party would oppose introduction of such a Bill in the State. "They have been talking in the past about a Gujarat out of Rajasthan. This is another step towards it," the leaders charged. Mr.Ojha said the it was cowardly on the part of the State Government to introduce "bhojan mantra" (prayer before the meal) in the hostels run by the Government in a surreptitious manner. "They should keep | some transparency in such matters. This is a backdoor introduction," he charged. There was lot of resentment in the public against the new liquor policy mooted by the State Government, he said. "The policy has brought public, especially women, on the streets to oppose it," he noted. (The Hindu 17/3/05)

Punjab Assembly mourns Pope's death (7)

CHANDIGARH, APRIL 4. The Punjab Assembly was adjourned for the day after the members offered condolences at the death of head of the Roman Catholic church, Pope John Paul - II, who died at the Vatican on Saturday last. Before rising for the day, the House also expressed its sympathies with a sitting MLA, Satwant Kaur Sandhu, whose son Harjinder Singh Lali also passed away recently. Moving the adjournment motion, Chief Minister Amarinder Singh described the Pope as a great religious and spiritual head, who had travelled 10 lakh kilometres traversing 129 countries, during which he came in direct contact with 40 crore people. He said in his death not only did the Christian community lose their "guru" but, the entire world had lost a great champion of peaceful co-existence based on principles of humanity and universal brotherhood. The Leader of the Opposition, Parkash Singh Badal, in his homage recalled the Pope's association with the Sikh community. He said the Pope had expressed anguish after 'Operation Bluestar' in 1984. He also recalled the Pope appealing to the French Government to allow Sikh students permission to wear turbans in school. The BJP group leader, Tikshan Sud and Independent MLA, Sucha Singh Chhotepur also paid homage to the Pope and Mr. Lali. Before adjourning the House, an emotional Speaker Kewal Krishan, stood up to pay his respect to the departed souls. The House observed two minutes silence. (The Hindu 5/4/05)

Christian body seeks Sonia, Pawar help (7)

Mumbai, April 10: The Catholic Secular Forum has in a memorandum to the Congress president Sonia Gandhi and Nationalist Congress Party chief Sharad Pawar condemned the setting up of a cell in the state home ministry "to monitor funds, being used by Christian missionaries and NGOs." The CSF said it "takes strong exception to statements by the BJP MLA Sudhir Mungantiwar, while moving an unofficial State Religious Freedom Bill, that Christian missionaries were misusing foreign charity for conversion purposes." Mr Joseph Dias, general-secretary of the CSF, when told that some Christian sects were resorting to conversion, agreed and said, "those Christians or anyone found resorting to luring and seducing people to conversion by fraudulent means need to be taken to task and the government machinery should be used effectively to stop this kind of conversion which is essentially a criminal activity. It is very clear and the law should take its course whether it be a priest, swami or maulana." The CSF in its memorandum

expressed the fear that "such a cell will be used to police the minorities in Maharashtra while going soft on misuse of foreign funds being received by organisations like the VHP, RSS, Bajrang Dal or its affiliates. The CSF asks the government what checks and balances would be there to ensure no discrimination or even to prevent harassment of NGOs by the police. Such a move is reminiscent of a police state and unheard of in a democracy, particularly where the powers that be tout themselves as secular. Christians fear that having lost power in the Lok Sabha and Assembly polls this is yet another attempt by communal forces to regain ground at the cost of Christians and by disturbing communal harmony." (Asian Age 11/4/05)

Court notice to Centre over Dalit Christians (2)

New Delhi, April 11: The Supreme Court on Monday issued notice to the Centre on a petition filed on the issue of grant of Schedule Caste reservation benefits to Dalits, who convert to Christianity. The issue could pave the way for a high-voltage debate on the sensitive issue of grant of reservation benefits to Scheduled Castes after their conversion to Christianity- A bench comprising Chief Justice R.C. Lahoti and Justice G.P. Mathur issued the notice after briefly hearing counsel Prashant Bhushan, who appeared for petitioner, the Centre for Public Interest Litigation. It then posted the matter for final hearing in August. Attorney-General Milton Banerjee had said on the last hearing, "It is matter of policy and legislation and the courts should keep out of it." However, on Monday, he requested the top court to issue formal notice to the Centre, so that a response could be filed. The Supreme Court on October 25 had asked the attorney-general to ascertain the Centre's view on the petition which challenged the legality of paragraph 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Orders, 1950, by which people professing and converting faith in religions other than Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism were deprived of reservation benefits. (Asian Age 12/4/05)

Rin ad draws Catholic criticism (7)

Mumbai, April 16: The Catholic Secular Forum of CSF has taken exception to the Rin Advance detergent advertisement portraying a priest (Amitabh Bachchan) dressed in a shabby cassock asking a student how he manages to keep his clothes so white and clean. General-secretary of the forum, Mr Joseph Dias said "the CSF has asked the Advertising Standard Council of India, a self regulatory body of the industry, to ensure that its members did not hurt the sentiments of any religious community." He said the advertisement by Hindustan Lever Limited is being telecast on a number of channels including Zee and Star networks. Mr Dias said that, "it would resort to an agitation and call for a public boycott of Hindustan Lever products if the advertisement is not immediately withdrawn . and an apology issued for hurting the feelings of Catholics. He also threatened that their protests would include demonstrations outside the residence of super star Amitabh Bachchan who and the HLL headquarters in Mumbai. Mr Dias said the CSF is opposed to the use of religious figures or characters in advertising as "it trivialises what is essentially a sacred and personal issue." (Asian Age 17/4/05)

VHP claims 45 Adivasi Christians returned to Hindu fold (7)

KOLKATA, APRIL 17: LEAVING the West Bengal government groping in the dark, the VHP today said that they have "re-converted" 45 Adivasi Christian families to Hinduism in Popra village, 20 km from Malda. The day-long function, organised at an ashram of VHP-affiliate Akhil Bharatiya Santhal Samaj, was attended by Adivasi families from nearby villages, too, including some from Jharkhand, said Nakul Das, VHP's Malda unit chief. "The Adivasi families who were converted to Christianity for lure of money and other facilities, were disenchanted when they did not get what they were promised. That is why they chose to return to the Hindu fold," said Das. However, State Chief Secretary Ashok Gupta told The Indian Express that the administration was unaware of the function. In 2000, 40 families in the same district had been converted to Hinduism. Even senior police officers were left clueless. "We did not know this was happening at that village. We will look into it" said S K Pujary, SP, Malda. (Indian Express 18/4/05)

VHP conversion rath rolls again (7)

Popra (Malda), April 17: Three years after the Vishwa Hindu Parishad signed off the conversion of six families with a vow to conduct one on a 'grand scale', it did. Members of 45 tribal families

converted to Hinduism from Christianity today. The VHP had converted six families, one Muslim and the rest Christians, on August 22, 2002, in Labibpur. As it was then, the administration was clueless about today's event, held at this village in the Old Malda police station area, 18 km from the district headquarters. In all, 102 people took part in the ceremony held under the banner of the Akhil Bharatiya Sanatan Janthal Samaj, an organisation owing allegiance to the VHP. A similar ceremony was held during Ramnavami in 2000 and 81 families had been converted then. Today too, was Ramnavami. But unlike the ceremony five years ago, there was little fanfare. Even some front-ranking VHP leaders of the district decided to give the occasion a pass. Nakulchandra Das, the district president of the VHP, said of the 45 families, five had been taken to court where they swore on an affidavit that they were converting to Hinduism. The group comprised three men, two women and six children. "These families were from the Old Malda area. The affidavits of the others, who came from far away will be drawn up later," Das said. The administration was not informed about the event as the outfit's brush with officials has "not been pleasant" in the past. (Telegraph 18/4/05)

RSS 're-converts' 3,200 people to Hinduism (7)

Jaipur, April 19: The RSS claimed on Tuesday that over 3,200 persons belonging to Chita-Mehrat community reconverted to Hinduism on Monday in central Rajasthan in the presence of RSS chief K.S. Sudarshan. These people had adopted Islamic traditions during the Muslim rule, according to Mr Jugal Kishor, a senior VHP functionary. The RSS function was organised at Beawar under Ajmer district. That area is known as Magra Merwara and is dominated by Rawat community. Addressing the function, Mr Sudarshan urged RSS and Bajrang Dal workers to encourage people who wanted to return to the Hindu fold. He appealed to all who had converted to Islam or other religions to revert to Hinduism. BJP leaders and a Rajasthan minister were also present at the function. This belt is a centre of Hindu and Muslim organisations who have been engaged in such activities, says Mr Ashok, a social worker at Beawar. "Over 70,000 people were reconverted to Hinduism in last few years," claims Mr Kishor. The function was organised at Ashapurana Temple which was built by the VHP. Ashapura is a deity of the Chita-Mehrat and Rawat communities. "We have built over 40 temples in the region and our target is to construct 300 temples," Mr Kishor said. The VHP runs several projects and 125 schools in the area. "These people were Hindus and descendants of Hindu king Prithviraj Chauhan and still practice Hindu traditions," claims Mr Kishor. "There are a dozen Muslim outfits active in the area and they try to win over innocent people by using money power to follow Islamic traditions. (Asian Age 20/4/05)

In Bengal, VHP's converts go covert (7)

MALDA, APRIL 20: FOUR days after 45 Adivasis "reconverted" to Hinduism at a VHP-sponsored function in Popra village, 20 km from here, six of them have gone into hiding. Nobody knows why. The VHP claims that the police and district administration had been harassing them after the conversion ceremony. The VHP claimed the six Adivasis were from Popra and that they had filed affidavits in the court declaring their intention to return to Hinduism. The rest of the reconverts hailed from other places in Jharkhand. Refusing to reveal the identity of the six re-converts, Rekha Hembrom, head of the VHP-run Chitrakoot Ashram Briddhika Manch of Popra, which organised the function, told The Indian Express: "We will not tell you their names and whereabouts. We have been continuously harassed by the police and administration after April 17. It's as if we have committed a blasphemy. The Church is converting people to their fold and the government is listless. Now, if some of them are coming back to our fold, the government is after our blood. The next time we arrange these functions, they will be done in total secrecy." But Superintendent of Police S K Pujary rubbished allegations of harassment. "We have not harassed anybody. We just inquired what was going on at the Ashram. We were anxious about their safety," he said. (Indian Express 21/4/05)

Cochin Corp'n nukes a nun turn in her grave (7)

KOCHI, APRIL 27: INMATES of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, an Italian congregation in Kochi, are fighting a battle against bureaucracy over the burial of a nun. Sister Beena Antony, 36, superior of this congregation here died of cancer on March 26, the eve of Easter Sunday. She

had been undergoing treatment at the Ernakulam Medical Centre for a long time. The authorities sought permission of the corporation to bury the nun on the convent premises as is the ritual. An application, with full sketch of the crypt, was submitted to the corporation secretary. The funeral, on March 28, at the convent at Chalikkavattom, was led by Mon Sebastian Louis, vicar-general of the Archdiocese of Verapoly. Several priests, nuns and parishioners with MLA K Babu attended the ceremony on land adjoining the convent. But the scene changed when a local resident complained about the funeral and now the congregation has been slapped with a notice from the Corporation. It was asked to exhume the body and perform a reburial to solve the matter which is snowballing into a religious issue with the parishioners joining hands with the nuns. The inmates have sought the help of legal experts who maintain that according to the Kerala Municipality Act, a burial can be held in a private property provided the local bodies give consent and neighbours raise no objection. Moreover, the Constitution gives exemption to religious heads who can be buried on the premises of their residence. But the nuns do not want to make things worse by ignoring the directive of the Corporation authorities. (Indian Express 28/4/05)

VHP reconverts 567 Christians (7)

Bhubaneswar, May 1: In a significant development, 567 Christians returned to Hindu fold in an elaborate ceremony organised at Bijepur in Bargarh district in western Orissa on Sunday. The ceremony whose highlight was a yagna, was organised by Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) at a local school. Converts mostly belonging to scheduled caste participated in the ceremony. They were provided new clothes. Shlokas were chanted while inducting them into Hinduism. Members of 169 families from nearby seven villages attended the ceremony. The local VHP functionaries had been in touch with these people for a long time, counselling them to return to Hinduism, VHP sources said. The VHP national secretary, Mr Dharma Naryan Sharma, joint national secretary Rohini Parmanik and the state vice-president of the organisation, Mr Satyanarayan Panda, were among the prominent people who were present on the occasion. The police said that the converts had filed sworn affidavits with the district authorities informing them about their intention to change their faith as required under the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act. 700 affidavits sworn by those intending to reconvert had been submitted with the district authorities, the police said. (Asian Age 2/5/05)

Priest succumbs to attack wounds (7)

Patna: TWO WEEKS after the murderous attack on a Catholic priest Father Mathew Ujaytal, he succumbed to his injuries in a Mokama hospital on Sunday. He was attacked by an alleged criminal near the gate of his Church for failing to meet his extortion demand. According to information reaching the state police headquarters, a local criminal, Cyan Das, had demanded money from Father Mathew Ujaytal, which he reportedly refused to pay. Infuriated by the refusal, the criminal attacked him with a sharp weapon when he was coming out of his church. Father Mathew, who sustained a grievous neck injury, was admitted to the local hospital and battled for life for nearly two weeks. Though his condition had improved initially, on Sunday he succumbed to his injuries in the hospital. Other than its infamous profile scripted by upper caste Bhumihar criminals and notorious riverine areas Mokama, nearly 100 km from Patna, finds mention in journalist-turned-author Vijay Nambisan's book "Bihar lies in the eyes of the beholder", where his doctor wife was a medical practitioner in a missionary hospital. The death of Father Mathew Ujaytal has sent shock waves among the Christian fraternity of the state. All Christian missionary schools in the state were closed on Monday. (Pioneer 3/5/05)

Sack all Christian IAS, IPS officers, says VHP (7)

Bhubaneswar, May 9: An official direction issued by a senior IAS officer asking all district magistrates in Orissa to rectify the process of recording the caste of "Santhal Christians" has angered the Sangh Parivar. The state Vishwa Hindu Parishad will soon start a campaign demanding the dismissal of all Christian IAS and IPS officers. IAS officer Livinus Kindo, currently serving as a member of the board of revenue, says the recording of the caste of Santhal tribals had been incorrectly done in many tehsils. "Instead of writing 'Santhal Christian' for Christians, all the Santhals have been termed as Christians instead of mentioning the caste with their religion," Mr Kindo observed. Subsequently, he had directed all district magistrates to rectify the mistake

and submit a compliance report within three months. The particular portion of the letter that sparked off the controversy read: "I apprehend that the state of affairs might have occurred in some other tehsils of the state of Orissa. If the caste of the Christians is not recorded properly, they may face avoidable problems in obtaining their caste certificates and other benefits."

When the Organiser, the mouthpiece of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, published an article criticising the Orissa government for favouring "converted" Christians, members of the Sangh Parivar planned to get the attention of BJP minister Manmohan Samal, who heads the revenue department. (Asian Age 10/5/05)

Missionaries held in Orissa freed in a day (7)

Bhubaneswar, May 14: Four Christian missionaries who were detained on Thursday by Rajnagar police on charges of conversion, were released on Friday evening. According to the police, the four missionaries belonging to Believer Church and Bible College of Brajarajnagar, had been reportedly propagating the Christian faith in the villages for the last six months under the pretext of providing financial help to innocent villagers. On Thursday, when the four missionaries were allegedly trying to convert some villagers of Tikayatnagar, a few local youths opposed them and informed the police. The police rushed to the spot and seized about 70 Bibles, religious leaflets, posters and banners from their possession. It also found that the missionaries had not taken permission from the district administration for their conversion activity in the area.

Bharatiya Janata Party Kendrapara district president Duryodhan Sahoo on Saturday demanded stern action against all those missionaries who are deliberately violating the Orissa Freedom Religion Act (OFRA). "Taking advantage of the weak financial condition of the people in the super-cyclone affected Rajnagar and Mahakalpara area, the Christian missionaries are indulging in conversion activities without adhering to laws of the land. A thorough inquiry should be made to ascertain if all the conversion activities made during the past five years in this area were legitimate or not," Mr Sahoo said. Meanwhile, Kendrapara district collector Hemant Kumar Sharma has directed the superintendent of police to probe into the recent alleged conversion of Hindus to Christianity in the district, in violation of the OFRA. About 130 Hindus allegedly have embraced Christianity in Rajnagar block of the district recently. (Asian Age 15/5/05)

Staines killer escapes gallows (7)

Bhubaneswar/Cuttack: The Orissa High Court on Thursday granted a lifeline to Dara Singh, the main accused in the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two minor sons, commuting his death sentence to life imprisonment. Eleven others, who were granted life imprisonment by the trial court in 2003, were acquitted in absence of their identification. In one of the most eagerly awaited decisions regarding a case that has for long tugged at the nation's conscience, a division Bench comprising Chief Justice Surjit Burman Roy and Justice Laxmikanta Mohapatra said that appellant Dara "cannot be held individually liable, though he can be held liable vicariously along with others by invoking Section 149IPC, for the murder of the three deceased persons." Fingers had pointed to Dara, alias Ravindra Kumar Pal, when on January 22, 1999, Staines and his sons Philip (11) and Timothy (7) were burnt to death inside a station wagon by a mob at Manoharpur village in Orissa's Keonjhar district. On September 22, 2003, Khurda district and sessions judge M N Patnaik convicted 13 of the 18 accused. Dara was sentenced to death, while the others got life imprisonment. (Times of India 20/5/05)

Dara to move SC for full acquittal (7)

Bhubaneswar/Cuttack: Dara Singh, the main accused in Staines murder case, on Thursday said he would move the Supreme Court for a full acquittal. Reacting to this, CBI counsel Suryakanta Padhi said, "A decision on moving SC would be taken at the appropriate level." Elaborating on the order, the court said, "The eyewitnesses never attributed any particular fatal injury to appellant Dara Singh for which he can be individually held responsible for the death of the three deceased persons or for the death of any of them. Evidence against all the participants — including Dara Singh — being of identical nature, they were all equally responsible for the three murders. Therefore, no justification is available from the evidence on record to single out Dara Singh for convicting him under Section 302 IPC... the sentence of death there under cannot be sustained and must be set aside." The court added that convictions and sentences of the

remaining 11 appellants "cannot be sustained as there is no reliable evidence on record as regards their identification." Dara, incidentally, faces several other criminal cases, including those for murders of Catholic priest Arul Doss, a Muslim trader called Sheikh Rehman and the helper of a cattle-transporting truck. In Kolkata, expressing his view on the judgment, noted criminal lawyer Joymalya Bagchi was of the opinion that the HC decision to commute Dara's death sentence was not unprecedented. He felt the court has taken the right decision as the victim's wife had forgiven her husband's killers. (Times of India 20/5/05)

Anti-conversion law: no scope for revival (7)

CHENNAI: The Chief Minister, Jayalalithaa, allayed apprehensions of the people belonging to the minority communities on Saturday, making it clear that the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion (TNPFCR) Act, 2002 was no longer in vogue as it was repealed through an Ordinance last year. In a statement here, Ms. Jayalalithaa said she had to make the clarification due to misinformation on the issue by some persons. "Many confused people had been asking the Government if the Act was really repealed or it was still in vogue." The law was enacted on December 2, 2002 only with a view to promoting communal harmony among people of different religions, she said, adding that it was not intended to be used against the minorities. Recalling that she had assured then that the Act would in no way affect the minorities or infringe on their freedom, Ms. Jayalalithaa said this was evident from the fact that no case was registered under the Act right from its enactment till it was repealed. "The Government headed by me has always been a secular one and it remains to be a bulwark protecting the rights of the Minorities. It has been strongly defending the rights and interests of the Christians, Muslims or any other minority community. Everyone is aware that my Government during its earlier tenure from 1991 to 1996 and during the current tenure from 2001 has set an exemplary record in protecting and promoting the rights and welfare of the minorities." (The Hindu 22.5.05)

Seven Staines murder accused walk to freedom (7)

Bhubaneswar: AFTER NEARLY four years of detention, seven of the 11 accused acquitted in the Staines murder case by the Orissa High Court walked out of Chowdwar jail to freedom on Tuesday. The free birds, Mahadev Mahant, Turram Ho, Rabi Soren, Ojen Hansda, Surath Nayak, Harish Mahant and Kartik Lohar were accorded a warm reception by Dara Sena, an outfit formed by the supporters of Dara Singh, the main accused in the case, at the jail gate. The High Court recently commuted Dara's death sentence into life imprisonment. Sources said Dara Sena had planned to take all the seven to Puri for a darshan of Lord Jgannath. All those released from Chowdwar appeared to be hale and hearty and in a jubilant mood. Talking to media-persons near the jail gate, one of them said he had waited for this day as he was sure that justice would be done to him. Sources said orders for the release of three others lodged in Baripada, Karanjia and Keonjhar jails had also been dispatched through special couriers. However, Rajat Kumar Das alias Dipu Das, currently lodged in Baripada jail is unlikely to be released immediately despite his acquittal by the High Court, as he is facing trial in two other cases. His release is possible only if he manages to obtain bail in these cases. Apart from Dara Singh, who is cooling his heels in Baripada jail, Mahendra Hembram is perhaps the only other accused in the case for whom freedom appears to be a remote possibility. (Pioneer 25/5/05)

SIT to investigate killings of two pastors (7)

Hyderabad: THE KILLING of another pastor has sent shock waves and concern through the Christian community in Andhra Pradesh. Director General of police Swaranjit Sen on Friday handed over the investigations in the case to Special Investigation Team. The decision comes a day after the body of another kidnapped Christian Father was recovered from outskirts of the city 45-year-old K Issac Raju who had gone missing from Raidurg area of Hyderabad on May 24, was found murdered. The Cyberabad police found his body tied with ropes in a gunny bag near a rain water drain in Shaikhpet area on Thursday. The police recovered the body after an anonymous caller tipped the police about it. Cyberabad police commissioner Mahendra Reddy said that the body was mutilated and had decomposed, indicating that he would have killed three or four days ago. "The motive is still not clear and we are investigating the case from all the angles". This is

the second such incident in Hyderabad. Last month another Christian preacher K Daniel had gone missing from his residence in Asifnagar area and later his body was found dumped at Shamshabad under the Cyberabad commissionerate. In both the cases the pastors were taken from their residence by unknown people saying their services were required to solemnise marriages. Both were protestant pastors. The incident has evoked a strong reaction from the Christian community. Suspecting the involvement of communal elements in these cases, the Christian Council of India has demanded a CB-CID probe. National Congress of Indian Christians has also strongly condemned the incidents and demanded a judicial inquiry by a sitting High Court judge. (Pioneer 4/6/05)

Christian families attacked in Jalgaon, Maharashtra (7)

A mob of tribal people attacked a congregation of 10 Christian families in Gamnia village in Jalgaon District of Maharashtra on May 16. The Indian Evangelical Team (IET), a Christian organization, informed the Christian Legal Association of India (CLAI) that a mob, comprising of men from about eight surrounding villages, threatened to kill Christian men if they did not leave the village. When the men fled for their lives from the village, leaving the women and children behind, the latter became the target of the attack, said the IET. After being beaten up brutally, the women were also paraded naked in the village. In a letter to the National Commission for Minorities (NCM), Sarichand Chauhan, pastor of the Indian Evangelical Team in village Gamnia, has stated that women were abused and "a stick was forced into their vagina". When contacted, Mr. V.V. Augustine, member NCM, said that the NCM had ordered an investigation into the allegations and was awaiting its report. The Superintendent of Police, Mr Vasant Karogeke, told the CLAI that police officials have been stationed in the area to prevent further attacks in the light of the current situation; however, he denied that any incident of such nature had taken place with any of the women. Furthermore, he told the CLAI that six Christians, arrested on the accusation of destroying Hindu idols, have been released on bail. It is suspected that the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, an RSS affiliate that works among tribal groups, is assisting the tribals in arranging bail and providing food for those who have congregated for this purpose. (EFI News June 8, 2005)

3 US preachers face mob attack (7)

Mumbai, June 12: Three American preachers who were conducting Bible education classes at Malvani village in Malad were assaulted and one of them allegedly kidnapped on Saturday by a mob, who accused them of performing conversions. The kidnapped preacher was later found on Sunday morning. Eight American preachers had come to the city and were at Malvani village where they had been conducting Bible study classes for adults and children since June 6. On Saturday, the last day of the class, a mob of over 30 persons came to the house in which the classes were being conducted and accused the preachers of converting people to Christianity. Ms Jincy George, 16, who was present at the class, said, "The men accused us of converting people and even tried to hit me, but I managed to escape along with five of the women preachers." According to Ms George, persons from the mob caught the preachers and beat them brutally. Two of the preachers, Phillips Allen and Clover Edwards, were hit and kicked by the mob and the third preacher, Richard Jenal, was beaten and then whisked away in an autorickshaw. Mr Allen and Mr Edwards were taken to the Bhagwati Hospital for medical treatment. Mr Jenal was later found on Sunday morning after he managed to find his way to a friend's house in Andheri. Mr Dolphy D'Souza, president of the Bombay Catholic Sabha, said, "We condemn this type of intimidation on a peaceful gathering. Such incidents occur only because some people want to create an atmosphere of fear among minorities." When contacted, Mr Vyankatesh Aapdev, president of the state unit of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, denied any VHP involvement. He added: "They were conducting conversions at the venue, which outraged people who then attacked the preachers." The police on Sunday arrested two persons, Bharat Koli and Ramesh Keni, who were part of the mob. They were later produced before a sessions court on Sunday and released on bail. (Asian Age 13/6/05)

Miscreants desecrate Jesus shrine in Jabalpur (7)

Jabalpur: A day after the attack on missionaries in Mumbai, unidentified miscreants desecrated a shrine of infant Jesus in the precinct of Holy Trinity Church here on Sunday night. Christian

community leaders have lodged an First Information Report (FIR) in the Omti police station demanding action against the miscreants and protection for the community members. "Unidentified youth threw rotten eggs and blue coloured water on the shrine," said Father Joseph Periyappuram, priest in-charge of the church. On being spotted by the guard, who was asleep when they were desecrating the shrine, the miscreants escaped on their motorbikes, he added. According to the Father, this incident was not an isolated case. Last Sunday, some miscreants desecrated the church with rotten eggs, cow-dung and coloured water. A case was lodged with the Omti police station on June 6 but to no avail. Around 600 believers who reached the church on Monday morning to celebrate the holy Eucharist, found the holy shrine in a mess with a stench of rotten eggs. Some of them reportedly broke down seeing the condition of the shrine. The Bishop of Jabalpur Diocese Rev Gerald Almei-da, who visited the spot, appealed to the community members to keep their calm. (Times of India 14/6/05)

Rs. 3-lakh ex gratia to pastors' families announced (7)

HYDERABAD: The Chief Minister, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, has sanctioned an ex gratia of Rs.3 lakhs each to the families of the two pastors who were killed in the city last month. The Government has also decided to sanction houses under the Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojana for both families, Dr. Reddy said. While K. Daniel of Asifnagar in Karimnagar was found murdered near Shamshabad, the body of Issac Raj from Raidurg was found at Shaikpet near Golconda. (Ref Hindu 23/6/05)

Pastors seek house sites (7)

VIJAYAWADA: Members of the Vijayawada Urban and Rural Pastors and Evangelists Welfare Association, on Wednesday, demanded immediate steps for allocation of house sites for pastors and evangelists across Krishna district. Nearly 400 pastors and evangelists representing various churches in the district, participated in the rally, which began at Swarna Palace and culminated at the Sub-Collector's office where the Christian priests submitted a memorandum to the Sub-Collector, Budhaprakash Jyothi. Their demands included allocation of house sites to pastors, white rations cards to the financially backward pastors, constitution of a Christian minority corporation, effective steps to check atrocities against Christian missionaries, enhancement of government funds for construction of churches, allocation of surplus lands for Christian graveyards, free power supply to churches and extension of water pipelines to churches free of cost. (Ref: The Hindu 23/6/05)

Christians face Hindu right-wing wrath (7)

NEW DELHI: District administrations in two corners of the country, Jodhpur and Hyderabad, have woken up to staggered reports regarding persecution of Christians by some right-wing groups. On Saturday, a group of Hindu activists attacked a Christian gathering at Parameshwari Palace, Sardarpura, in Jodhpur, and alleged that it was a "conversion" meet. The police are investigating the matter. The incident took place at the St Andrew's hall, where a youth festival was on. More than 60 persons had assembled "to find a path to peace and spirituality" under the guidance of Father Paul Matthew. "I came from Bikaner to find the right path," said Mukesh Yadav, who added that there was no conversion going on. More than five dozen activists belonging to VHP, RSS and Bajrang Dal thronged the arena and chased the participants away. "One person has received some injuries," said the police. Jodhpur superintendent of police Ravi Meharda said, "We are investigating the matter and nothing much can be said before we reach a conclusion." There was more disturbing news from Hyderabad. A hunt is on for two members of a gang, allegedly owing allegiance to a right-wing Hindu organisation, which kidnapped and killed two pastors in the city recently "for carrying on evangelical work." The Cyberabad police have reportedly arrested one of the alleged killers. (Times of India 26/6/05)

Nun moves High Court (7)

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: A nun has challenged in the Kerala High Court the Kerala Bar Council's decision to deny her leave to enrol as a lawyer. Justice K Balakrishnan Nair while admitting the petition of sister Teena Jose has issued notices to Bar council of India and its counterpart in Kerala. the nun belongs to the Congregation of Mother of Carmel L F Convent,

cherthala. According to her the Council's refusal to enrol her as a lawyer as being a religious person was illegal and violative of the provisions of Constitution. She contended that several nuns and priests were employed in various professions including teaching and nursing. Countering the contention, the Bar Council Secretary Gopakumar said, the Advocates Act and statutes stipulate that those employed in salaried profession can not be given permission. This apart, he said, the petitioner had no permanent address and had not vowed to stick to the lawyer's dress code. She also stated that she wanted to do voluntary service which again goes against the tenets of the statutes. There are at least nine cases rejected on these grounds. Only sister Teena Jose has chosen to challenge the council decision. Gopakumar said the Kerala Bar Council's observations about the lack of criteria was endorsed by the Bar Council of India. (Times of India 26/6/05)

Permission for Christian meet withdrawn (7)

JAIPUR: The participants in a Christian gathering in Jodhpur returned to their native places on Sunday, a day after the Youth Festival organised by St. Andrews Church was disrupted by the activists of Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal activists with the allegation that religious conversion was being carried out in the function. The district administration withdrew the permission given to the Church to hold the event on Saturday. The Youth Festival had started on Friday with a prayer meeting and devotional discourses. About 70 people, including women and children, from Banswara, Udaipur and Bikaner districts as well as neighbouring States were taking part in the event. Most of the participants were staying at the venue, Parmeshwari Palace Marriage Hall. Tension brewed up on Saturday morning when the workers of VHP, Bajrang Dal and other Hindu outfits assembled outside the hall and raised slogans alleging that the function was being held as a façade for converting Hindu youths into Christianity. They caught hold of a couple of participants and handed them over to police for questioning. The festival was wound up abruptly after the administration rescinded the permission to hold it in the middle of discourses. The police sources, while denying that any violence took place at the venue, said the permission was withdrawn as a "precautionary measure" to prevent any untoward incident. The authorisation for holding the event was originally given to the Pentecostal Church of God. However, no complaint has been lodged with police either by the organisers or the representatives of Hindu outfits. (The Hindu 27/6/05)

Youth held for killing two pastors

Hyderabad : Kokala Govardhan, facing the charge of killing two pastors, was produced in a local court by the police on Monday, where he was remanded to judicial custody till July 7. 25-year-old Govardhan alias Pahalwan was arrested by the police in connection with the two separate incidents of murder of two pastors, K Daniel and K Issac Raju, in the outskirts of Hyderabad last month. Earlier, producing the person before the media, Hyderabad city police commissioner V Dinesh Reddy said the police was looking for two more accomplices Satyanarayana and Ganesh. The arrested person has confessed to his crime saying the two pastors were killed for trying to convert Hindus to Christianity, Mr Dinesh Reddy said. "Govardhan was angry because Daniel had invited Govardhan to convert to Christianity some time back," the Commissioner said. The two pastors were killed after they were kidnapped from their residences in Asifnagar and Rayadurg areas of Hyderabad. Later, their bodies kept in gunny bags were dumped in deserted places. Govardhan, talking to newsmen, said that he was inspired to carry out the killings by the case of Dara Singh, who was convicted for burning alive a Christian missionary Graham Staines and his two children. Incidentally, Govardhan and his accomplices carried out the first attack on May 19, the day Orissa High Court commuted Dara Singh's death sentence. Govardhan said that he was perturbed to see the two Christian pastors going around his locality Karwan and other surrounding areas trying to convert Hindus to Christianity. "We had warned him to stop those activity but he did not listen," he said. But he denied any link with Hindu Vahini or any other Hindu organisation. (Pioneer 28/6/05)

5 more arrested for murder of pastors (7)

Hyderabad: The Hyderabad police have arrested five more people for the murder of two Christian pastors and claimed the men had drawn up plans to kill more priests. Police commissioner V. Dinesh Reddy, who presented the five men at a news conference here on Thursday, described

them as Hindu fanatics who abducted and killed the pastors to "teach a lesson to those converting Hindus to Christianity." K. Goverdhan alias Pahalwan, the prime accused in the case and a resident of Hyderabad, was arrested last week and produced in a court that remanded him in judicial custody till July 7. The five other accused are also residents of Hyderabad. Two more accused — Ganesh and Mallesh — are still at large. The mutilated body of pastor K. Issac Raju, 45, was found at Golconda on the city's outskirts on June 2. (Asian Age 1/7/05)

CPI-M concern at rising attack on Christians (7)

JAIPUR: The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has expressed concern over the growing incidence of attacks against Christians in Rajasthan. It has held the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Government in the State "responsible" for the violence unleashed against the community during the past 18 months by the Bajrang Dal, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Vishwa Hindu Parishad. The State Secretariat of the CPI(M) in a statement released on Thursday said the Christians in Rajasthan were living in terror as they had been denied the right to practice their religion and assemble in churches. The latest act of disturbing a Christian youth festival in Jodhpur by the VHP-Bajrang Dal activists was part of an agenda to terrorise and malign the whole community creating a bogey of conversions, it has alleged. "Sometime back the police failed to book the criminal elements who unleashed terror on delegates who had come from different parts of the country to attend a convocation ceremony at the Emmanuel Mission International at Kota. In last week's forced intrusion into a Christian gathering in Jodhpur also the police registered cases against the victims on charges of attempted conversion while they allowed the law breakers to go scot free," Vasudev, Secretary of CPI(M) Rajasthan, said. "Even while being a minuscule community in Rajasthan the contribution of Christians in the education sector is immense. It is unfortunate that they are targeted for a vilification campaign and even charged with indulging in spying activities," Prof. Vasudev observed. (The Hindu 2/7/05)

Madhya Pradesh mulls changes in Religious Act (7)

BHOPAL: The BJP Government in Madhya Pradesh is considering amendments to the Religious Freedom Act following an official probe committee report that claimed a sharp rise in religious conversion in tribal-dominated Jhabua district, official sources said here on Sunday. The Government has taken serious note of successive district collectors of Jhabua not sending information on conversion for the last 36 years and said collectors posted in the district since 1969 would be questioned and necessary action taken, said the sources. The Government's moves came after an one-man committee of former Director-General of police Narendra Prasad, which probed allegations levelled by Hindu outfits about conversions and feeling of insecurity expressed by missionaries after the rape and murder of a girl at a missionary school on January 11, 2004, submitted its report on May 21 this year. Quoting census figures that showed rise in population of Christians by about 80 per cent in Jhabua from 1991 to 2001, the report, which is yet to be made public, claimed provisions of the Religious Freedom Act, 1968, were not being followed as the collectors were not informed about conversions nor did the collectors inform the State Government about this, they said. As per the Act, the district collector should maintain a register showing details of conversions and inform the State Government, the sources said. Mr. Prasad is understood to have claimed that conversion, that took place due to laxity in implementation of Government schemes, was the main reason for the widening chasm between Hindus and Christians in Jhabua. The report also gives details about the laws enacted to check conversion in Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu and refers to judgements of High Courts and the Supreme Court. (The Hindu 11/7/05)

Gaur targets collectors on conversion (7)

Bhopal, July 11: Babulal Gaur is planning to amend a state law to make religious conversions more difficult after a controversial report said they were responsible for violence on Christians in tribal areas. The Madhya Pradesh chief minister is considering action against all officials who served in tribal-dominated districts in the last 37 years but failed to check conversions. Collectors and senior officials serving in tribal welfare departments since 1968-69 — when the Madhya Pradesh Religious Freedom Act was passed — will be questioned and necessary action taken against the "erring" officials who failed to report conversion cases to the state government. The

Madhya Pradesh Religious Freedom Act makes it mandatory that all conversions should be reported and maintained in a register by the collector, who is to furnish the details to the state government on the 10th of every month. Gaur's move comes in the wake of the findings of a one-man committee report which probed into the rape and murder of a girl at a missionary school on January 11, 2004. But the Opposition, Christian leaders and rights activists have raised questions on report prepared by former director-general of police Narendra Prasad. Indira Ayenger, the chairperson of Madhya Pradesh Christian Association, rubbished the report's findings. She said the report claimed nearly 80 per cent rise in Christian population in Jabua. "That is what is called being economical with the truth. The Christian population in MP is on the decline. We are merely .03 per cent of the population. And if there were forced conversions, how is that not a single thana has a complaint in the last 10 years or so?" she asked. (The Telegraph 12/7/05)

Kerala nun moves court for right to practice law (7)

New Delhi: The Kerala state Bar Council has refused Sister Teena Jose the right to practice law. A law graduate, sister Teena has appealed in the high court for justice. The state Bar Council's argues that it does not allow members of faith, priests, and sisters to practice law as they are already engaged in religious activities. Sister Teena Jose, a graduate in law from the Mahatma Gandhi University, does not take any salary for her religious work, which the state has confused with a paid profession. Dr M.D. Thomas, national director, Commission for Religious Harmony, Catholic Bishop's Conference of India (CBCI), said, "It is the infringement of the Article 19 (G) of the Constitution. The church has no objection to any profession. Priests and nuns can take up profession of a doctor, teacher, lawyer; human rights activist for the upliftment of society. In fact, church encourages such activities." Dr Thomas further said, "Priests and nuns don't ask for money, but if somebody wants to pay a nominal sum, it is utilised for somebody in need of it. We have several priests, nuns practising as lawyers in Kerala, the Bar Council earlier never had any issues giving the permission." Advocate Bhupinder Singh Chauhan said, "I agree that denial of the license is infringement of the Constitution but before issuing a license, the chamber has to abide by the guidelines of the Advocates Act and the Bar Association of respective states. As per the guidelines, one cannot be a part-time lawyer as it is a full-time profession. Being a nun calls for a lot of social and religious commitment. It is practically impossible for a woman to fulfil all these while she continues to be a nun. (Asian Age 13/7/05)

RSS alleges rise in evangelism (7)

New Delhi, July 24: The party organ of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Organiser, has alleged increase in Christian evangelical activity since in the sacred Triumala Hills, in Andhra Pradesh the abode of Lord Venkateshwara and sought surrender by the state government of the control of Lord Venkateshwara temple. The latest issue of Organiser has carried a front-page report stating that, "The evangelists are targeting the most sacred site of Tirumala and in direct affront to the Hindu community, which has for centuries regarded all seven hills as holy," says the report adding, "they have started gathering on the slopes in groups for public prayers." The report does not mention the fact that state chief minister Y.S.R. Reddy is a Christian, but clearly indicates that the state government is encouraging the evangelist activity. It says, "Even though an officer of the state-controlled Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) which manages the world famous Venkateshwara temple has denied that a missionary society has submitted a proposal to build a church on the hills, there is widespread disbelief on account of the known bias of chief minister Y.S. Rajeshwar Reddy." The report further says, "what lends credence to Hindu fears is the despicable statement by the government official that the TTD temple owns only 10.33 sq miles of land on the hills, and this land is administered by the mandir trust. This is a transparent ploy to deny the sacred character of all seven hills in their entirety, and restrict the sacred site of the Hindu community to the formal boundary of the extant of temple of Lord Venkateshwara. (Asian Age 25/7/05)

Christians: Check how poor we are (7)

New Delhi, Aug. 2: The All-India Catholic Union is demanding a national survey to determine the degree of backwardness of the community. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had decided to set up a high-powered panel headed by Justice Rajendra Sachar on backwardness among Muslims.

The Christian organisation is now demanding that the Justice Rajendra Sachar Committee either enlarge the scope of its survey to encompass Christians, or a separate committee be set up for the purpose. While Christians in urban areas are noticed to be literate and forward, it is the Christians in rural areas who are the most backward. Especially dalit Christians and tribal Christians. All-India Catholic Union President John Dayal said, "The 2001 Census also showed that despite the comparative overall high education levels of the community (urban), the levels of education in rural and tribal areas were dismally low, specially relating to the girl child in tribal areas." Migration of women from tribal areas to metropolitan cities for jobs, and their exploitation, is unparalleled in any community, Mr John Dayal said. Similarly, Mr John Dayal pointed out, "The rural population, mostly dalit, is landless peasantry, pauperised landless labour and others dependent on seasonal and inadequate employment." He added, "As per our studies, the Christian community does not have an entrepreneur class, nor does it have an artisan class of people who could be self-employed. The urban population is entirely in the service sector, and grossly under-employed." Dalit Christians comprise a full 60 per cent or more of the entire population of 2.5 crore Christians. Over 75 per cent of this population is in states such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Punjab and some other parts. (Asian Age 3/8/05)

Staines murder case: Dara files plea in SC (7)

NEW DELHI, AUGUST 16: Dara Singh, sentenced to life for the murder of Australian Missionary Graham Staines and his two children, today moved the Supreme Court challenging his conviction by the Orissa High Court. He contended that his conviction was upheld merely on the basis of presumption of his presence at the scene of crime on January 22, 1999 as the mob was shouting slogans in his name. This was "contrary to the principles of criminal justice and devoid of law," Dara claimed. The trial court had convicted Dara for the offence and sentenced him to death. But on May 19, the High Court reduced the sentence to life imprisonment and also acquitted 11 other accused, who were convicted by the trial court. The lower court had convicted 13 accused, including Dara, in connection with the murder of Staines and his two minor children Philip and Timothy. But the High Court held that there was no evidence on record that they had died due to individual act of Dara. It said no fatal injury to any of the deceased had been attributed to Dara and that he could not be held personally liable for the crime. Staines and his kids were charred to death when a mob set ablaze the wagon in which they were sleeping on the night of January 22, 1999 at Manoharpur in Keonjhar district. (Indian Express 17/8/05)

Minorities panel asks Christians to consider cremation (7)

New Delhi, August 17: THE city's Christian community has been asked by the Delhi Minorities Commission to consider cremation as an option because of space constraints at cemeteries. In fact, burials are on mostly in Paharganj cemetery despite there being no space. A letter from DMC member Arnold James to community leaders reads: "There is no hope for getting new sites for burial grounds in Delhi. We are reusing old graves, but for how long? There is no binding on us that we should go for cremation." The letter further states that an exclusive electric or gas crematorium for Christians would be beneficial. It also suggested gas furnaces at the Nicholson cemetery and storage of ashes in small cabinets "as practised abroad". The various denominations are, however, divided on the issue. The Church of St James at the Kashmere Gate has been tolerant. "Your observation for shift of practice to cremation is wholly justified," says Rev. Monodeep Daniel in a letter to the Commission. He says: "The burial rite in the Church of North India allows use appropriate words for committal of body to fire or water". There were, however, sharp reactions from the Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Job Mar Philoxenos says cremation is against the Church doctrine. He mentions, in a letter to the Commission, that in Kerala, mortal remains are kept in family vaults. He suggests that the government could give land and ask the communities to build their own vaults. Vault-graves hold more bodies and only family members are buried in them, explains James. However, Rev. Premdoss of the Methodist Church says that family vaults would create problems as police permission would be required for each burial. Instead, he suggests vaults where ashes of family members could be stored in tiny boxes. Thus, a four-inch box could replace a six-foot coffin, he says. (Indian Express 18/8/05)

Grant basic human rights, don't handcuff me, says Staines' killer (7)

Bhubaneswar, Aug. 19: After succeeding in his attempt to get cable television connection in his prison cell, Dara Singh, the key accused in Graham Stewart Staines murder case, has moved the court seeking its order that he must not be handcuffed while being moved to various courts for trial, reports our correspondent. Dara has filed a petition before the Mayurbhanj district sessions judge court urging it to pass an order asking the jail authorities not to handcuff him in future, especially while taking him to courts and the vice-versa. is yet to take a decision on his petition. Dara Singh is presently serving a life sentence in Baripada Circle jail. (Asian Age 20/8/05)

UPA toes NDA's line on Muslims, Christians (7)

New Delhi, Aug. 28: The official position taken by the BJP-led NDA government on Gujarat and alleged conversions of Hindus to Christianity has been accepted by the UPA government in the agenda paper distributed to members before the first National Integration Council meeting convened by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Wednesday. Two senior members have shot off letters to the Prime Minister protesting against the NDA influence over the NIC agenda and pointing out that "a large number of members strongly feel that the circulated document is contrary to the aspirations of millions of the ordinary people who had opposed the fascist forces with full determination and zeal." The document refers in passing to the Gujarat violence, describing it as "riots" and links it to the "Godhra train carnage." The government has placed the Gujarat violence in the same category as communal riots, maintaining that "barring the Gujarat riots, there was no sudden or steep spurt in violence (in 2002)." It has placed the number of dead as an exact 943 and injured as 2,000. Human rights bodies have placed the number of fatalities at 2,000. There is no mention at all of the nature of the violence in Gujarat that makes it stand apart from other incidents of communal tension, with the government making it very clear through the agenda that it was being treated as just one of the communal incidents of the year. (Asian Age 29/8/05)

'Conversion law must be repealed' (7)

New Delhi, Aug. 31: The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) on Wednesday advocated repeal of anti-conversion laws passed by various state governments and more autonomy to States. Union communications and IT minister Dayanidhi Maran said at the meeting of the National Integration Council, "It is necessary to initiate suitable steps within the framework of the Constitution to repeal the anti-conversion laws passed in few states, including Tamil Nadu." Speaking on behalf of his party, Mr Maran took a dig at the party's political adversary, the AIADMK government in Tamil Nadu. (Asian Age 1/9/05)

'Conversions disturbing communal harmony' (7)

New Delhi : Religious conversions are emerging as major cause of concern for the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government. The agenda paper prepared by the Government for the National Integration Council (NIC) meet on Wednesday attributes conversions as the one of the major cause for disturbing the communal situation in the country. The most distressing note in the current year was the alleged conversion activities during the annual religious assembly of the Immanuel Bible Institute Samiti, Kota (Rajasthan) in February 2005. According to the agenda paper, "The violence in Mangalore and other areas of Dakshina Kannada (Karnataka) during the second week of June, 2005 over alleged attempts to forcibly convert some Hindu girls by their Muslim employer and the terrorist attack on the disputed Rama Janmabhomi and Babri Mosque at Ayodhya, had the potential to destabilise the communal situation in the country". A large proportion of the communal incidents were sparked off by trivial events like street quarrel, old enmity, traffic incident, children playing cricket and kite flying which accounted for about 70 per cent. The next important cause of the incidents have been religious issues which accounted for 15 to 20 percent of the total incidents", In recent years, the issue of conversion/ re-conversion has also become a major cause of communal tensions in some part of the country. Allegation pertaining to the forced conversions and re-conversions and subsequent communal tensions have surfaced from time to time. (Pioneer 2/9/05)

Land shortage starts debate (7)

New Delhi, Sept. 6: Cremation or burial? This is the question that the three lakh odd-Christians in Delhi are asking themselves as they are caught in a debate between their faith and the ground reality: shortage of land to bury their dead ones. Drawing attention to the grave situation that the community is facing at present, which is likely to worsen in the coming years, Delhi Minorities Commission member Arnold James has suggested that the community to be "prepared for an alternative, electric crematorium". Mr James has also exhorted the community not to waste time in deliberating on the issue and "ask the government for providing an electronic crematorium exclusively for Christians". Approving the suggestions of the Delhi Minority Commission for the installation of furnaces for cremating bodies, Father Monodeep Daniel, presbyter in charge of the Church of St. James at Kashmere Gate, said: "A timely intervention of installing facilities for this purpose will be of great service to the community." He pointed out that this is approved in the Bible. "In other words, Biblically, the committal of the dead body to fire or to water does not affect the fundamentals of faith of theology in anyway," says Father Daniel. However, at a meeting of the Christian community leaders, most of them did not agree stating, "Christians are yet not prepared to cremate their dead. It is against their faith." (Asian Age 7/9/05)

Nun fights battle to become lawyer (7)

Kochi: Nun Teena Jose's dream of becoming a lawyer will have to wait. The enrolment committee of the Bar Council of Kerala (BCK) on Tuesday filed an affidavit reiterating its stand that nuns and priests cannot enrol as advocates. BCK filed a counter affidavit to Jose's case in the high court in June this year after she was refused enrolment. "The case has been adjourned and has been posted for September 23," said BCK counsel Shaji, adding that his client's contention was that nuns and priests could not be enrolled as lawyers as they were already engaged in a profession. Enrolment committee member K.V. Sadananda Kurup said the rules on enrolling advocates were clear. (Asian Age 7/9/05)

Government, church neglecting Dalit Christians' (7)

PATHANAMTHITTA: Samuel Nellikkad, chairman of Kaippatta Habel Foundation (KHF), has accused the Government and the Church of adopting a 'step-motherly' attitude towards Dalit Christians. Addressing a meeting organised by KHF in connection with the 151st anniversary of baptism of St. Habel of Kaippatta in Mallappally on Wednesday, Mr Samuel said Dalit Christians faced "unending misery" and poor socio-economic status, despite their embracing Christianity decades ago. "It is unfortunate that no mainstream church has come forward to remember St. Habel or celebrate the 150th anniversary of his baptism in 2004. Even the commemoration meet organised by the Church of South India in Kottayam last year was a 'name's sake' exercise," he alleged. Mr. Samuel said denial of reservation benefits to the children of Dalit Christians solely on the basis of their change of religious faith was "unjust and undemocratic." Even educational benefits of stipend and lump sum grant for Dalit Christian students were reportedly delayed, Mr. Samuel alleged. A memorial stone was unveiled near the CSI Church cemetery at Kaippatta, near Mallappally, marking the 151st anniversary of baptism of St. Habel, on Wednesday. Karumban Daivathan, slave of an aristocratic Christian family in Mallappally, was baptised by the missionary John Hawksworth 151 years ago to become Habel. The Anglican Church canonised him as Saint on completion of 150 years of his baptism, later and Archbishop Stephen Vattappara, had officially announced the decision on September 6, 2004. John Sathyakumar, Anglican Church Bishop of Chennai, unveiled the granite plaque (memorial stone) in Mallappally on Wednesday. (The Hindu 9/9/05)

Burial land survey ordered (7)

New Delhi, Sept. 8: Following the warning from the Delhi Minorities Commission that the Christian community is facing severe land shortage to bury its dead, Delhi government has ordered a survey of the burial grounds. Presently the three lakh Christians are facing acute shortage of land to bury their dead. Having no options, they are reusing cemeteries in Paharganj, Maurice Nagar and Burari. The time period to reuse a burial land has been reduced to five years. But it is in trans-Yamuna area where the problem is at its worst. It has no place to bury its dead in the area. Arnold James, member of the Delhi Minorities Commission has written to the government to look into the matter: "The members of the community in trans-Yamuna have no option but to approach

the Paharganj and Nicholson cemeteries for burial purposes, posing considerable inconvenience," said Mr James. Ramesh Narayanaswami, principal secretary (home) has asked the divisional commissioner to carry out a survey and find out the "particulars of burial ground facilities, if any, in northeast and east districts for different denominations of the Christian community, along with the details of the denominations such as Roman Catholic, Protestants, Presbyterian, Metho-dists, among others." (Asian Age 9/9/05)

Jews' conversion angers church (7)

Guwahati, Sept. 23: The silent protest of Christian leaders in the Northeast has failed to deter the campaign of the rabbis selected by the Sepherdic Rabbinate Council of Israel to convert Mizo and Manipuri Christians to Judaism through the ritual bath in the Northeast. If 198 Mizos were converted in Mizoram on Friday last, more than 100 took the holy bath in Manipur on Sunday. The Jewish ritual bath of conversion or Mikvah is considered a step towards their promised land, Israel. Rabbi Zion Buarbon of Israel blessed the new converts during the conversion process. Mr Avior Khawlhring, information secretary of Shavei Israel, said all the converts have undergone the necessary rituals, including circumcision. "The spiritual rabbi or Beit rabbi hardly go out of Israel unless there is an issue of prime importance for Israel and Judaism. The Mikvah of Aizawl and Imphal seems to be quite important to them," said Mr Liyon Fanai, a convert and one of the leaders of Shavei Israel. "The conversion ceremony is funded by the Israeli government through Shavei Israel, an organisation that has been trying to locate the 10 lost tribes of Israel," Mr Fanai said. Though, rabbis of Israel refuse to admit it that the ongoing conversion ceremonies have not gone down well among the Christian leaders who are keeping a close watch over the developments. This was visible when some Christian leaders strongly objected to the conversion of Christians in Mizoram and Manipur. "Acceptance of our people as Israelites is the work of Satan," said Dr P.C. Biaksama, an ethnic Mizo and former government bureaucrat who now studies Christian theology. (Asian Age 24/9/05)

1,800 converts re-embrace Hinduism (7)

Etah: As many as 1,800 Christians converts re-embraced Hinduism in Etah on Sunday and 40 churches were handed over to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's Dharma Raksha Samiti, which would transform them into temples of Maharishi Valmiki. These temples would be open for the untouchable community too. The purification drive, led by the Gorakhpur MP and saffron flag-bearer Yogi Aditya Nath, saw a gathering of more than 3,200 villagers from 70 villages of Etah at the Saraswati Vidya Mandir on Sunday. Earlier, about 5,000 Christian converts had re-joined Hinduism in Etah in February. Talking to The Pioneer, Hindu Jagran Vibhag, VHP regional coordinator Indrajit Arya said the missionaries misled Dalit Hindus, especially Valmikis of Agra to take to Christianity. He said this community has always been considered untouchable and the missionaries took full advantage of this fact by promising lucrative terms like financial security and social equality. While the VHP had taken up this task of re-conversion only a few years back, the Valmiki community of Agra was being misled by the missionaries for far too long, he said. Some converts' families, which arrived in the purification ceremony, had been Christians for two-three generations and now they wanted to re-embrace Hinduism, along with their children, who were born Christians, he said and claimed that they wanted to reunite with their heritage that they had lost by assuming Christianity. VHP leaders, including the Gorakhpur MP Yogi Adityanath, subsequently dined with the 'reformed' Hindus to make them feel equivalent to other Hindus, as the missionaries target the practice of "untouchability" in Valmiki Dalits as their weapon for ensuring conversions. The leaders aim to bring back at least 80,000 Christian converts back by next year. (Pioneer 3/10/05)

Kerala ruling parties angry over attack on bishop house (7)

Thiruvananthapuram, Oct. 19: The attack on the house of the bishop of Neyyatinkara in the outskirts of the city by a gang of miscreants has deeply vexed the ruling Congress-led UDF, which is gearing up to face a Lok Sabha bypoll in Thiruvananthapuram. The attack, which took place in the early hours of Monday, left a security guard injured. The gang also destroyed some vehicles in the premises and created terror before vanishing. Bishop Vincent Samuel was sleeping in the house when the attack occurred. Left parties in the Opposition have already

alleged that a local Congress leader, in cahoots with the liquor mafia, was behind the attack. The Latin Church was in the frontline of the anti-liquor movement in the area and its priests have even received death threats from illegal brewers. It could not have come at a worse time for chief minister Oommen Chandy, who needs the support of the Latin Catholic community to put up a good show in Thiruvananthapuram. He has assured that the police would identify and arrest the attackers quickly. The crime branch team probing the attack has already detained several persons of the locality for questioning. Since the attack coincided with the commencement of the campaign for the bypoll, a stream of political leaders visited the bishop's house to express concern. They included Opposition leader V.S. Achutanandan, former chief minister A.K. Antony and BJP leader O. Rajagopal. CPI(M) state secretary Pinarayi Vijayan said on Wednesday that the gang which attacked the bishop's house was being protected by the government. A Congress leader who contested the civic polls was behind the attack, he alleged. "This is the first time that a bishop's house has been attacked in Kerala," said Mr Vijayan. Veteran leader K. Karunakaran, who has allied with the LDF, also expressed lack of faith in the ongoing crime branch probe and sought an investigation by a special police team. The leaders of the Latin Catholic community, which has traditionally supported them, had recently expressed deep disappointment with their policies. (Asian Age 20/10/05)

Supreme Court admits appeals in Staines case (7)

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court on Wednesday admitted an appeal filed by the Central Bureau of Investigation challenging the Orissa High Court order modifying the death sentence awarded to Dara Singh in the Graham Staines murder case into life imprisonment. Bench of Justice Ashok Bhan and Justice Altamas Kabir also admitted an appeal filed by Dara Singh seeking quashing of the life term and acquittal. It issued notice to the parties and directed issuance of bailable warrants against three accused in the case. In a special leave petition, Dara Singh, who was convicted for the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two minor sons, Philip and Timothy, contended that his conviction was upheld merely on the basis of presumption of his presence at the site of the incident as the mob was raising slogans in his name. Hence it was contrary to the principles of criminal justice and devoid of law. In its SLP, the CBI submitted that the High Court had disregarded the entire evidence while acquitting 11 of the accused and reducing the death sentence slapped on Dara Singh. When all the accused were identified by eye witnesses, there was no reason to disbelieve their evidence, it said and sought quashing of the impugned judgment. The High Court on May 19 set aside Rabindra Pal Singh alias Dara Singh's death sentence but slapped life imprisonment on him for being part of an unlawful assembly that burnt Staines and his sons alive. It held that there was absolutely no evidence on record that the three persons or any of them died due to the individual act of Dara Singh. Another accused Mahendra Hembram was also convicted in the case. (The Hindu 20/10/05)

Latin Catholics furious with CM on attack (7)

Thiruvananthapuram, Oct. 21: Leaders of the Latin Catholic Church on Friday expressed anger at the inability of the police to arrest the culprits behind the attack on the Bishop's House at Neyyatinkara in the outskirts of the city. A gang of miscreants had attacked the Bishop's House early on Monday and had injured a security guard. The Bishop, Rev. Vincent Samuel, was sleeping when the attack occurred. The Crime Branch, which is probing the incident, has detained a few local people, including a Congress leader. However, no major arrests have been made so far. Opposition parties have alleged that some local Congress leaders, who are in cahoots with the liquor mafia, were behind the attack. The church is a very active campaigner against liquor menace and illegal brewing in the area and its priests had got death threats from the hooch mafia. A meeting of the laity and clergy of the Neyyatinkara diocese on Friday expressed anxiety at the slow progress of the investigation and decided to launch strong protests from Monday. Rev. Samuel said that he was afraid that the real culprits behind the attack might escape and some scapegoats would be lined up by the police. "We are sad at the lack of interest shown by the government in the case," he said. (Asian Age 22/10/05)

Church to adopt ashram, aarti, Sanskrit (7)

Pune: The Catholic church would take up the study of Sanskrit, adapt to monastic life in an ashram and adopt the Hindu ritual of aarti during mass if the movement towards 'Indianisation of the church' gets the nod from 400 priests and five bishops congregating in Pune. Starting Tuesday, Pune's Papal Seminary, which is celebrating the 50th anniversary of its transfer from Kandy (Sri Lanka) to the city, will play host to the priests for three days. Discussions will cover the state of the church in India and the movement for its Indianisation. The Catholic church has already adopted a number of Indian traditions and practices and has come a long way, four decades after the historic Second Vatican Council (1962- 65) brought an epochal shift in the modern church through its declaration on religious liberty. Pune's Papal Seminary, which has ordained over 1,250 priests during the past 50 years, has continued with its modernisation effort along with its associate institutions such as the Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV), formerly, the Pontifical Athenaeum, and the De Nobili College. Pune-based Catholic leaders such as Joseph Neuner, Kurien Kun-numpuram, Francis X D'Sa, John Vattanky and Subhash Anand have been stressing for lesser control from the Vatican, to make the church "truly Indian and genuinely Christian". (Times of India 25/10/05)

Many Christian priests follow ancient ashram system strictly (7)

Pune: Has the time come for churches in India to turn 'truly Indian'? Francis X D'Sa, an internationally acclaimed Sanskrit scholar has noted in his paper published in 'Dreams and Visions: New Horizons for an Indian Church (2002)': "Today, the time has come for the Indian church to shed its image of a multinational company and retrieve those characteristics which bring out its 'Catholicity' in the best sense of the word." Pandikattu Kuruvilla, teacher of philosophy at JDV and the Papal Seminary's rector, Ornellas Coutinho, explained that a number of Indian religious customs and practices have already been embraced by the Catholic church to become truly Indian. "A number of Christian priests, for example, strictly follow the ancient Indian ashram system of monastic life, such as those at the Bethany Vedavijnana Peeth (Pune), Satchitananda Ashram (Trichy), Kurusumala Ashram (Kerala) and the Sameskshna Ashram (Kalady, Kerala)," said Kuruvilla. "Practising vegetarianism, organising satsangs and reading Bhagvad Gita are some of the changes that have taken place," he said. (Times of India 25/10/05)

Preacher told to leave India, to meet Sonia (7)

Kochi : A German national, Sylvia Christine Pretorius, who has been ordered by the Kerala Government and the Kerala High Court to leave the country for illegal activities related to religious conversion, is now planning to approach the Supreme Court and Congress leaders, including party president Sonia Gandhi, to avoid being deported. Addressing a Press conference here on Wednesday, she denied all the allegations, including preaching religious conversion, that have been levelled against her and found to be true by Government agencies and the courts. Ms Pretorius claimed that neither she nor her husband Pretorius Barend Johns Petrones, a South African national, had engaged in such illegal activities. Ms Pretorius alleged that a middleman was trying to grab property that was in her possession. She said, "Peter, who belongs to Kumbalangi near Kochi and whom we trusted in the beginning and in whose name we purchased some land near Thattekad in Ernakulam district for a tourist resort, has turned out to be a traitor. I believe that due to his interest we got the order to leave the country, describing us as people engaged in religious conversion. "He was using our house and premises for conducting prayer meetings and we as Christians have participated in such meeting never knowing that he is painting us as the organisers of such meetings," she alleged. "We came to know that his real motive was to grab the property by forcing us to leave the country. He was behind informing the intelligence agencies that we were engaged in conversion," she claimed, adding, "We could not understand his motive as we don't know the regional language. Unfortunately, we could not prove such facts in the High Court as the land was in his name." She demanded a re-investigation into the issue. "We cannot imagine such a thing happening to an Indian who visits Germany. As we love the country, we wanted to buy some land and believed this person," she said. Her husband is now in Germany. (Pioneer 27/10/05)

Christian meet starts as Bajrang Dal protests (7)

Jaipur, Oct. 27: A meeting of Christian priests, organised by the Emmanuel Mission, started in Kota despite protests by supporters and activists of the Bajrang Dal. Hindutva organisations are protesting against the meet, which, they allege, would be used for conversions. However, these charges have been refuted by the Emmanuel Mission. Bajrang activists tried to disrupt the programme but the police kept them away, said Samuel Thomas of the mission. "We invited the Dal leaders to attend the function in the presence of the police. They can check that nothing would be done against the law. It is a religious function," he added. Over 1,000 delegates from India and 30 from abroad are attending the meet. The Bajrang Dal's Anil Tiwari said they have deployed 500 activists at the railway station and bus stand to check if the mission had brought people for conversion. "We will keep an eye on the function," he said. "We identified 15 people and handed over them to the police. They were Hindus and had been brought for conversion," Mr Tiwari alleged. (Asian Age 28/10/055)

Latin Catholics up in arms against UDF (7)

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: Angered by the slow pace of investigation into the attack on the Neyyattinkara Bishop's House on October 12, the Latin Catholic community has decided to confront the UDF Government by taking out a march to the Secretariat on November 7. In a pastoral letter read out at all churches under the Latin Archdiocese of Trivandrum during Holy Mass on Sunday, the Church authorities described the attack on the Bishop's House as "the first incident of its kind in the contemporary history of the Catholic Church in Kerala." Terming the Secretariat March a "struggle for justice," the Church called upon the clergy and laity to join the march. The pastoral letter, issued by Archdiocese administrator M. Joseph, said that though the investigation had been handed over to the Crime Branch, no action had been taken. "Although we had strongly raised at various levels, including that of the Chief Minister, the demand for stern intervention by the police, we doubt whether the police are serious about the investigation," the letter said. It said that the Secretariat March is a demand for the immediate arrest of the guilty, steps to prevent recurrence of such incidents and protection and security to churches. The letter made it clear that the Catholic Church suspected the involvement of a mafia gang linked to the liquor lobbies in the area in the attack. The church also believed that the attack was an act of vendetta against Father Gerald Mathias, who had given evidence in court against the suspected attackers in a case. The relationship between the Latin Catholic Church and the UDF Government has been strained for a while, with the Church upset by UDF's "lack of commitment" in implementing the Narendran Commission report, and the UDF's liquor policy. Thiruvananthapuram Archbishop Susai Pakiam, a campaigner against liquor, has not minced his words when taking on the Government for its excise policy. The Archbishop and his counterpart in Kochi, Daniel Acharuparambil, had come out strongly against Chief Minister Oommen Chandy at the sixth General Assembly of the KRLCC held here on June 17. (The Hindu 31/10/05)

Christian committee wants bill withdrawn (7)

New Delhi, Nov. 5: The All-India Christian Council has sought withdrawal of, or suitable amendments to, the proposed Foreign Contribution (Management and Control) Bill 2005, as the bill in its present form would violate the constitutional protection provided for freedom of religion. The organisation felt that Section 5 (IV) of the bill, which uses terms such as "conversion through inducement or force, either directly or indirectly, from one religious faith to another", is draconian by nature and will be used to target Christian institutions. Expressing concern over the "adverse impact" on the freedom of faith of the minority communities in India and on the work of Christian institutions, the organisation said that the proposed bill, which is supposed to replace the FCRA Act 1976, gives an impression that the new bill was meant to control the flow of foreign contribution, instead of facilitating the same for programmes and activities for the good of the poor. In a media communique, the organisation apprehended that the "bill provided ample scope for misuse of its provisions that were ostensibly intended to control and prevent the use of foreign funds for anti-national activities." (Asian Age 6/11/05)

Priests, nuns can become lawyers: Kerala High Court (7)

KOCHI: The Kerala High Court, on Monday, held that nuns and priests could be enrolled as lawyers, provided they did not engage in a fulltime profession, such as teaching or nursing.

Justice K. Balakrishnan Nair gave the ruling while allowing three writ petitions by the nuns Tina Jose and M. Tessa and the priest Thomas Pudussery, challenging the decision of the enrolment committee of the Bar Council of Kerala against enrolling them as lawyers. The court observed that nuns and priests were members of the religious profession. But under rule 2(b) of the Bar Council of Kerala Rules, a profession was defined as "analogous to trade or business which generates income and not the profession of religion." The court said that no one became priest or nun for taking up employment and earning a living. A person who joined the profession of religion dedicated his or her life to the service of god. Therefore, they were not engaged in a profession. The court also pointed out that under the Bar Council of India Rules, a person already enrolled was not disqualified even if he joined the profession of religion. Thus, the rules did not prevent them from joining the profession of religion. The court made it clear that the contention of the State and national-level Bar councils that priests and nuns were not eligible to join the legal profession was not supported by any statute. The court said, "The entry of such persons will add lustre to the profession." The legal profession needed selfless and dedicated persons to take up the cause of the downtrodden and the environment, without being concerned about fees. The Judge said that a person passing out of a seminary, or any other religious institution, had taken a vow to serve God and His people. (The Hindu 8/11/05)

Latin Catholics flay delay in arresting 'real culprits' (7)

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: Latin Catholic priests, nuns and the laity staged demonstrations in various districts in the State on Monday condemning the delay in arresting the culprits involved in the attack on the Bishop's House at Neyyattinkara three weeks ago. At Neyyattinkara, the demonstrators blocked the national highway for more than an hour. Three demonstrations from different directions gathered near the bus stand in the town to block vehicular traffic. Neyyattinkara Bishop Vincent Samuel said everyone living in the vicinity of the Bishop's House knew who the real culprits of the attack were. The police, however, still had no clue on the subject, he said. In the State capital, the demonstrators marched to the Secretariat gates and staged a dharna there. Vicar general of the Arch Diocese of Thiruvananthapuram Monsignor M. Joseph, inaugurating the dharna, alleged that the police were protecting those involved in the attack. Nothing else could explain the delay in arresting them, he added. (The Hindu 8/11/05)

UDF angers Catholics on bypoll eve (7)

Thiruvananthapuram, Nov. 8: The Congress-led UDF may have to pay dearly for the inability of the police to arrest those who attacked the Bishop house in Neyyattinkara three weeks ago. The UDF is fighting a prestigious Lok Sabha bypoll in Thiruvananthapuram and the surging anger of the Latin Catholic Church has created jitters in its camp. Leaders and laity of the Church have threatened to boycott the poll if the attackers are not arrested quickly. They held dharnas and marches across the state on Monday to express their anger at the slow pace of the police probe. Varapuzha Archbishop Daniel Acharuparambil went to the extent of saying that the government was deliberately shielding the real culprits behind the attack. Almost 20 days have passed since a bunch of hoodlums attacked the Bishop House. They injured a security guard and damaged vehicles in the premises. Bishop Vincent Samuel was in the building when the attack occurred. Priests have alleged that goons of the liquor mafia, who had the patronage of local politicians, were behind the attack. The church is in the forefront of anti-liquor agitations in the area. The police detained a local Congress leader for questioning and have released pictures of four suspects, who are absconding. However, church leaders said that it was just an eyewash and the real culprits had slipped away. The incident has become a major embarrassment for the UDF government and chief minister Oommen Chandy. The CPI(M)-led LDF has alleged that the government was inactive since Congressmen were behind the attack. (Asian Age 9/11/05)

India asks Israel to stop conversion (7)

Aizawl: HOPES OF migrating to Israel by a tribal group in the North-East who claims to be descendants of a lost Jewish tribe were shattered after Jerusalem said no to conversion to Judaism following protests by New Delhi. "We were all devastated after we got confirmation that the Indian Government forced Israel to stop converting any more persons to Judaism," Peer Tlau, a practicing Jew in Mizoram's State capital Aizawl, said. The Israeli foreign ministry last week announced it

would stop the conversions of the 6,000-strong Bnei Menashe tribe in the two northeastern States of Mizoram and Manipur in the wake of complaints from the Indian Government. "The Indian authorities, through official channels, told us they do not view positively initiated efforts at conversions to other religions," Israeli foreign ministry spokesman, Mark Regev, was quoted as saying. "When the Indian Government issues a complaint we take it seriously. At the moment there is a freeze on all such conversions taking place." Sephardic or oriental chief rabbi in Jerusalem, Shlomo Amar, announced in March that members of the Bnei Menashe tribe in India's North-East were descendants of ancient Israelites or one of the Biblical 10 lost tribes. The recognition by Israel came in the wake of mounds of applications from local tribe's people seeking to migrate to Israel, or the "Promised Land", which they say is their right. According to Israeli law every Jew enjoys the "right of return" — or the right of abode in Israel. After the Bnei Menashe tribe was recognised as one of the ten lost tribes by Jerusalem, a group of Israeli rabbis in September visited Mizoram and converted the first batch of 218 Mizo tribal people to Judaism after they took a holy dip at a "mikvah" or a ritual bath. "We are waiting to get converted and then migrate to our Holy Land. Now the conversion ban could jeopardise all our dreams," Yonathan Ralte, a Mizo youth, said. (Pioneer 15/11/05)

Families ostracised for conversion to Christianity (7)

Nellore, Nov. 14: Seven families belonging to the fishermen community of Kottasathram have been ostracised by village elders for converting to Christianity. They have been treated like outcasts for the last one and a half years for embracing Christianity and for refusing to take part in the Srirama Navami festival at the local temple in August 2004. While four members of the family of Katamgari Mangamma have not been allowed to step into the village after their conversion, the other six families were asked to leave the village. Ms Mangamma said that she was unable to donate money for the temple festival because her husband's death had left her a pauper. "I was unable to run my family and decided to convert on the advice of some of my neighbours", she said. "I wanted to make a living with the blessings of Jesus Christ". The angry village elders, however, said that only those offering prayers to Lord Ram will be allowed to stay on in the village. This decision was supported and villagers were warned not to have any connection with the converted families. Saddened by the social boycott, the families left the village and constructed huts in the forest land, which is one and a half km away. However, the vendetta of the villagers was not over and they allegedly destroyed the borewells dug by the families. The villagers have also reportedly persuaded forest officials to destroy the huts they built in forest land. This has left the families without a roof over their heads. To add to their woes, village elders have warned nearby Pottemma Nagar residents not to give the families water and other necessities. When one Levamma went into the village with a Bible five days ago, the villagers drove her out and asked the families to leave the area by November 15. (Asian Age 15/11/05)

'Lost tribe' upset by freeze on conversion (7)

Aizawl, Nov. 13: Members of a tribe in the Northeast who claim to be one of the Biblical 10 lost tribes say they are upset over a freeze in their conversion to Judaism following a protest by the Indian government. Many of the 6,000-strong Bnei Menashe tribe in Mizoram and Manipur, who profess they are the Biblical tribe, have applied to Tel Aviv seeking to migrate to Israel — the "Promised Land" — which they say is their right. "We were all shattered after we got confirmation that the Indian government forced Israel to stop converting any more people to Judaism," said Peer Tlau, a practicing Jew in Mizoram's state capital Aizawl. The Israeli foreign ministry earlier this week announced it would stop the conversions of the Bnei Menashe tribe in the wake of complaints from the Indian government. (Asian Age 14/11/05)

Conversions rock Himachal (7)

Shimla : Himachal Pradesh with over 98 per cent Hindu population is in news for incidences of Hindus converting to Christianity enmass. Apart from the local population of the upper regions of Shimla district, large majority of migrant population from Bihar and Orrisa who come in for the blue collared jobs are converting to Christianity willingly. Most of the converts are from poor economic background. The social want of being treated as equals can be attributed as one of the main reasons for their conversion to Christianity. The issue is gaining political momentum with several organisations claiming that large scale conversions are taking place in the State. In a

recent incident, the Himachal wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) warned the Christians of Baijnath town in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh of dire consequences if they did not renounce their faith and reconvert to Hinduism. Feroz Maish, 64, the converts' pastor, was beaten up by VHP and Bajrang Dal activists a few days back and warned of dire consequences if he did not renounce his faith and reconvert to Hinduism. The feud began with a local resident, Prakash Chand, alleging that his wife and two sons had converted to Christianity two years ago under Mr Masih's duress, which was probed to be false by the local police. Following this, the VHP and Bajrang Dal activists accosted the pastor, while he was traveling to the Norha village, five kms from Baijnath town on November 4, 2005 and warned him and said that they would visit his house and recite hymns from Gita to purify his house. Pioneer 22/11/05)

'Justice' sought by dalit Christians (7)

New Delhi: All-India Catholics Union president John Dayal on Tuesday expressed the hope that the dalit Christians would finally get justice from the Supreme Court, reports our special correspondent. Referring to Chief Justice of India Y.K. Sabharwal's assertion that the top court will examine the issue of granting Scheduled Castes status to dalit Christians after getting detailed information, Mr Dayal said that surprisingly, the UPA government's bid was to stall the issue. "The government tried its best to question both the jurisdiction of the top court and the demand of the minority community," Mr Dayal said. Mr Dayal added, "This was the first time the case came up after Justice Y.K. Sabharwal took over from Justice R.C. Lahoti, who had hauled up the government on PILs. (Asian Age 30/11/05)

India Catholic body outraged (7)

NEw Delhi, Dec. 1: All-India Catholics' Union President John Dayal on Thursday demanded that the United Nations and human rights groups condemn the attack on the Catholic nuns and priests in China. The Catholics Union, he said, salutes the Catholics in China, who have braved the challenges and trials unheard of in modern times. Mr Dayal said that the Vatican has already condemned the violence perpetrated against 16 nuns in Xian and expressed concern for the arrest of six priests of the unofficial Church. Attacks on the Franciscan Sisters of Xian and six priests in the Diocese of Zhengding. The six belong to the diocese headed by Bishop Jia Zhiguo, who was himself arrested earlier this month. The 70-year-old bishop has been arrested at least eight times since 2004 and has spent 20 years in Chinese prisons. The All-India Catholics' Union, which is Asia's largest and oldest laity organisation, has called upon the United Nations, the Indian government and other human rights groups to take note of the magnitude of the violence and impress upon the government in Beijing that such actions do not behave a country seeking recognition as the fastest developing economy. Mr John Dayal said, "The battered Church has been stunned by the sheer brutality of the attacks on priests and nuns and the incarceration of unknown numbers of lay faithful in the vast land." Mr Dayal said the Catholic Union notes that the Chinese violence has, in a way, abetted anti-Christian violence in Pakistan and Bangladesh in recent months. "We are surprised that the Government of India, which spoke to out when non-Christian minorities were harassed in Pakistan and Bangladesh, has chosen to remain mum in this case. (Asian Age 2/12/05)

10 accused in Staines' murder surrender before court (7)

Bhubaneswar : Ten persons accused in Graham Staines' murder case, who were earlier acquitted by the Orissa High Court, surrendered before the District and Sessions Judge, Khurda, on Thursday in pursuance to a fresh directive from the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court, hearing the two separate petitions filed by Dara Singh alias Rabinder Pal, the main accused in the Australian missionary Graham Staines' murder, and the investigating agency, the CBI, on October 19 this year had issued notices to 11 acquitted persons. Dara, in his petition, urged the apex court for his acquittal. But the CBI moved the court challenging the verdict of the Orissa High Court. Dara's counsel in the Supreme Court Shiva Sankar Mishra said the CBI and other agencies had made him guilty solely on the basis of slogans. He is hopeful that Dara would be acquitted in the Supreme Court, as no direct evidence is there to nail him in the sensational murder case. A Division Bench of the Supreme Court, comprising Justice Ashok Bhan and Justice Althamas Kabir, on October 27 had directed the District and Sessions Judge, Khurda, to

issue bailable warrants against the 11 acquitted persons, including Dayanidhi Patra alias Daya, Umakanta Bhoi, Kartik Lohar, Rabi Soren, Mahadev Mahanta, Turam Ho, Renta Hembram Ojen alias Suresh Hansda, Suratha Naik, Harish Chandra Mahanta and Rajat Kumar Das. The bench also directed the Sessions Judge to grant the 11 persons bail, subject to his satisfaction. The District and Sessions Judge on November 9 had directed the SP, CBI, Kolkata, to arrest the 11 persons and produce them before his court on December 8. Accordingly, the CBI official Dharani Sahoo on Thursday produced 10 out of the 11 persons in the court. Rajat Kumar Das, who is currently in the Baripada Circle jail in connection with the Jamubani murder case, could not be produced. Ten other persons were released on bail. (Pioneer 9/12/05)

Christian Minister flays Munda (7)

Ranchi : The lone Christian Minister of Jharkhand Government has reacted sharply to the proposed anti-conversion announced by Chief Minister Arjun Munda. Three days ago Chief Minister had announced plans to bring a legislation in the State Assembly to ban conversions in the State to "protect tribal culture and identity" while addressing a tribal rally. Most of independent MLAs had supported the announcement on Sunday. But the lone Christian Minister in the Munda Government and an independent Legislator, Enos Ekka, has issued a Press statement on Monday opposing any such bill. "I do not feel it is appropriate to introduce such a bill. In secular country like India every one has right to live on the call of his conscience. Anybody wishing to change his/her religion should not be prevented from doing so," the statement said. It further said: "People should not be bound by any law. We supported the Government on the condition that no different attitude will be adopted towards Christians and Muslims." Mr Ekka is one of the five independents who initially supported the BJP-led Government. He also hit headlines at the formation of the Government as the UPA had charged that he was abducted by the NDA leaders. The five independents are known as G-5. Later, one more independent MLA supported the Government. But the two of the G-5 Ministers - Madhu Koda, who is tribal and Chandra Prakash Chaudhary - have already supported the announcement. Reacting to Mr Ekka's statement, Mr Chaudhary told newsmen: "Enos is a Christian and it is natural that he will oppose such a bill. But we believe that forceful conversion through alluring people is wrong". The bill seems to have created rift in unity of G-5. At present the Christian population is 4 per cent of the total population of the State. And Christian missionaries are active in most parts of the State and are working in tribal-dominated areas that are facing alienation. Tribals constitute 27 per cent of the total population and conversion are rampant in these areas. (Pioneer 14/12/05)

'Christian Muslim relations with RSS improve' (7)

Bangalore, Dec. 25: The RSS Claims that a positive and qualitative change is slowly coming into the thinking of Muslims and Christians about the goals and activities of the Sangh Parivar. "We are aware it has to be a slow process. We have tried to understand their doubts and reservations about us and the response has been heartening. We are confident that over a period of time, through sustained heart-to-heart dialogue between our leaders and these communities that they will understand that we are nationalist and not parochial," Mr Indresh Kumar, All-India Joint Coordination pramukh of the RSS, said on Friday. In conversation with The Asian Age, Mr Kumar said, "The RSS has been emphasising to our Muslim and Christian brethren that no matter what their religion is, they have common ancestors, a common land and a common culture as the Hindus. It is high time that they stop viewing the RSS with communally coloured glasses. Attempts have been made by the communists and pseudo-secularists to tarnish the RSS image. They are determined to isolate them (minorities) and create hostility as a part of their vote-bank strategy." "The Muslim and Christian brethren have expressed fear and apprehension about RSS stance on Article 370, the Ayodhya issue, the Uniform Civil Code and cow slaughter. We are trying to allay their fears in many of the meetings we have had with Muslim and Christian leaders," he added. (Asian Age 26/12/05)

Church gets notice on appointments (7)

New Delhi, Dec. 24: The Supreme Court has issued notices on a petition challenging the appointments of administrators to the Indian Evangelical Lutheran Church not belonging to the

religious denomination of the church. Such appointments to take over and administer the affairs and properties of the church impinges on the religious and minority rights guaranteed under the Constitution, said the petition. A bench of Justice S.B. Sinha and Justice P.P. Naolekar issued notices to Mr P. Jayasingh Peter, the election officer, Mr R. Bharanidharan, advocate election officer of the church, and others. The bench also issued notices to the registrar, Chennai Central, and the inspector-general of registration, Chennai, and asked the respondents to file their replies. Advocate A. Francis Julian, appearing for the petitioners, said the administrators were passing orders pertaining to faith such as admission of members, payment of contributions etc. amounting to interference in religious rights. "The administrators — one a non-Christian and the other not belonging to the religious denomination of the church — do not have any knowledge of the working and faith of the church spread especially over southern states," said the petition. (Asian Age 25/12/05)

Catholics seek PM help (7)

New Delhi, Dec. 24: All-India Catholics Union president John Dayal has sought personal intervention of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to check the growing violence against Christians. It assumes significance as it comes on the eve of Christmas. Women married to Christian non-resident Indians were facing problems in securing visas. Christian tribals in Jhabua were still in jail, while the perpetrators of anti-Christian violence were still at large. Even within a few kilometres from Delhi, in Sonapat, houses of some Christian families were burnt, he said. In a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Mr Dayal said, "May we humbly request that your government take urgent steps in the above matters to make the New Year happier for the Christian community and everyone else in the country." He said, "We regret our joy in the approaching Christmas, the festival that brings with it the promise of freedom, liberation and salvation in the birth of Christ, is diminished and overshadowed by daily reports of violence against churches, priests and the faithful, police atrocities and incidents of miscarriage of justice in which the victims are the poorest of the poor Christians and their fellow dalits. (Asian Age 25/12/05)