

MINORITIES: CHRISTIANS - 2007

(January to December 2007)

Compiled & Edited By
K. Samu,
Human Rights Documentation,
Indian Social Institute, Lodi Road, New Delhi

Himachal's Congress govt bans conversions (7)

New Delhi, Jan 5: The Congress government in Himachal Pradesh has quietly passed an anti-conversion law despite a written assurance by Congress president Sonia Gandhi to Christian organizations earlier that she had personally directed her party members to challenge similar laws passed by the BJP governments in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Bill was passed during the four-day winter session of the state legislature on December 29, while most Christians were still celebrating Christmas and the New Year. The BJP in the state welcomed the bill, which is a first for the Congress Party. The bill was passed very quietly, with the Congress leadership in New Delhi also silent about the decision of chief minister Virbhadra Singh to pass this anti-conversion law. Similar laws are currently in force only in BJP-ruled state, such as Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Arunachal Pradesh. Mrs Sonia Gandhi had intervened when Christian leaders had protested against the anti-conversion bill passed by the BJP governments. The secretary-general of the All India Christian Council, Mr John Dayal, told this newspaper that he had received a letter from the Congress president informing him that she had directed her party to oppose this law from inside and outside. However, instead of this being done at any level, a Congress government has also passed a similar law during the festive season. This, Mr Dayal said, was "a cruel joke." The 8,000 Christians living in Himachal Pradesh appear to be alarmed by this development, as under the new law anyone found to be converting another person is to be severely punished with two years in prison and a fine of Rs 25,000. Christians have earlier been targeted by BJP-led governments and the party has also run a strong campaign against this minority community. The attacks on priests and nuns in states like Madhya Pradesh and Orissa have been followed by these anti-conversion laws which the BJP has made clear is basically targeting Christians in these states. A draft of the Himachal Pradesh bill had been in circulation in 2005 and been strongly opposed at the time by the Catholic Church. Archbishop Stanislaus Fernandes, secretary-general of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, has said: "Apart from the law, it is worrying that the social ministry of the Church is being scrutinised and regarded with such suspicion." (Asian Age 6/1/07)

RSS says it grieves at death of Baselius (7)

New Delhi, Jan. 20: The Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh on Saturday expressed its grief on the demise of Major Archbishop Mar Baselius of Malankara Catholic Church. At the time of his death the Archbishop was heading the Kerala Catholic Bishops Council. The RSS leader Mohan Bhagwat and Ram Madhav said the Archbishop was a highly respected spiritual personality and had given an Indian face to Christian priesthood. "He was in the forefront in Indianising church services," the RSS. Perhaps, this is for the first time that the RSS, which is often known for its ideological difference with the Christian missionaries, has showered praise on a personality associated with the church. The RSS also maintained that the respected Archbishop was a great scholar in Indian culture and a proud proclaimer of his Indian heritage. He worked for the unity of Indian Christian denominations as well as of the Indian religions, the RSS said. Saying that his contribution to the spiritual evolution of the country will always be remembered, the outfit also recalled meeting between its Sarsanghchalak Mr K.S. Sudarshan. (Asian Age 21/1/07)

Bajrang, VHP men on rampage in Kanpur (7)

Lucknow, Jan. 21: Members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal went on a rampage and disrupted a prayer meeting being conducted by Christian missionaries at a private

guesthouse in Kanpur on Sunday afternoon. According to reporters reaching here, the VHP and Bajrang Dal activists raided the Richa Guest House in Chakeri locality on Sunday afternoon and roughed up the organisers. The VHP activists broke furniture and ransacked the auditorium where the prayer meeting was being held. The VHP and Bajrang Dal activists alleged that the programme had been organised to convert Hindus to Christianity under the garb of a prayer meeting. The organiser of the meeting, Mr M Joseph, however denied that there was any move to carry out conversions. "The prayer meeting was open for all and if they (VHP and Bajrang Dal) wanted, they could have attended it to see if any conversions were being carried out," he told reporters. Mrs P. D'Silva, who was attending the prayer meeting along with her sister, said the two dozen-odd . activists "behaved in a frightening manner as they went about hurling abuses at women". (Asian Age 22/1/07)

Conversion of 137 tribals (7)

Bhubaneswar, Jan. 30: As many as 137 Christian tribals were converted to Hinduism at a VHP-sponsored function at Tumparakela village under Kurundia block in Orissa's Sundergarh district on Tuesday. The converts include 70 women. A yagna was arranged and priests chanted shlokas while inducting these tribals into Hinduism. All of them were provided with new clothes and lockets with images of Hindu gods. Prominent VHP functionaries were present on the occasion. They include VHP zonal secretary Achyutanand Kar, state organising secretary, Makadhwa Mohanty and Sundergarh unit president of VHP Mitrabhanu Panda. Asked if the tribals have taken permission of the district administration to embrace Hinduism as required under Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, Mr Kar said, it was not needed. "It is a homecoming for these tribals. Hence the permission from the district administration was not needed," he said. (Asian Age 31/1/07)

Disappointed Christian leaders write to Sonia (7)

New Delhi, March 8: When the Himachal Pradesh Assembly passed the anti-conversion Freedom of Religion Act 2006 last December, the Congress party could not have imagined the adverse reactions it would bring from minority groups, especially Christians, even from outside the state. Bride Groom India USA UK UAE Canada Australia Pakistan Saudi Arabia Kuwait South Africa 18 - 24 25 - 30 31 - 35 36 - 45 46 - 50 50+ Hindu - Assamese - Bengali - Gujarati - Hindi - Kannada - Malayalam - Marathi - Marwari - Oriya - Punjabi - Sindhi - Tamil - Telugu Muslim Christian Sikh Parsi Jain Buddhist Jewish Other No Religion Spiritual They say the law, the first ever to have been passed by a Congress government, goes against the party's commitment to allow Indians freedom to "practise, profess and propagate" their faith. Usually seen at the forefront for defending the party, the groups now say the law amounts to a breach of faith. Several Christian clerics, heads of Christian organisations and even the Vice-Chairman of a State Minorities Commission have written to UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi in the past few weeks in this regard. In a letter dated January 12, Abraham Mathai, Maharashtra Minorities Commission vice-chairman, wrote: "It may be recalled that even in your capacity as the chairperson of the UPA government and president of the Congress party, you had condemned these Bills publicly and also written to the All-India Christian Council about the same in a letter dated 27th July 2006. It was encouraging to know that the Congress party in all these five states under your able leadership had vehemently opposed these Bills and even demonstrated against them." Mathai goes on to express his disappointment saying: "Such a Bill that undermines the very spirit of democracy especially in a Congress-ruled state is an embarrassment to the party, which is seen as the only hope and champion of secularism in this nation. Besides negotiating and contradicting the integrity and the stand of the Congress on this issue, such a trend when allowed to continue will even weaken our resolve in fighting against communal forces and their repressive policies." In a separate letter to Sonia, the president of the National United Christian Forum, Archbishop Vincent M Concessao, writes that this is "the last thing that the citizens, particularly the minorities, expected from the Congress." All those writing to Sonia have cited the other four states (Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan), which had passed similar anti-conversion laws and the Congress party's opposition to those laws. In a strongly-worded paragraph in his letter to Sonia, secretary of All-India Christian Council Sam Paul has requested the Congress president to "constitute an inquiry against the Himachal Pradesh chief minister for anti-party activities and set

the record straight by repealing this anti-human rights law of the Anti-Conversion Bill.” (Indian Express 9/3/07)

Christian Dalits revert to Hinduism, cops on alert (7)

Jagatsinghpur : After a gap of three years, the Kilipala hamlet under Tirtol Block has again hit the headlines following reports that two Dalit Christian families reconverted to Hinduism at a ceremony organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad [VHP] last week. Three years ago, 27 Dalits, including 15 women and 12 men from seven families, had converted to Christianity at the behest of three persons Gouranga Mallick, his brother Prafulla Mallick and pastor Subash Samal of Kilipala near Kanimul village. The incident had created a clamour across India. The converts fled the village and took shelter in a Bhubaneswar church and on February 10, 2004 a group of local villagers assaulted the converts and tonsured eight women who had embraced Christianity. Acting on pressure from various quarters mainly Christian missionaries police registered two cases one against the unruly villagers and against pastor Subash Samal who had influenced them. Later police picked up six persons for violating Orissa Freedom of Religions Act 1967 [OFRA] and for the first time in the state the act was enforced against the violators at Kilipal conversion incidents in 2004, later police arrested Sita Kandi and her associate Chakradhar Bhoi who performed tonsuring of the women in 2005. After living months away from village the alleged seven converts families had returned home on August 9, 2004 and elaborate police arrangements were made to provide security to converts in the village against the antagonised Hindu villagers. The advent of the Hindu fundamentalist organisations and their continuing efforts pushed some converts to return back to Hindu fold and checked the progress of conversion in the areas and Dharma Jagarana Samiti had taken steps to reorganise the converts families into Hindu fold and prevented conversion activities at village. The alleged converts had accused the Hindu fundamentalists and their organisation including villagers that they were beaten up and tonsured the baptised women and forced them revert to Hinduism organising purification ceremony at village, on reverse locals had complained to police for action against the Christian missionaries who were illegally converting innocent scheduled caste people promising lucrative financial benefits. Police had registered cases and normalcy returned back to village as no conversion or re-conversion was reported so far. Meanwhile, officials report said one Gouranga Das and five persons embracing Christianity had moved to legalise their conversions under OFRA when the district collector brought them to book and prosecuted them for violating section 4,5,6 of OFRA 1967. Surprisingly two years after VHP organised Gita Yajna to revert the Christians in Kanimul last week where two converts Nrusingh Mallick and Shyam Sundar Mallick families reconverted to Hinduism, VHP central Marga Darsaka Laxamanananda Saraswati and local VHP leaders had organised the purification ceremony and convinced them to return to Hinduism. While reports say after the re-conversions incident Kilipala the Hindu fundamentalists organisation are on bid to organise another re-conversion ceremony. police are on a high alert at village to prevent any incident, villagers still socially ostracised the converted Christian at village. (Pioneer 28/3/07)

568 revert in Balangir (7)

Bhubaneswar : As many as 568 people, 358 men and 210 women, from 101 families on Sunday reconverted to Hinduism in Balangir and Bargarh district, RSS sources here said. The re-conversion programme was held at the Arya Seva Mandir at Balangir early morning, with the people to be reconverted performing Hindu rituals and offering prayers at a yagna before being recognised as Hindu again. These people had earlier converted to Christianity due to poverty and illiteracy and are residents of three blocks of Balangir district, Patnagarh, Agalpur and Loisinga and one block of Bargarh district, Gaisilat. Pandit Satyabrat Sashtri and Swami Anant Charan Das of Arya Seva Mandir conducted the reconversion ceremony. (Pioneer 2/4/07)

VHP-backed outfit attacks Christians (7)

BHOPAL: Members of the Dharma Sena, a Vishwa Hindu Parishad-backed outfit, attacked many Christians, including girls and women, who were participating in a Palm Sunday function in Jabalpur's Cantonment area. The police have registered a case of rioting and damage to property under Sections 147, 148, 323, 427 and 506 of the Indian Penal Code against the Dharma Sena

activists. The Dharma Sena is a band of about two-dozen local activists drawing strength from the VHP. It spearheads an anti-conversion campaign in Jabalpur. In Sunday's incident near the Hanuman Mandir on a hillock at Patababa, the Dharma Sena activists were outnumbered and two of them were also injured. While those from the Christian community claimed that they had been going to the Patababa hill for the past several years, the Dharma Sena activists said they were there for preparations in connection with Monday's Hanuman Jayanthi. When contacted, Collector Sanjay Dubey said police investigations were under way. (The Hindu 3/4/07)

Rajasthan Anti-Conversion Bill: Hindu outfits seek Guv's removal (7)

Jaipur : Several Hindu organisations, lead by Vishwa Hindu Parishad, have threatened to launch a movement for the removal Rajasthan Governor Pratibha Patil if she further delays her approval for the Anti-Religious Conversion Bill, pending for her decision for over a year. State head of the Parishad Jugal Kishore told mediapersons that non-clearance of the Bill was encouraging Christian missionaries and some fundamental Muslim elements to indulge in religious conversions by promising incentives or threats. He sighted two incidents - one at Sri Ganganagar and another in Alwar district -where these elements were recently arrested for indulging in religious conversions. At Sri Ganganagar, police had arrested two Christian missionaries, who had landed there to convert some poor people into Christianity. In Alwar, some Muslims virtually forced a backward class family of eight to adopt Islam if they wanted to live in the village. The timely intervention of the police had saved the family. Kishore said the Governor was withholding her approval to Bill without any valid reasons. If she further delays her approval, the Hindu organisations have no option but to launch a Statewide agitation for her removal from the post. The State Assembly, about a year back had passed the Bill, which was sent to the Governor for her approval but she sought certain clarifications from the Government. The Vasundhara Raje Cabinet, after going through the letter of the Governor, maintained that there was nothing wrong in the Bill and she should give her approval to the Bill at the earliest. Patil took the stand that right to make such a law is lies with the Centre and State Government had no jurisdiction to enact such law. But the Government maintained that similar bills were passed by Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and some other State Governments and Governors of those States had given their approval. (Pioneer 18/4/07)

'92 nun 'rape': Lab report to be probed (7)

KOCHI, April 18: A case related to the mysterious death of a nun in 1992 received a new twist today with a Thiruvananthapuram court finding prima facie indications that the report of the pathological examination done to ascertain rape had been tampered with. The Chief Judicial Magistrate's court today ordered a detailed forensic examination of the government chemical examination laboratory's original reports relating to vaginal smear tests on the body. The court also directed the police to seize the reports. This court order comes after Jomon Puthenpurackal, a rights activist, moved the court for reopening the case following newspaper reports that the lab report had been been crudely corrected with whitener and over-written in a different handwriting to contradict the original findings indicating rape before death. Sister Abhaya's body was found in the well of her hostel at the Pius 10th Convent in Kottayam. Residents in the hostel had told the police that she was last seen before dawn walking towards the kitchen. The case has been through many twists and turns in the past 15 years with the local police, the state crime branch and the CBI taking turns to investigate it. There was a public uproar after Kerala Police wrote off the case as a "suicide", while media reports hinted at efforts by certain influential sections to sabotage the probe. The police crime branch probe too did not fare any better, and the case eventually went to the CBI. In 1996, the CBI's Chennai unit concluded that it was indeed a case of homicide. It asked for permission to close the case since no further progress could be made. The Ernakulam Chief Judicial Magistrate slammed the CBI report and directed the agency to do a fresh probe. The CBI, however, repeated the plea, and the court again rejected its report and asked it to probe again. Soon after in 2003, CBI Deputy Superintendent Varghese P Thomas, who headed the probe team, resigned in the middle of the probe, ten years before his retirement. The officer accused CBI Superintendent of Police V Thyagarajan of pressuring him to botch up investigations into this case and take it no further. Thomas had gone on record to say that the CBI investigation into this case could get nowhere because it was being sabotaged. He had

accused a certain section from Kerala was using their clout with the then Prime Minister's Office to get the then CBI director fall in line. After Thomas quit, the case was handed over to the CBI's New Delhi unit. The leakage of the original and allegedly tampered chemical analysis report is now expected to give the CBI something to work on, though lab officials maintain that it was a normal practice to rewrite and correct reports when required. Home department sources confirm that neither the local police nor the CBI had accessed the original lab report kept in the laboratory's custody. Home Minister Koderi Balakrishnan today, however, ruled out a parallel probe by the state police in the light of the new development. (Indian Express 19/4/07)

Missionary beaten up for 'preaching' Christianity (7)

JAIPUR: A missionary was on Sunday severely assaulted here for allegedly preaching Christianity. Walter Masih said it was an act by those who are against Christianity. "I am unaware whether they were from Hindu groups. I am serving the people and I want an unbiased probe into the matter," he told over the phone. Masih claimed he was manhandled by over 20 people at his rented house in Nandpuri and received multiple injuries. Circle Officer of Sodala, Rakesh Puri, said Masih was teaching Christianity and a case has been registered against 20 people for alleging beating him. (Times of India 29/4/07)

Five youth held for attack on pastor (7)

Jaipur : In swift action, police have arrested five youth on Monday in connections with the attack on a Christian priest in the State capital. Though, police were yet to establish their connection with any Hindu outfit, the leaders of Christian community says they belong to Bajrang Dal. The police were also trying to find out the role of the private TV channel which had shown the attack live. Senior leaders of Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal said that their organisations had nothing to do with the attack. The leaders of Christian community, along with some Congress leaders, on Tuesday met Governor Pratibha Patil and submitted a memorandum to her. Of late the minority Christians in the State are feeling insecure, the memorandum said. Later talking to mediapersons they said that though the faces of all the youths involved in the attack could be seen, the police were yet to arrest many of the real culprits. On Sunday, over a dozen youth went to the house of Walter Masih, a pastor and attacked him with sticks and iron rods. They were shouting slogans that the priest was engaged in religious conversions. At the time of attack, a prayer was in progress in the house with about a dozen people participating in it. His wife Joys admits that Walter visits Kachi Bastis on week days to spread the message of Christ among the poor people and on Sunday they come to his house for prayers. (Pioneer 30/4/07)

Attack on preacher: panel dismayed (7)

JAIPUR: A national-level fact-finding team of human rights organisations and Christian bodies, which visited the State capital to probe last week's attack on the preacher, Walter Massey, on Thursday expressed its fears over a "Gujarat-like situation" developing in the Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled Rajasthan in the near future. The BJP front organisations, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal, were at present leading a hate campaign against Christians in the whole of Udaipur division, adjoining Gujarat, and in parts of Ajmer and Jaipur, with the tacit support of the administration, it said. "The pattern of violence indicates a design. The attacks on Christians are never in the form of communal clashes as they are targeted against a micro minority in the State. There is enough evidence available in many places for the police to take suo motu action against the VHP, Bajrang Dal and Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad but no action is taken. Some of the Indian States are now seemingly ruled under a separate set of law," John Dayal, member, National Integration Council and the All India Christian Council, told journalists. The fact-finding team, including Teesta Setelvad, social activist, Abraham Mathai, vice-president, Minorities Commission, Maharashtra, and Sister Mary Scaria, Supreme Court lawyer, besides Kavita Srivastava, general secretary of the Rajasthan PUCL, Sawai Singh of the Sadbhavana Manch and Engineer Mohammed Saleem of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, met the victim's family and attended the court proceedings. (The Hindu 4/5/07)

Christian prayer centre to move court (7)

ANGAMALY (KERALA): The controversial Christian prayer centre near Trissur district on Friday said that it would approach the Kerala High Court to quash the complaint of irregularities filed by a court-appointed investigation team. The complaint has been filed by the special investigation team (SIT) led by Inspector General of Police Vincent M. Paul who was asked to conduct a detailed probe into all the activities by the high court after it received complaints of criminal activities including unnatural deaths taking place in the Muringur Divine Retreat Centre. According to the SIT, there were 974 deaths of inmates in the last few years and the centre authorities were running a de-addiction centre without mandatory clearances. Speaking to reporters here, Fr George Pannackal, the director of the centre, said they would approach the court. "Not a single family member of the 974 people who died here has raised any doubt," defended Pannackal. Already the Kerala unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party has demanded immediate closure of the centre and have termed that this centre is the Noida of Kerala. It was on Monday that the special investigating team had filed a formal complaint against the centre on the basis of the findings of a court-directed probe into allegations of criminal activities there, including unnatural deaths. They have indicted Pannackal and 10 other members of the staff, including nuns as accused. The centre, billed as Asia's biggest of its kind, was subjected to a surprise inspection by a joint team of police and state health department officials in September last year. The inspection detected irregularities in the manner in which the centre was treating a large number of patients suffering from depression and alcoholism. (Times of India 6/5/07)

Another Christian family threatened (7)

JAIPUR: Another Christian family in the Rajasthan capital received threats from suspected radical groups on Sunday prompting the police to accord them security. The likeness of the case to the attack on preacher Walter Massey in the Nandpuri locality here the previous Sunday is worrying human rights activists and the police alike. After an assurance from the authorities, the family of Than Singh John, originally hailing from Dholpur district of Rajasthan, went back to its rented accommodation in Paldi Meena settlements on Jaipur-Agra Road on the outskirts of the City. A case under Section 505 Indian Penal Code was registered in the Kanota police station, falling in Jaipur (Rural) district. Mr. John, a pastor with the Believers Church of India, his wife Ruth and two children had virtually fled from their modest house in Paldi Meena, a resettlement colony of lower income group, after two masked youth, who came on a motorcycle in the morning, asked them to leave the place. Mr. John was making preparations for the Sunday morning prayer then. As Ruth noticed a group of people holding sticks standing at a distance, the family, which had heard of the Nandpuri attack, fled. Once reaching the city, 15 km away, the family approached social activist groups, which contacted the police, seeking registration of a case and police protection to the fugitives. Mr. John recalled a similar situation in February 2006 when four persons had threatened him outside his house. He had tried to file a case with Kanota police station then — which the activists found, never got registered. "We decided that the family would go back to their residence. Now it is for the authorities to protect them," Kavita Srivastava, general secretary of Rajasthan People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), said. "The developments are worrisome as the groups are choosing Sundays, the day of worship for Christians, for attack," she noted. (The Hindu 8/5/07)

11 held for attack on two pastors (7)

MUMBAI: Eleven persons were arrested and released on bail on Wednesday in connection with the assault on two pastors at Ichalkaranji in Kolhapur. The arrests followed after a delegation of the State Minorities Commission met home minister R R Patil. The delegation led by Commission vice-chairperson Abraham Mathai demanded that the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime be applied on those who assaulted the pastors. The pastors, Ajit Billawi and Ramesh Kagargole, were beaten up by activists of the Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad on Monday for allegedly converting Hindus to Christians. They were later dragged to the local police station. Patil had ordered a high-level probe into the assault. "The attack which was orchestrated in the presence of the electronic media was pre-planned and on the lines of that enacted in Jaipur last week," said Mathai. He said the Bajrang Dal and VHP were publicising their assaults through TV channels. Mathai said the attacks are increasing as the law-breakers know they can get away with it. "In the Ichalkaranji case it is sad the police booked the victims of the attack based on

charges made by the attackers," said Mathai. During his meeting with Patil he called for Christians to be brought under the ambit of the Prevention of Atrocities Act. (Times of India 10/5/07)

Activists get bail, victimised priests held (7)

ICHALKARANJI, MAY 9: This vibrant textile town of three lakh people in south Maharashtra is oblivious to the events of the past two days, beginning Monday evening, when two Christian priests were beaten up by local activists of Hindu outfits. The activists accused the priests of converting six Hindus from the Shahpur locality. But in the Gandhi statue area, a stone's throw away from the Gaobaug police station, tension is palpable. Today, the Gaobaug police arrested 14 activists of various Hindu outfits for their alleged involvement in the incident. But all were released on bail later in the evening. Those arrested included VHP District Unit Secretary Jawahar Chhabda, Joint Secretary Prakash Pote, and city unit chief Shivprasad Vyas. Yesterday, Pastors Ajit Belavi, 35, and Ramesh Korapgol, 34, both residents of Chikodi in Karnataka, along with Rama Shinde, a resident of Shahpur, were remanded in police custody till May 11. They were arrested on the basis of an FIR filed by Chandrakant Chavan in Shahpur, where the priests were regular visitors over the past six months. Charan Singh filed by Chavan was on grounds of being cheated under Sec 420 and 295 A of IPC. The priests are employees of Chennai-based Friends Missionary Prayer Band. Kolhapur-based Maharashtra Shepherd Council's President Pastor Dilip Kamble said the police had been unfair in locking up the victims while letting their attackers go scot-free. "We are contacting the National Minorities Commission for justice," he said. While it was on the basis of the Council's protest that the 14 activists were arrested, what actually got the police machinery moving was state Home Minister R R Patil's public denouncement of the incident. Kamble said the two priests were regularly visiting Shahpur and holding prayer meetings at the residence of Rama Shinde. "Chavan, his family and relatives had been regulars at the gathering for the past six months. Clearly, he filed the FIR under pressure from the RSS-VHP," said Pastor Sanjay Renke, Vice-President of the Maharashtra Shepherd Council. "In 1997 and 2006, similar incidents of Christians getting beaten up and arrested had occurred," said Pastor Kamble. The RSS had another take on the incident. "The electronic media is to be blamed for blowing up what was a local issue. Besides, Patil's statement aimed at minority appeasement led to a lot of pressure on the police to arrest our activists," said the group's western Maharashtra convenor Bhagatram Chhabda. When asked how the electronic media happened to be present when the two priests were beaten up, Chhabda said, "We were celebrating the centenary of 'Vandemataram' near the Gandhi statue on Monday when we heard of the conversions in Shahpur. A cameraman of local channel called B-News followed us there and shot the incident. We do not know how the same footage reached NDTV, CNN-IBN, Sahara Samay, Star News, Aajtak, Zee News and ETV by 9 pm the same day". (Indian Express 11/5/07)

NCM condemns attack on two Christian priests (7)

New Delhi, May 10: The National Commission for Minorities on Thursday strongly condemned the attack on two Christian priests in Maharashtra's Kolhapur district, saying such incidents strike at the "very roots" of the freedom enshrined in the Constitution. "A clear and discernible trend that has emerged in the recent past is the repeated attacks by hired goons on Christian preachers and religious persons," the NCM said in a statement. "From well-documented attacks by hired goons in masks in Jaipur to public humiliation and beatings of preachers in Ichalkaranji, the pattern seems to be the same," it said. "The commission condemns these attacks in the strongest possible terms. If civil society wishes to live by the values of a multi-cultural, pluralistic society which is sensitive to the aspirations and beliefs of all its citizens, it must now raise its voice against these outrageous attacks," it said. The commission also asked the state governments concerned to investigate these atrocities and take the sternest action possible against the culprits. Two priests from Ichalkaranji in the district were severely beaten up allegedly by Bajrang Dal and VHP activists on May 8 and later paraded through the streets. The NCM said that it was deeply perturbed by the development which, it believes, strikes at the very root of the freedom enshrined in the Constitution. Religious tolerance and respect for the beliefs of all sections of society has been the hallmark of the Indian ethos. (Asian Age 11/5/07)

Christian finds Shivling, converts (7)

Bhubaneswar, May 10: A 66-year-old Christian courted Hinduism after he discovered a "Shivling" at his farm at Jhumur village in Sundergarh district in Orissa. And soon after he did that John Minz decided to donate his land for construction of a Shiva temple. He has, however not forced his family to convert. Mr Minz's family members also didn't oppose his decision either. According to Mr Minz, in his dream, he saw a "light coming from above and reaching my farmland, and that too for three successive nights. Since I saw the same dream for three successive nights, I went to the farmland and found a 10-inch Shivling," he said. (Asian Age 11/5/07)

Anti-conversion Act: NCM seeks data from states on convictions (7)

The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) has expressed strong reservations about the attack on two Christian priests in Kolhapur, in the Congress-NCP ruled Maharashtra. Chairman of the NCM Hamid Ansari said, "The recurrence of these incidents is a cause for serious concern, especially when the matter was taken to the police. Instead of arresting the hooligans, they arrested the priests, giving the impression that there is no law of the land operating in these matters." In addition, the NCM has written to all such states that enacted anti-conversion laws in the recent past banning "fraudulent conversions", asking them to provide concrete statistics on how many convictions have taken place under this Act so far. The letter to the Home Secretaries of the states was written in November last year. The states include Gujarat, Rajasthan, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Arunachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (the law in Tamil Nadu was repealed after the national elections in 2004). Arunachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have written back saying they have registered no such "forcible conversion" cases and there have been no convictions since the laws were enacted. Rajasthan and Orissa have written back saying that they are in the process of collecting information. Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh are yet to respond to the NCM. It is learnt that the NCM is also collecting statistics through its own channels, including Christian groups, on the veracity of claims of "fraudulent conversions" that have inspired the state laws. Sources in the NCM say there is no real need for these laws as several clauses already exist in the Indian Penal Code equipped to deal with charges of conversions through "force or allurement". Critics of these laws in the NCM say enacting them only makes certain groups vulnerable to suspicion or being judged as suspect, even without any evidence. Till recently, it was a BJP government in a state or one supported by it that enacted such laws. But on December 29 last year, the Congress recorded its first in Himachal Pradesh. The Act now in place prescribes a notice period of 30 days to the district magistrate in case someone wishes to convert, and the district authorities can conduct any inquiry in that time as they deem fit. The NCM issued a statement this week condemning the enactment of anti-conversion laws. The NCM says "the provision of notice and inquiry, and that too selectively, is tantamount to a gross interference with individual liberties of citizens and would allow state functionaries to interfere in matter of personal life and religious beliefs. More seriously, it would impinge on the freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion guaranteed by Article 25 of the Constitution". (Indian Express 11/5/07)

HC notices to Gujarat, officials (7)

AHMEDABAD: : The Gujarat High Court on Wednesday issued notices to the state Government and officials in connection with the registration of a criminal offence against the Anand-based Alpha Bible College on the basis of a non-existent law. The notices issued by Justice Anant S Dave are returnable by May 25. Among those to whom the notices were issued include Home Secretary, Law Secretary, DGP, SP (Anand district), and senior sub-inspector of Anand police station. The notices were issued on a petition filed jointly by Samson Christian of the All India Christian Council and director of Alpha Charitable Trust Ullganathan Govind Swamy. The petitioners demanded disciplinary action against senior sub-inspector of Anand Town Police Station M D Lathiya. The petitioners stated that the case registered was "bogus". (Indian Express 24/5/07)

Dalit Christians for caste-based quota (7)

New Delhi, June 17: Dalit Christians are demanding caste-based and not religion-based reservations, according to All-India United Christians Movement for Equal Rights president Jose Daniel. Brother Jose Daniel told this correspondent that the presidential order called the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950 came into effect on August 10, 1950, made it mandatory that dalits belonging to only one particular religion are eligible for quota. Now the Christians demand is that quota should cover dalits belonging to all religious backgrounds. It is for this reason that the dalit Christians have raised the demand for an amendment to it, in order to cover dalits of all religious backgrounds. . Former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao had brought forward the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Orders (Amendment Bill, 1996, which was introduced in Parliament on March 12, 1996. The bill aimed at extending the quota benefit to dalits following the Christian faith and to bring them at par with those following the Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist faiths. The bill lapsed as the term of Parliament had ended. Brother Jose Daniel demanded that the process set in motion by the previous Congress government of P.V. Narasimha Rao must be completed by the present Congress-led UPA government at the Centre. That was the only way to end the discrimination against the dalit Christians. In support of the demand, Brother Jose Daniel pointed out that the Prime Minister's High-Level National Commission for religious and linguistic minorities headed by Justice Ranganath Mishra had cleared the air of all confusion. (Asian Age 18/6/07)

Four men in missionary institution attacked (7)

Satna (Madhya Pradesh): Masked assailants allegedly beat up and injured four persons at a Christian missionary institution here, police said on Thursday. Around 14 masked men arrived at Karunalaya, an institution offering services to the poor, on five motorcycles on Wednesday evening and attacked four persons with sticks, they said. Senior police officers went to the scene and rushed the injured to a hospital. A case has been registered against the unidentified assailants and attempts were on to trace them, police said. However, the All India Catholic Union's state president Rajiv Singh has accused saffron groups of committing the crime and demanded enhanced security for missionary institutions. City Bajrang Dal convenor Atul Sengar, on the other hand, denied the charges and described the incident as unfortunate. He also sought the immediate arrest of the attackers. - PTI (The Hindu 20/7/07)

Church to oppose minority redefinition (7)

Shillong, July 20: The Presbyterian Church of India (PCI) has decided to organise an All India Resistance Movement to oppose tabling of Bill for the proposed 103rd amendment of the Constitution in Parliament. The PCI decided this after a two-day discussion on the amendment that seeks to categorise minority groups in the country on state-wise parameter instead of the present nationwide practice. The PCI has also given a clarion call to parliamentarians from minority communities to unite and oppose the Centre's proposal. It has also sent a memorandum to Union Minister of Law requesting him to abort the proposal of placing the bill. PCI convener P B M Basaiamoit said, "In a population of 1 billion in India, Christians constitute only 2.8 per cent." He said Christians might be in majority in states like Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland with a significance presence in Manipur and Kerala but nationwide they were in minority. He said there is a provision in Article 32 of the Constitution to protect the minority groups, which the present proposal to bring about the 103rd amendment would negate. The PCI feels if such an amendment that seeks to categorise minority on state-wise basis becomes a reality, it will affect the aspirations and hopes of the religious minority communities, including Christian, who forms a microscopic minority in the country. According to PCI members, "If such a move becomes law, it will affect the minority status and minority privileges of minority institutions." (Indian Express 21/7/07)

Catholic youth 'sena' in Kerala (7)

Thiruvananthapuram, July 23: Catholic youth of Irinjalakkuda diocese have formed a "protection sena" after bishops issued pastoral letters asking the laity to guard church-supported institutions from CPI(M) "hegemony." Increasing the pitch of confrontation with the Left Democratic Front government, hundreds of youth belonging to the Kerala Catholic Youth Movement held a rally and torchlight procession announcing the formation of the sena. "We are not planning to undertake

any violent struggle against the government," said an activist of the newly formed sena. "We will follow peaceful and Gandhian ways." Leaders of Kerala's Syro Malabar Church and the Latin Catholic Church had issued pastoral letters against the LDF government in the last two weeks accusing it of trying to trample constitutional rights of minorities. The crux of the issue is the bitter dispute over fee structure of self-governing colleges run by the church. While the government wants such colleges to show more "social commitment" by reducing the fee, the managements have chosen to see it as an infringement on their rights. (Asian Age 24/7/07)

Church to go ahead with agitation plan (7)

KOTTAYAM: Even as the State Government launched low-key efforts to assuage the sentiments of a combative Catholic Church hierarchy, a conclave of priests called by the Archdiocese of Changanassery, Syro-Malabar Church, on Tuesday decided to move forward with the formation of 'vigilance teams' and the protest march scheduled on August 12. Speaking to mediapersons, Archbishop Mar Joseph Powathil and Mar Joseph Perumthottam said they had not decided to revive the talks. In fact, they are interested in the talks only if it is effective. "Their words and deeds do not match," said Mar Powathil. The high priests wanted the Government to rescind the professional colleges Act the provisions of which had been struck down by Courts and to desist from the move to involve local bodies in the administration of schools. A resolution adopted by the meeting exhorted the flock to join hands against what it termed the move on the part of the Government to politicise the education sector and to infringe upon minority rights and said the Church would move ahead with its awareness campaigns and agitations. According to them, the anti-minority actions include the revision of curriculum, suspension of appointments to 16 colleges and higher secondary schools, upsetting of social justice in the admissions to self-financing colleges and revision of the Kerala Education Rules. The day began with a visit of Kerala Congress(J) chairman P.J. Joseph and Public Works Minister T.U. Kuruvilla to the Archbishop's House at Changanassery, where they met Mar Perumthottam and Mar Powathil. Speaking to The Hindu, sources close to the Church hierarchy said "nothing substantial took place" during the talks. The Archbishop told them that the public statements and the actions of the Government did not match. "The emissaries had nothing to offer," the sources said. Mr. Joseph, when contacted, said Tuesday's visit was a preliminary effort so that effective talks could be initiated soon. "I expect talks could be revived soon," he said. In Thiruvananthapuram, Law Minister M. Vijayakumar had met Archbishop Susaipakiam on Monday evening. (The Hindu 25/7/07)

Conversion Bill boomerangs on Pratibha (7)

Jaipur : Just a day before her resignation from the post of Governor of Rajasthan, Pratibha Patil, had sent the controversial Anti-Conversion Bill to the then President APJ Abdul Kalam stating that only the President was competent to approve such a Bill. Now the same file, which she had been avoiding for more than a year, would be before her for approval. In March last year, the State Assembly had passed the Freedom of Religion Bill, which sought a ban on conversions by force or allurement, and sent it to Patil for her assent. But, instead of signing on the dotted line, she had sent it back to the Government stating that, since the subject of the Bill came under the jurisdiction of the Centre, only the President was competent to decide it. She had advised the Government to send the Bill directly to the President. But the Cabinet, after discussing the Governor's response, concluded that the subject was very well under the purview of the State, and the Assembly was competent to pass such a Bill. Also, many States have enacted similar laws and the Governor of these respective States had given their assent to them. The Government had sent back the Bill to Patil with the hope that she would give her nod for the second time. Instead, she had been sitting on the Bill for more than a year and a day before her resignation, she had sent the Bill to the President. It would be interesting to see what stand she would take now on it as the President of the country. (Pioneer 27/7/07)

Conversion Bill rejected by Gujarat governor (7)

Ahmedabad, July 31: In a move that is likely to influence voting patterns in the Assembly elections due by the end of the year, Gujarat governor Naval Kishore Sharma on Tuesday returned the controversial amended religious conversion bill to the state legislature, saying that it would violate the right to religious freedom. Jains, Buddhists and Muslims had campaigned

vociferously against the measure, saying that it would curb their right of religious identity. The Gujarat Freedom of Religion (Amendment) Bill, 2006 sought to replace the definition of a convert with a new one: under which a person renouncing one denomination and adopting another denomination of the same religion was to be excluded from the meaning of the word "convert". Returning the bill, the governor said: "What made it more objectionable were the three explanations stipulating that the Jains and Buddhists shall be construed as denominations of the Hindu religion, Shias and Sunnis of the Muslim religion and Catholics and Protestants of the Christian religion." The governor said that he was returning the bill to the Assembly so that "it is reconsidered for suitable amendments, in order to bring its contents in conformity with the Constitution," an official Raj Bhavan statement said. Jains and Buddhists in the state strongly objected to being classified as Hindu "denominations", and had made strong representations to the Gujarat government. The Modi government is wary of hurting the religious sentiments of the cash-rich Jains, and the significant population of Buddhists in the state, with just months to go before the election. The Congress expressed satisfaction at the governor's decision to return the bill to the House. The bill had earlier been passed by a majority in the Assembly, with the Congress abstaining from voting. "We had been protesting against the bill. Even the Modi government was trying to get it back for amendment with his Man Friday and Jain minister Amit Shah keen that Jains are not offended in an election year," Congress leader Arjun Modhvadia said. The bill proposed to regulate widespread conversions, and the BJP government's main targets were Christians, who they claimed were converting tribals, and Muslim youth, who they alleged were luring Hindu girls, "trapping" them into marriage and then converting them. Jains in Gujarat had vociferously protested against the bill. The All-India Digambar Jain Mahasabha, led by Mr N.K. Jain, had said: "Any government, as per their convenience and agenda, cannot afford to curb our right of religious identity." Shrenik Shah, president of the All-India Shwetambar Murtipujak Jain Sangh, who had been in the forefront of the protest, had said that Jainism was a distinct religion. "We are not primarily concerned with the conversion aspect of the bill. But we have asserted our view that Jainism is a distinct religion," said Mr Shah. In 2005, the Supreme Court had declined to issue a writ of mandamus to grant Jains the status of a religious minority throughout India. However, the court left it to individual states to decide on the minority status of the Jain religion. During a recent judgment, however, the Supreme Court had observed that "the Jain religion is indisputably not a part of the Hindu religion." (Asian Age 1/8/07)

Modi decides to reactivate anti-conversion law (7)

GANDHINAGAR, AUGUST 1: Months ahead of the Assembly elections and a day after Gujarat Governor Nawal Kishore Sharma returned a Bill to amend the Freedom of Religion Act, the Narendra Modi Government has decided to reactivate the dormant anti-conversion law enacted by the Assembly in 2003. The decision was taken at a Cabinet meeting on Wednesday. A statement issued by Ministers I K Jadeja and Saurabh Patel, the government spokespersons, stated that the administration was of the view that without affecting freedom of religion as enshrined in the Constitution, it was necessary to stop all religious conversions through inducements or threats in larger national interest. The statement added: "The Modi Government believes that the state has been specifically targeted by some foreign powers for religious conversions, as they convert the innocent and the poor using inducements and threats. Strong nationalistic political will is needed to counter such forces, but unfortunately the opposition Congress does not believe in preserving national identity. The Cabinet lauds the decision to bring in the original anti-conversion law of this Government, terming it in national and societal interest." Responding to the Governor's decision to return the amendment Bill, the Government said that it was brought with the intention of preventing divisions within those religions which have their origin in the country. "The issues raised by the Governor would be studied exhaustively, and the Government would determine its next step in due time following constitutional guidance from experts," the note stated. The anti-conversion law was enacted in 2003 by the Modi Government immediately after it came to power, but it failed to implement it as proper rules and procedures were not stipulated. "We were only waiting for some clarifications, of which the amendment Bill was a part. Now we will go ahead," said a Home Department official. Provisions of the law : • Bans conversion from one religion to another by force, allurement or fraudulent means • Provides for punishment of up to 3 years, and a fine of up to Rs 50,000. In case the convert is a minor, a

woman or a person belonging to SC/ST, the imprisonment is up to 4 years and the fine is of Rs 1 lakh • Prior permission needed from the District Magistrate in a prescribed form for carrying out or even taking part in any religious conversion ceremony • The convert too has to separately inform the District Magistrate. Failure to do so can attract both imprisonment of up to one year, a fine of Rs 1,000 or both • Prior permission from DM/SDM needed for prosecution of offences under the Act • Offence under the Act has to be investigated by an officer not below the rank of inspector (Indian Express 2/8/07)

Chhattisgarh conversion Bill awaits Guv's assent (7)

Raipur : The Chhattisgarh Religious Freedom (Amendment) Bill that provides strict penalties against conversion hangs in the balance for almost a year, is awaiting the Governor's assent. The Bill was passed by the State Assembly on August 3, 2006. However, it continues to be with the Governor. Sources said he could suggest amendments or return the Bill but the Government has not received anything from Raj Bhavan so far. "We are still awaiting a response from the Governor," the source told The Pioneer. After its passage in Assembly the Government sent it to the then Governor KM Seth for approval. But he did not put his seal of approval as he was not satisfied with some of the provisions in the Bill. His objection was mainly on the provision that if anyone returned to his original religion it would not amount to conversion. The Governor had sought clarification on this and reportedly suggested some amendments to the Bill. In the meantime, a new Governor was appointed. "I will personally meet the Governor in a few days to discuss the issue," Home Minister Ram Vihar Netam told The Pioneer. He denied that the State Government had received any objection on the Bill from the Governor's house. The Minister said he would discuss the issue with the new Governor ESL Narshimhan, who was appointed here in January this year. The State Government, notably, amended the existing law and increased imprisonment from one year to three years and from two years to four years for a forced conversion depending on the situation. Similarly, financial penalty was also raised. Those who wished to convert on his own had to seek the district Collector's permission a month prior to conversion. And if someone converted without permission there was a provision for three years imprisonment. The amendment was made apparently in view of alleged forced conversion in the State with more than 1,000 people reported to have converted in the past six years. (Pioneer 21/8/07)

Church will not give up rights: Archbishop (7)

KANNUR: Thalassery Archbishop George Valiyamattom has said that the Catholic Church will not surrender its rights and will strongly resist any move to encroach on the rights of minority communities. Inaugurating the minority education rights protection campaign organised by the Thalassery Archdiocese here on Thursday, Archbishop Valiyamattom said that political parties were encouraging commercialisation of education by creating problems in the State, thereby forcing students to join institutions in neighbouring States. He said that the Government was not sincere in its offer of consensus when it was filing appeals against court judgements regarding admissions to professional colleges run by minority communities. The Archbishop said that the Catholic Church would not allow panchayats to control schools. Vicar-General of the Archdiocese Mathew M. Chalil said that 14,534 educational institutions were being run by the Catholic Church in the country. Of these, 60 per cent institutions were in rural areas. It was announced at the function that minority education protection committees would be constituted in all parishes under the Archdiocese. (The Hindu 3/8/07)

Kerala Church prepares resistance move (7)

KOCHI, AUGUST 15: Four days after CPI(M) General Secretary Prakash Karat called on Kerala church heads to sort out "misunderstandings" about the Left, a majority of Kerala dioceses are moving to set up rights protection groups against the CPI(M)-led Government "in every diocese and district" to protect their rights and prevent the comrades from doing "the old Bengal-model infiltration of church bodies". Representatives of the state's major church groups met in Thrissur for a 'liberation task meet', which the Kerala Catholic Youth Movement organised on Independence day, to adopt a formal document aiming to structure and consolidate Church resistance to "Left transgressions on constitutionally provided minority rights". Its movers say this

would be a purely peaceful initiative, aiming primarily at a strong consolidation of the followers at the grassroots level. After his meeting with church heads last Friday, Karat had claimed there were only some misunderstandings marring Left-Church equations, claiming the Left had always championed minority rights, even as it is concerned about social equity too. That, clearly, has not worked. When things began souring between the Church and the comrades over the Left's education policy hitting Church-backed self financing institutions, CPI(M) State Secretary Pinarayi Vijayan had blamed it on the Church being misled, and ordered it to withdraw the first few pastoral missives read out to the laity against the "Left threat". But that could only fetch the Left a lot more angry pastoral letters, protest meetings and increasingly more church bodies coming openly into opposition. Pinarayi, incidentally, had also attempted to remind the bishops how Fidel Castro and Pope John Paul II could famously hit it off well, and how that could be made to happen here too. But Karat, obviously, could play no Castro. "We have no more options but to defend ourselves. We can, and we will. We no longer expect the Left to stop trampling on our minority rights anyway," the head of a prominent Kerala diocese, not wishing to be named, told The Indian Express. He claimed all major dioceses have endorsed the call including those of the Catholic Church, the Syrian Orthodox factions and the Marthoma Church, which together account for the majority of the state's 20 per cent Christian population. "There's no way we can take the Left on its word anymore, not even Chief Minister V S Achuthanandan. He invited us for talks recently, but in essence, the bottom line of his letter was that we should be ready to go to the talks willing to forgo the very constitutionally guaranteed rights that we are fighting the Government for," Mar Andrews Thazhathu, Archbishop of Thrissur, told The Indian Express. He reeled out some specifics: "The Left Government says it has no plans to let local bodies meddle with schools. But every other day, the district education officials are instructed on phone, with nothing to show on record, to make school principals submit to the panchayat representatives, and they can't help it. Our people have filed no less than 65 cases in just the last year against arbitrary Government harassment in educational institutions, and lost every one of them—naturally, because each time a case is filed, the Government would simply issue a fresh order overturning the previous one in question, and we have to file a fresh case." (Indian Express 16/8/07)

UP pastor,wife face attack by VHP men (7)

Lucknow, Sept. 17: Angry villagers, led by some VHP activists, beat up a pastor and his wife and burnt down a thatched hut that was being used as a place of worship at Barauli village, in the Madaon police station area on the outskirts of Lucknow, on Sunday evening, accusing the couple of forcing conversions in the area. Pastor Virendra Singh and his wife are residents of the Indira Nagar locality but had been visiting Barauli village to hold prayer meetings every Sunday. The couple had bought a 2,000 sq. ft. plot of land in the village where they had built a thatched hut where the prayer meetings were held on a regular basis. According to the pastor, he was on the way to the prayer venue with his wife when he was stopped by some local people and VHP activists. "These persons, led by one Narendra Singh and Giri Baba, warned me not to hold prayer meetings in the area and threatened me with dire consequences. They said that I was forcing conversions, but I denied the charge and told them to verify the facts themselves. When I refused to bow to their diktat, they beat me and my wife and burnt down the hutment," he said. Local villagers are also divided into two groups - one opposing the pastor and the other supporting him. "He has been telling us stories from the Bible and has been preaching but he has never forced us to convert to Christianity. What he tells us holds good for all faiths and we attend his prayer meetings because they make us feel good," says Monu Tiwari, a local resident. However, another resident, V.V. Pradhan, claims that the couple has been luring the poor with tall promises if they convert to Christianity. "He promises them jobs, admissions in school for their children and several other facilities if they adopt Christianity. If this is not luring the illiterate, then what is it?" he asks indignantly. Pastor Virendra Singh has, meanwhile, lodged an FIR with the Madaon police station. Senior superintendent of police Akhil Kumar said three persons have already been arrested in connection with the incident. "We have identified all the culprits and the remaining arrests will soon be made." The SSP added: "This is a sensitive matter and we will not allow it to have any repercussions." (Asian Age 18/9/07)

Dalit Christians plan stir for Scheduled Caste status (7)

NEW DELHI: The National Council of Dalit Christians on Tuesday stepped up their demand for granting Scheduled Caste status to all dalits irrespective of religion, and deletion of Para 3 of the Presidential Order of 1950. Constituents of the Council are also planning to resort to agitation to mount pressure on the Government. In a representation prepared at the national executive of the Council, signatories criticised the non-committal attitude of the Congress to this long-pending demand of Dalit Christians from across the country. Also, the Council has sought to remind the Congress of its 1996 and 2004 election-eve promise to extend SC status to dalit converts to Christianity. Along with the representation, the Council has attached a letter of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh supporting the demand. (The Hindu 19/9/07)

Maya backs Dalit Christians' quota demand (7)

NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 18 : Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati has written to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh endorsing the National Council of Dalit Christians' demand for reservations. In a letter addressed to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Mayawati wrote: "I fully endorse the demand of the Council to amend para 3 of the Presidential Order, 1950, so as to give benefits to Scheduled Caste in Christians also." Requesting the Prime Minister to "amend para 3 of Presidential Order suitably", the letter also reminds that she had sent "a similar representation on August 2, 2005, to end this discrimination". The letter points out that this order was "amended in 1956 in favour of Sikh scheduled castes and subsequently in favour of Buddhist Scheduled Castes in 1990". The Supreme Court is also seized of a petition filed by the Centre for Public Interest Litigation challenging the constitutional validity of para 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Orders, 1950, under which people belonging to the Scheduled Castes who converted to religions different from Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism were deprived of reservation benefits. The apex court, which agreed to examine the question of providing reservation for Dalits even after their conversion to Christianity, remarked it as "a crucial issue" and even sought the views of Attorney-General Milon Banerjee on it. In his submissions, the A-G said he had written a letter in this regard and the Government had sent its reply. Though he had asked the Government to consider the issue sympathetically, he said it was "matter of policy and legislation and the Courts should keep out of it". He even recalled earlier apex court rulings holding that any amendment to the Presidential Order of 1950 regarding inclusion of any particular community within the Scheduled Castes or the Scheduled Tribes was within the purview of legislative action. He brought to the notice of the court that the NDA Government had rejected a request for inclusion of Dalit Christians within the category of Scheduled Castes in 2002. The apex court had also ruled that the list of entries in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes categories under the Presidential Order was final and the courts could not "add or subtract". (Indian Express 19/9/07)

Lifer for Dara Singh in murder case (7)

BHUBANESWAR: A trial court in Orissa's Mayurbhanj district on Saturday sentenced Dara Singh and three others to life imprisonment for killing a Catholic priest in September 1999. Dara Singh is already serving life imprisonment in the Baripada circle jail in Mayurbhanj for killing Australian missionary Graham Stuart Staines and his two minor sons in Keonjhar district in January 1999. District and sessions judge Sachidananda Sahu, who awarded the life term to Dara Singh, Jadunath Mahanta, Rajkishore Mahanta and Chema Ho, acquitted 17 others. The court examined 26 prosecution witnesses. Dara and others killed Father Arul Doss on the night of September 1, 1999 at a church in Jambani village. In the Staines murder case, Dara Singh was awarded the death penalty by a trial court in Bhubaneswar. The High Court, however, reduced it to life imprisonment for lack of strong evidence. (The Hindu 23/9/07)

Dalit Christians accuse Cong of discrimination (7)

Berhampur : President of National Council of Dalit Christians (NCDC) Merry Johans slammed the Congress for discrimination against the Dalit Christians. She flayed the party for depriving them of the Scheduled Caste (SC) status. Johans was speaking at a Press conference in the city on Wednesday after the meeting held at the Parishaal (Mohana) on Tuesday by 1,500 Dalit Christians from eight districts to intensify the demand for their inclusion in the Scheduled Caste

list of the Indian Constitution. Johans said that it was during the Congress Government in 1950, an Act was passed, which gave the Dalit Hindus the SC status. Later, the Dalit communities of other religions such as the Sikhs and the Buddhists were accorded the status in 1956 and 1990 respectively. He lamented that even after the recommendations of the Ranganath Mishra Commission to include the Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims in the SC category, the Government is tight-lipped. Ranganath Mishra Commission has recommended that Para 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Caste) order 1950, which originally restricted the Scheduled Caste only to the Hindus and later opened it to Sikhs and Buddhists, but does not include Muslims, Christians, Jains and Parsis, etc, should be wholly deleted by appropriate action so as to completely de-link the Scheduled Caste status from religion and make the Scheduled Caste net fully religion-neutral like that of the Scheduled Tribe (ST). Johans urged that the Central Government should modify the Act in order to facilitate the process. There should not be any discrimination on the grounds of religion as the constitution considers every individual as equal, he added. State convener NCDC Kumar Prasant said if the Uniform Civil Code would benefit all the religious communities, then it should put in force. Prasant informed that several political leaders, including that of Mayawati has already expressed their support for their cause and some States such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh have recommended to the Central Government for the inclusion of the Dalit Christians in the SC category. (Pioneer 4/10/07)

Dalit Christians to agitate for SC status (7)

BERHAMPUR: Dalit Christians of Orissa are planning to hold agitation throughout the State demanding Scheduled Caste status. They alleged that the Government was delaying implementation of report of Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission, which in its report submitted five months back recommended the Government to declare dalit Christians as Scheduled Castes, as they are still downtrodden. Representatives of dalit Christian community from eight districts of the State met at Mohana in Gajapati district on Tuesday to chalk out their future course of action. The meeting was attended by president of National Council of Dalit Christians (NCDC), Mary Johan and its State convener Kumar Prasant. Ms Johan called upon like-minded organisations and social activists of the State to come forward and help the dalit Christians get their right from the government. Speaking to newsmen on Wednesday, Mr Prasant deplored the stance of the State as well as Centre to forget the underdevelopment of tribals and Scheduled Castes once they get converted to Christianity. "Can only religious conversion change the social status of a person whose clan has suffered social ostracisation since generations," he asked. Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission filed its report to Centre five months back. Most Left parties and many other political parties have supported the claim of dalit Christians. (The Hindu 4/10/07)

Anti-conversion Bill: C'garh Governor seeks Attorney Gen's advice (7)

RAIPUR, OCTOBER 5: Governatorial assent to Chhattisgarh's controversial Anti-Conversion Bill has further been delayed with Governor E S L Narasimhan asking for the legal opinion of the Attorney General of India in the matter. Official sources said the Bill has been sent to Attorney General of India Milon Banerjee for clarification on a provision stating if someone is reconverted to the religion followed by his father or grandfather, it would not be treated as a conversion case. When contacted, Secretary to the Governor P C Dalai neither confirmed nor denied that Narasimhan had sought clarification on certain provisions in Chhattisgarh's Anti-Conversion Bill. Last year, the state Assembly had approved the Chhattisgarh Religious Freedom (Amendment) Bill 2006, which has a provision to "penalise those who change their faith without informing authorities". The clarification sought by the Governor assumes significance as the state prepares for Assembly polls and possibly the Lok Sabha polls. "The delay in getting the Governor's assent for the Bill has put the BJP Government in a spot, as it has promised in its poll manifesto that the party would stop conversions in tribal-dominated state by enacting a law," sources added. In the past too, the controversial Bill has been a cause for concern for the BJP Government with Narasimhan's predecessor K M Seth also delaying his assent to the Bill, which has been strongly opposed by the state's minority communities. Legislative Affairs Minister Ajay Chandrakar confirmed that the Bill, which was passed by the Chhattisgarh Assembly in mid-2006, is yet to receive the Governor's assent. "However, I will not be able to specify the nature of clarification sought by the Governor," Chandrakar added. The move to strengthen Chhattisgarh's Anti-

Conversion law followed claims by several Hindu Rightist organisations of increasing conversions to Christianity in the tribal areas of the state. According to the Bill, those wishing to change their religion must inform the District Magistrate about it a month in advance. A penalty for those violating the law, including those who convert people forcibly, would range from Rs 50,000 to 100,000 and imprisonment of upto five years. While passing the Bill, the BJP Government had maintained that the law was not against the provisions laid down in the Constitution. Party sources said the introduction of an "Anti-Conversion law" was explicitly requested by BJP President Rajnath Singh, who had reportedly ordered all state governments, where the party is in majority, to bring in a "legislation that would ensure punishing of people involved in forceful conversions". (Indian Express 6/10/07)

In first reconversion in MP, VHP to 'purify' 160 Christians today (7)

DEWAS (MP), OCTOBER 10: In the first "reconversion ceremony" in Madhya Pradesh, as many as 160 Christians will be "returned to the Hindu fold" tomorrow by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Shree Sampraday Seva Samiti. The Sampraday is identified with Swami Narendracharyaji Maharaj whose followers protested at airports after he was denied permission to board a plane with his mace. Confirming this, VHP Dewas district secretary Nandkishore Dwivedi told The Indian Express that 160 Christians will be "purified" amid "rituals" and "chanting of hymns" at the Chimnabai Girls Higher Secondary School in Dewas town's Meera Bawdi locality. Converts from Gujarat and Maharashtra along with those from two tribal-dominated talukas of Dewas district "will return to the Hindu fold" at a day-long ceremony that will begin with "a three-hour purification process", the first such ceremony in the state. Even in Jhabua district, where Hindu organisations accused Christians of converting tribals in large numbers, no "reconversion" ceremony ever took place. "We haven't forced anyone. They have all agreed to return to their original faith willingly and have given us affidavits," Dwivedi said. He said locals were "scared to convert", so the organisers "decided to bring converts from Gujarat and Maharashtra" as well. Followers of Narendracharya said that in the last 18 months he had brought back to the Hindu fold some 26,000 families who had "strayed to other religions". Posters announcing the "reconversion" have come up all over Dewas, forcing police to take precautionary measures. There's already tension in town with the function organisers alleging that several posters were torn last night. They have even lodged complaints with the police. Sampraday's MP unit chief Rajendra Garud warned that if more posters were torn, followers would be forced to act like they did when the Swami was not allowed to board a plane with his mace. (Indian Express 11/10/07)

Mob attacks Christian schools for staying open on Pitrapaksh (7)

Raipur, October 10: Suspected Sangh cadres damaged buses and properties of two schools managed by missionaries in Raipur after they refused to declare a holiday on Wednesday. Pitramokhsa Amavasya falling on Wednesday had been declared an official holiday by the state Government. However, Holy Cross and Saint Xavier's Schools had decided to stay open arguing that the half-yearly examinations were approaching and the management did not want a disruption in the academic session. The first attack took place in Shankar Nagar colony of the city where a mob led by suspected Sangh leaders damaged two buses of Saint Xavier's on their way to school. "The agitated mob was armed with rods and was shouting slogans against Christian missionaries. They accused the school authorities of deliberately trying to hurt religious sentiments," said Superintendent of Police (City) Shashi Mohan Singh. He added that a police party was immediately rushed to the spot. Later, the same men went to the Holy Cross School and got into an altercation with the management to close down immediately. When the management refused, the activists ransacked the Principal's office. Cases have been registered at the Civil Lines and Kotwali Police Stations against unknown persons for disrupting peace. However, Senior Superintendent of Police B S Marawi confirmed that no one had been arrested by the police till late in the evening. It is not the first attack on Christian institutions on the charge of promoting "missionary activity". In February this year a mob, comprising allegedly of Sangh cadres, had raided a Christian congregation, injuring six people. The injured included four US Evangelists, present at the meeting. (Indian Express 11/10/07)

VHP 'reconversion' ignored by MP town, so Gujarat fills gap (7)

DEWAS, OCTOBER 11: The Vishwa Hindu Parishad's maiden attempt at reconversion in Madhya Pradesh came a cropper today as only three locals turned up, despite the publicity campaign prior to the event. However, Gujarat saved the day for the VHP, sending in two truckloads of Christian converts. In fact, 90 per cent of the 140 who were reconverted to Hinduism today were from Navsari and Valsad districts in south Gujarat. The rest, barring the three locals, were from Maharashtra. The organisers — VHP and the Shree Sampraday Seva Samiti — were clearly disappointed. Admitting the low turnout, Rajendra Garud, Sampraday's MP unit chief, said the organisation would reflect on what went wrong. The VHP had spared no efforts in ensuring the event's success. Over 30,000 leaflets were distributed and hundreds of posters and hoardings were put up all over the town. A huge pandal was erected to accommodate a crowd of 10,000, but only a few places were occupied. Swami Narendracharya of the Shree Sampraday Seva Samiti presided over the "purification" ceremony — a three-hour function after which the converts were warned not to return to Christianity. Wearing dhotis and sporting the sacred thread, the converts' heads were tonsured to signify their "rebirth". However, many had a difficult time following the instructions which were in Marathi. Narendracharya claimed to have reconverted 27,394 people in the last one-and-a-half years. He told Hindu families to give birth to five boys and at least two-three girls, or else they would soon be a minority. He urged the gathering to emulate the Muslims when it comes to taking pride in one's religion. Meanwhile, officials of the Chimnabai Girls High School in Meera Bawdi area, where the reconversion was carried out, complained that the function was held while classes were on. "We don't know how the authorities gave them permission to hold the programme on a working day," said a school official. (Indian Express 12/10.07)

Pinarayi invites Church wrath (7)

Kozhikode : The Catholic Church in the State is up in arms against the CPI(M) for its secretary Pinarayi Vijayan's reference to Thamarassery Bishop Mar Paul Chittilappilly as a 'disgusting creature'. The faithful took out several protest demonstrations in Kozhikode district on Sunday and the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a strong statement against Vijayan's speech at a memorial function on the death anniversary of party MLA Mathai Chacko in Thiruvambady, where he had made the derogatory reference to Mar Paul. Pinarayi at the function had said the statement of a certain Bishop that Matahi Chacko had received last prayers (Anthya Koodasa) as a true Christian was equal to humiliating the departed Communist. In a hard-hitting speech, full of qualifiers about the Bishop, he said that the priest who was making such statements for the UDF should be called a 'disgusting creature'. The Thamarassery diocese, in its protest, said that Pinarayi, a responsible political leader was using street language. Mercy Chacko, Mathai Chacko's widow, said she did not want to react to the controversy, saying it was up to the CPI(M) to give explanations on that. Vijayan, in an effort to diffuse tension, clarified that he did not name any particular priest in his speech, but the Church leadership refused to accept it as an explanation. He said that he had always looked upon the leaders of the church with respect. But he added that he was provoked to react when certain statements which were showing disrespect to Mathai Chacko, who had led the life of a respectable Communist. Protests were held by the faithful at several churches in Kozhikode district alleging that the CPI(M) leader had ridiculed the Thamarassery Bishop with his statement at the memorial function. Demonstrations were held at Sacred Heart Church, Thiruvambady and St Antony's Church Paroppady after the morning mass on Sunday. The Kerala Catholic Bishops' Conference (KCBC) protested at the derogatory remarks made by Pinarayi, which amounted to humiliation of church leaders. A joint statement issued by KCBC president Mar Joseph Punnakkottil and secretary Bishop Varghese Chakkalakkal said that the CPI(M) was trying to depict the church leaders as bad characters before the society and the faithful. "Cultural Kerala cannot digest the idea of equating church leaders, who have a sacred place in the hearts of the believers, to political leaders. Propaganda of lies is a style of communism globally. The double-edged strategy being adopted by CPI(M) by meeting the bishops in secret and speaking about them badly in the open is not suitable for any democratic party," the statement said. The KCBC also said that it would be foolish to believe that the people would take for granted all the controversies regarding priests, who could not react in the same way as the political leaders. Using the opportunity to criticise the CPI(M)'s alleged policy of aggression on the church, the KCBC said that the church was viewing very seriously the

attacks by the Left parties and their youth outfits against the church and its institutions. It warned that continuation of such programmes would be met with strong agitations from the part of the church. The Mananthavady diocese of the Catholic Church said that Vijayan was using street language, which was not appropriate to the position he was adorning. "Vijayan, who shows his face in bishops' houses, tend to forget all that when he goes outside," the diocese said. (Pioneer 15/10/07)

Final prayer' pits Church against CPM, Kerala won't rest in peace (7)

Kochi, October 15: No Marx for the best answers, but these are the ungodly questions fuelling the latest spat between the CPM and the Church, in God's Own Country: Would it be an insufferable taint on a dead true-Red comrade if priests did the final prayers for him at his death bed? Would that make Communism politically any lesser than the Church? The Church is not amused, and many Kerala dioceses have already called for yet another anti-CPM campaign, others are to meet over the issue in the coming days. The powerful Thamarassery diocese, whose Bishop is in the eye of this little Red storm, has announced it will pull the shutters on all its institutions, including schools, on Wednesday to protest. The Congress and other opposition parties are pitching in for the Church, while the CPM is showing no sign of relenting this time, the way it climbed down after Vijayan himself had asked the angry Church to withdraw its anti-CPM pastoral letters being read out across churches in the state, during the battle between the two over self-financing colleges. CPM sources point out that the Opposition had raised the final prayer issue at the bypoll last year in the dead MLA's constituency, claiming the CPM was unwilling to accept the comrade's change of heart in his last days, and that made it a political issue. It was CPM state secretary Pinarayi Vijayan who set passions afire a couple of days ago, proclaiming the Bishop of the Thamarassery diocese a "wretched creature", and a liar. This was after the latter claimed a week ago that priests were called in to give the last service to young CPM MLA and DYFI leader Mathai Chacko, while he was dying of cancer. Pinarayi alleged the bishop was mouthing a lie to help the Congress-led opposition, even hinted the Bishop may have been drunk. The dead CPM MLA's wife has been quoted as saying that the priests did come to the hospital saying that they wanted to pray for her ailing husband—but did not say it was to make the ritual final prayers. The Church, however, insists that the priests were actually called in by Chacko's kin just for that, and Chacko was fully conscious when the request was made. While the arguments continue, playing across the state is a debate on who should now apologise to whom. The KPCC on Monday came out strongly against the comrades, its president Ramesh Chennithala demanding that Pinarayi apologise to the Bishop. Even the Muslim League sees anti-minorityism in Vijayan's outburst, while on the other side, DYFI national president Sreeramakrishnan asserted that the Bishop should own up his lie and apologise. This is not the first time that the Kerala CPM saw a political-ideological torpedo in such issues. The last was when authorities at a temple in north Kerala revealed how the kin of Kodyeri Balakrishnan, CPM central committee member and Home Minister, performed a ritual for him there, which was sought to be hotly denied. MV Raghavan, Vijayan's one-time mentor in the CPM until he was expelled from the party and formed the splinter Communist Marxist Party (CMP), says the comrades are being hypocritical. "Vijayan has been seeing the bishops on the side secretly seeking favours, even while he blasts them in public. He should at least have the decency now to make his apology in public, not secretly," he said. CP John, a prominent CMP leader, said it was quixotic for the comrades to rile at the Church in this issue, when more senior CPM leaders had gone a lot farther. He cited the ritualistic funerals of CPM ideologue EMS Nambuthiripad and Politburo member and former Chief Minister EK Nayanar as instances, and that of the party Poliburo allowing the ashes of Poliburo member S Ramachandran Pillai's wife to be immersed in the Ganga. (Indian Express 16/10/07)

VS defends Pinarayi, tells Church to correct its approach (7)

Thiruvananthapuram, October 17: Kerala Chief Minister V S Achuthanandan on Wednesday intervened in the row between his party and the Catholic Church over the 'last sacrament' administered to the late CPI(M) MLA Mathai Chacko, saying efforts were on to create an impression that the deceased Marxist leader was a religious believer in his last days. Chacko, who died on October 13, 2006, represented Thiruvambady constituency in the Assembly. Defending the stance taken by his arch rival in the party, CPI(M) state Secretary Pinarayi Vijayan,

Achuthanandan said the claim by Bishop Paul Chittilappilly of the Thamarassery diocese that Chacko had consciously received the last sacrament was not acceptable as he was a person who had served society adhering to the Marxist ideals. Last Sacrament is the last one of the seven sacred ceremonies in the life of a Christian. "It was unfortunate that an effort was being made to create an impression that Chacko was a believer before he died battling cancer. He was in fact a thorough materialist and a committed Communist," Achuthanandan said. He said there was a time when the Church was at a loggerheads with the Communists, many of whom were denied a decent burial by the church. But over the years, there had been a radical shift in each other's perception. This was especially true during the pontificate of John Paul II who revised and repented for the punishment meted out by the Church to medieval Italian scientist Galileo Galilei, he said. "The reconciliation between the Church and the Communists was based on the perception that the former served society on the basis of spiritual ideals while the latter stood for the service of society based on the materialistic approach," Achuthanandan said. But it appeared that a section of the clergy was now trying to kick up a row by seizing on Chacko's life to take forward their struggle against the educational policies of the LDF Government. "This is quite unfortunate and one could only hope that the Church would correct its approach," he said. A controversy has erupted after Bishop Chittilappilly had claimed that Chacko had been administered the last sacrament while he was on his death bed in Kochi an year ago. Meanwhile, Mathews Mar Evanius Metropolitan, Bishop of Kandanad diocese, said "such comments should have been avoided". Speaking to reporters here on Wednesday, he said that the Church should look after the affairs of churches, in the same way Government should look after the affairs of Government and political parties their own matters. (Indian Express 18/10/07)

Church to end stir as priests sense credibility erosion (7)

Kozhikode : Faced with criticisms from top power centres and the laity alike, the priests of the Catholic Church have decided to end the agitations that they have been staging for the past four days in protest against CPI(M) State secretary Pinarayi Vijayan's outburst against a Bishop. Highly placed sources in the Roman Catholic Church told The Pioneer late on Wednesday night that even top priests were not supporting the agitation for which several priests had given the call. The decision to drop the agitation -- or at least to lessen its intensity -- was taken by the Church authorities after the faithful rallied in Thamarassery diocese on Wednesday. There were complaints from the higher echelons of the Church as well as from the laity that the agitation, which did not have a strong logical base, had raised suspicion that the Church was playing cheap politics. The decision could change, but as of now the move was to end the agitation, said a source. "The feeling is that if we continue with the agitation, it would bring bad repute to the Church, cause alienation of the believers at least mentally and make the CPI(M) unity stronger," said a highly placed Church source. "Therefore the high priests are not in favour of the continuance of the agitation," he said. "It should be noted here that no top priests above the rank of Bishops had responded to Vijayan's remarks with the vehemence that the middle level clergy has shown. Some Fathers did attack Pinarayi, but these were just a routine matter. They were fulfilling a duty as a controversy had kicked up," he said. Sources said that even now the laity had begun questioning the leadership of the Church secretly and openly whether it wanted a "fight with a democratically elected Government". "That the Government could be Leftist or rightist but the Church has no business to challenge it is the general mood of the believers. Such a situation is not desirable for Christianity," the source said. Many in the Church openly admit that the statement by Thamarassery Bishop Mar Paul Chittilappally almost a year after Mathai Chacko's death was totally 'uncalled for'. Believers do doubt that the statement was made deliberately with the determination of kicking up another controversy after the issues of self-financing professional colleges and the alleged move by the Government to get better control over the Church's educational institutions through local administration bodies. An affluent believer in Thamarassery, who had taken part in Wednesday's protest rally, said the whole thing was not in the interest of Christianity. He said, "Our Fathers were speaking as though they are the rulers of the State. They do not have the right to do so. They have the right to protest, but they do not have the right to sabotage elected Government." There is a general feeling among the top leadership of the Catholic Church that the three-day agitation had led to two obvious things, said a source at the Latin Catholic Bishop's Palace in Fort Kochi. (Pioneer 19/10/07)

Seminary as gurukul: church quietly going 'swadeshi' in BJP's bastions (7)

BHOPAL, OCTOBER 22: The Catholic Church in Madhya Pradesh is slowly but surely taking a swadeshi hue, an idea RSS chief K S Sudarshan advocated in Nagpur seven years ago. The process began irrespective of his advice, of course, but the swadeshikaran, or Indianisation, has been on for quite some time without attracting much attention in this BJP-ruled state. It has also been happening in neighbouring Chhattisgarh, also ruled by the BJP. Consider this. The church's seminary in Dewas is called Satchitanand Gurukul, a very Indian name. Here novitiates live with their preceptors in the guru-shishya tradition. Many other Christian institutions are similarly named in Indian style — Christ Premalaya, Purnodaya, Seva Sadan. When the Archbishop of Bhopal, Leo Cornelio, was installed recently, his feet and that of his predecessor Dr Pascal Topno were washed and they walked on leaves in the Indian tradition. Bishop Cornelio, on his part, asked guests to give him saplings as gifts, the symbolism having to do as much with his concern for the environment as with the importance Indian culture attaches to trees. Fr Rajesh of Satchitanand Gurukul says, "The Indian idea of Sat-chit-anand (truth, consciousness, bliss) and the Christian concept of the trinity (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) gel in a way. The philosophies of all religions converge at some point. We have also realised that when we adopt Indian names it helps us gain acceptance among locals." At the seminary, yoga and meditation are very much part of the curriculum. So it is in many churches. Fr Anand Mutthungal, spokesman of the Catholic Church of Madhya Pradesh & Chhattisgarh, says it's common for Christians to sit on the floor in churches. Earlier, there used to be a huge gap between the altar and the faithful, but no more. Even the size of the altar has been reduced to make people sitting on the floor comfortable. While some churches carry notices prohibiting footwear during Mass, the faithful take off their shoes and chappals before they enter a church in Bhopal's Jahangirabad locality, where no such notice is on display. Former member of Madhya Pradesh's State Minority Commission Indira Iyengar says that in tribal areas like Jhabua, the priest comes to the altar for the mass to the accompaniment of dhols and the singing of tribal hymns. Such Indianisation of the church started decades ago in southern India, but has taken a long time to spread to central India and beyond. Now several Indian and tribal customs and rituals are followed. In Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, many tribals touch the feet of the pastors and priests, and the wedding ring is replaced by a mala in urban areas. On the occasion of the Feast of Mother Mary, the idol is draped in a sari. On each of the nine days of the feast, the sari is changed. The festival culminates in a mela. The priests drape shawls around their bodies, and like Fr Rajesh, no longer take English names. Except for one non-Indian priest in Madhya Pradesh, the rest are all Indians. In fact, five out of 14 bishops in these two central Indian states are tribals. Dr Topno, who was archbishop for 14 years, is a tribal. But does taking Indian names and adopting local customs insulate the church from the wrath of Hindu organisations? No. In fact, they accuse the Christian organisations of using it as camouflage. VHP leader Nandkishore Dwivedi is not impressed by the name Satchitanand Gurukul. "I don't trust them," he says. (Indian Express 23/10/07)

Saffron brigade roughs up nuns (7)

BHOPAL, OCTOBER 26: Five nuns were assaulted and paraded by a mob after being accused of conversion in Indore late on Thursday, but the Madhya Pradesh Police refused to file an FIR on the incident as the high-profile global investors meet was on in the city. About 8.30 pm, a mob surrounded a house in Bhagirathpura where the nuns had come to attend a prayer meeting. The house belonged to Anil Kumar, a driver with Fransiscan Clarist Congregation, a Catholic religious order, and a Christian himself. But that did not prevent the mob from accusing the nuns of trying to convert the residents. "When we came out the mob assaulted us with sticks, snatched our rosaries, broke the cross and pulled our scarfs," the nuns, aged between 26 and 40, told the police later. The mob shouting religious slogans took them to the Bhagirathpura chowky and asked the police to book them for conversion. They handed the police a copy of the Bible and some literature snatched from the nuns. The police had a tough time protecting the nuns from the mob and finally took them to Banganga Police Station. "The Christian community should be thankful to us for saving the lives of the nuns because the mob had dangerous elements," Banganga Station in-charge T S Baghel told The Indian Express late on Friday. He boasted that 30 anti-socials have been externed from the locality and five booked under NSA. And yet the

police refused to register an FIR. "The police told us that the meet was on and it would be better if no complaint was lodged," said Fr Joseph Vallasari. When pressed, the police only agreed to take a complaint, but did not register any FIR. The community tried its best through Thursday night and throughout Friday, but in vain. It was only when Fr Anand Mutthungal, the Bhopal-based PRO of Catholics, got in touch with DGP A R Pawar late on Friday night that he ordered the Indore police to lodge an FIR. Baghel claimed he was busy in VIP bandobast so he asked his subordinates to only take their complaint. He said FIR would be registered under Sections 427, 323, 294 and 506 of the IPC. Before the DGP's intervention, the community had already given a call to keep its 11 educational institutions closed in Indore on Saturday. Fr Vallasari said the educational institutions would remain closed, but the community decided to withdraw a call for dharna. The nuns had a tough time even to get medical treatment on Thursday night as the staff said they would proceed only after FIR was registered. Indian Express 27/10/07)

Two Christians kidnapped from a hospital in Pakistan (7)

ISLAMABAD: Suspected pro-Taliban militants kidnapped two Christians from a hospital in Pakistan's North Waziristan, a news report has said. Masked men kidnapped the two Christian sanitation workers from the Miranshah Headquarters Hospital in North Waziristan on Friday, eyewitnesses said. Naeem Masih and Shahbaz Masih were abducted "right from the main gate of the hospital", the Daily Times quoted witnesses as saying. Around 1,000 Christians live in Miranshah. Two Christians were kidnapped five months ago but were later released. Local Taliban are suspected to be involved in the incidents though no group has so far claimed responsibility for the kidnappings. Christian residents of Hadyara village on the outskirts of Lahore were attacked earlier this month by men who also stormed the New Apostolic Church, established before the partition of the Indian sub-continent. They had complained to the authorities that their church could be razed by Muslims angry that Christian prayers were aired by loudspeakers. Members of the minority community had said that announcements were made through mosque loudspeakers asking Muslims from nearby villages to be ready for a "final attack". Other announcements urged businesses and farmers not to allow Christians on to their properties. Islamist militants in Pakistan have regularly threatened to kill Christian clerics in Southern Punjab's Khanewal district if they did not "embrace Islam and stop preaching Christianity." Demanding equal opportunities "as promised" by Pakistan founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah, minority organisations in August had sought a ban on forced conversions and repeal of the stringent blasphemy laws in the Islamic country. (Times of India 27/10/07)

Digvijay for NSA on those attacking nuns (7)

Bhopal: Condemning the attack on nuns by Bajrang Dal activists in Indore, senior Congress leader and former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh on Saturday demanded that the assailants be arrested and booked under the National Security Act. "I strongly condemn attack on nuns at Indore. This is a very unfortunate and regrettable incident. Those involved in the crime should be arrested immediately and National Security Act slapped on them," Mr. Singh said in a statement here. Accusing the BJP-led Government for its failure to protect minorities, women and children, Mr. Singh said it was protecting anti-social elements which were involved in disturbing the peace and amity in the State. "While on the one hand the State Government was inviting investors saying Madhya Pradesh was a peaceful State, on the other hand Bajrang Dal activists have sent a message to the World that the atmosphere here was not fit for industrial growth," Mr. Singh said.- PTI (The Hindu 28/10/07)

'Baptised' tribals re-embrace Hinduism (7)

SURAT, DECEMBER 19: Around 2,000 tribal men and women from different villages in South Gujarat, who had converted to Christianity, re-embraced Hinduism on Monday evening at a religious ceremony (sammelan) at the Shivaji ground in Tapi district. They took an oath by the fire in the presence of Jagat Guru Acharya Narendra Maharaj and submitted affidavits that they won't convert to Christianity ever again in the future. The people had started gathering at the venue since Sunday night listening to the Jagat Guru's teaching before re-converting to Hinduism at the ceremony a day later. Narayan Solanki, a disciple of Narendra Maharaj in Tapi district, said, "There are many disciples of the Maharaj working in different villages of Vyara, Dharampur,

Songadh, Mandvi, Ahwa-Dang, Vasda and so on. They visit these places and interact with the tribals who have been baptised earlier by various missionaries and convince them to return back to Hinduism." According to Solanki, the Maharaj also runs an ashram at Naneej village in Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. It was after a visit to one such ashram that they became motivated to become his disciples. "We visit different villages and persuade those, who have been baptised, to come back into the Hindu fold," said Solanki. Giving details about the sammelan (ceremony), another disciple, Mahipal Thakur, said, "We have been working for the sammelan for the past few months and contacted tribals in various villages, who had become fed up with Christianity. These tribals gathered on Sunday night at Tapi district. They were provided with food and accommodation, and later they met the Maharaj during the night. On Monday, they assembled at the Shivaji ground where the Maharaj gave a religious sermon. Many of the tribal men also cut off their hair and took oaths, while all of them gave thumb impressions on the affidavits saying they have willingly returned to the folds of the Hindu religion." Deputy Collector of Tapi district N S Halbe said, "The organisers had taken prior permission to hold the sammelan. The district officials visited the venue and have submitted their report about it to me." (Indian Express 20/12/07)

Missionaries attacked in tribal Gujarat, FIR says it was VHP mob (7)

VADODARA, DECEMBER 20: Christian missionaries were attacked, allegedly by VHP activists, while they were conducting "a social awareness programme" yesterday in Badia village in Gujarat's Kwant taluka. Four of the injured had to be admitted to the SSG Hospital in Vadodara and one of them, Brother Ramesh, had two fingers amputated. In an FIR filed this evening, the missionaries from the Don Bosco High School alleged that their assailants were from the VHP who also misbehaved with four girls and a nun. The missionaries said that owing to "police indifference", they sought legal counsel and gave the district collector an account of the incident before filing an FIR. Vadodara district collector Rajiv Topno said, "We have spoken to the missionaries and have asked them to lodge an FIR again. Based on that, further investigation will be done." The missionaries said they had been working in the region for 15 years and this was the first time they were attacked. Father Monty, manager of the Don Bosco School, said the missionaries were conducting "a social awareness programme" when some VHP activists asked them to leave at once. "We were leaving the village when their vehicle rammed into one of ours and turned turtle. They beat up four men and also misbehaved with the women who were with us," said Father Monty. He said some persons in the mob attacked Sister Manju Puscano. Father Damiel's laptop was also snatched. Sister Puscano said, "I was pulled out of the jeep and people tried to snatch my bag, stole my mobile, pulled my silver chain as well as my sari. With me, four other girls were dragged out of the jeep. The mob tried to chase us. We hid ourselves in the fields and took help from the tribals there." She said they could recognise three of the assailants. (Indian Express 21/12/07)

Hunt on for missionaries' assailants (7)

VADODARA, DECEMBER 21: The police on Friday launched a hunt for the group which attacked missionaries of the Don Bosco Education Society on Thursday. The missionaries had lodged an FIR in this regard on Thursday evening. The police officials, who visited Kwant on Friday morning, said four of the attackers identified by the victims were absconding. The police were also probing whether the attackers had any political affiliations, as witnesses had testified that the accused belonged to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Vadodara Deputy Superintendent of Police H N Chaudhary said the testimony of the witnesses in the case confirmed that two of the four accused—Harsingh Rathwa from Badiya and Praveen Rathwa from Kwant, who interrupted the social awareness programme at the village—were in an inebriated state. The two asked the missionaries to stop the social awareness programme. The two other accused, Kalesh Rathwa and Narsingh Rathwa, belong to Bhumaswada and Badiya, respectively. Chaudhary said, "There were two separate incidents. In the first incident, the social awareness programme of the missionaries was interrupted. In the second one, the missionaries met with an accident while on their way to Kwant after having dinner at the village." He, however, added that the second incident needed to be probed further. According to the FIR lodged by Father Monty Joseph, a mob followed him in a Tempo on his way back to Kwant. The attackers, who were allegedly

armed with sticks, then started pelting stones at the missionaries. "While a sister with four other girls in the jeep were forcibly pulled out, window panes of Father Daniel's jeep were broken and his laptop taken away," said Father Monty. (Indian Express 22/12/07)

Peace process being initiated in Orissa district (7)

VHP activists stop the Falulknama Express at the Berhampur Railway Station on Tuesday in protest against the attack on their leader Laxmanananda Saraswati in Phulbani on Monday. — Berhampur: The trouble started in Brahmanigaon when two groups clashed over the erection of a decorative arch for Christmas on Monday morning. Country guns were used leading to injuries to two persons. Following this, the vehicle of senior VHP leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, who was on his way to Brahmanigaon was attacked by a group near Daringbadi. He, his driver and police bodyguard were injured. This led to a communal flare-up. The Revenue Divisional Commissioner (RDC), southern division, Satyabrata Sahu, told The Hindu that officials from adjoining districts were being brought in to initiate a peace process. The VHP gave a 12-hour bandh call in the district on Tuesday, coinciding with a 36-hour bandh call given by a tribal organisation, Kui Coordination Committee, to start from Tuesday morning. These simultaneous agitations made the district a virtual war zone. Police could not reach most places as agitators had cut down trees and blocked the roads. At Barakhama near Baliguda a tribal died as two groups indulged in stone-pelting. VHP supporters allegedly damaged churches at Barakhama, Pabingia, Baliguda and Masripada. They also damaged vehicles of two Christian organisations at Daringbadi and Phulbani. The buses of an English medium school at Phulbani were also ransacked. Some reports said a few houses were burnt down at Pabingia and Brahmanigaon on Monday night. A mob torched the Tikabali police station and two police vehicles kept there. Kui tribals targeted the houses of Minister Behera at Phiringia and Phulbani. Both houses were ransacked and two four-wheelers and five motorcycles were burnt down. Inspector General of Police Pradip Kapur and Deputy Inspector General R.P. Koche were camping in Phulbani to monitor the situation. Restrictions under Section 144 were imposed in Daringbadi, Baliguda and Tikabali blocks. Mr. Kapur said 20 platoons of armed police along with magistrates were ready for action in tension-prone areas. According to him those who indulged in the violence were being detained. Nine persons were arrested in relation to the attack on the VHP leader. Four were arrested and three detained in relation to the communal clash at Brahmanigaon. (The Hindu 26/12/07)

Vadodara police file FIR against group of missionaries attacked (7)

KWANT (GUJARAT) DECEMBER 24: Brother Ramesh, 33, lies on a hospital bed in Vadodara, four fingers of his right hand amputated. This Catholic priest from Tamil Nadu was allegedly attacked by activists near Kwant, a tribal town in Vadodara six days ago, as reported by The Indian Express on December 21. His assailants are still absconding but the police have now registered an FIR under Section 37 of the Bombay Police Act against the injured priest for "unlawful assembly" in a village he had gone to enact a "public awareness" play. Same is the plight of Sister Manjula Tuscano, a missionary in her late 20s, who was part of Ramesh's group. She was allegedly beaten up, robbed and chased by the assailants. The police did not visit her after the incident but she is now an accused as well. The Kwant police have also registered an FIR against her, along with the 18 others, for "being part of an assembly of more than five persons," thereby violating prohibitory orders clamped in the wake of elections. The small convent of Dominican Sisters situated in this tiny tribal taluka town will not celebrate Christmas this year. "How can we celebrate? One Brother has his fingers chopped off, a Father was so badly beaten up that we thought he was dead, many children are yet to recover from their injuries," said Tuscano, a social worker with the convent. When contacted, the SP of Vadodara, Amit Vishwakarma, told The Indian Express today: "Police officials lodged the FIR since these missionaries had not taken permission from district authorities for assembling more than a group of five people. It is a bailable offence and further probe is yet to be done." Asked about the assailants, Vishwakarma said: "According to the FIR lodged by the missionaries on Thursday evening, four attackers were recognised. However, they are still absconding. There were other people in the mob who could not be identified." The convent, as well as the Don Bosco school

and hostel nearby, were provided armed police protection on Sunday evening after nuns and priests sent a written application to the police fearing danger to their life and property. While the convent houses 160 schoolgirls, mostly tribals, the school hostel has 165 tribal boys on its campus. The incident took place on December 19 when a group of 20 Christian missionaries, including nuns, from Kwant, accompanied by school children of their hostels, visited Badiya, a neighbouring village, to enact a play to "educate tribals about their rights over water, land, forest, animals and their lives." According to the FIR filed by Monty Rodrigues, 52, head of Don Bosco School — he has been working with Gujarat tribals for over 25 years now — a group of activists attacked them alleging they were engaged in "conversion activity." According to the FIR, they threatened them into abandoning the play, damaged their vehicles, beat up priests and tried to molest social workers and schoolgirls. The FIR says that the assailants chased the group, bumped into one of their vehicles, which turned turtle, injuring several children. The attack also resulted in the amputation of four fingers of Ramesh's right hand. Says Ramesh: "Bleeding and terrified, I had to run for several kilometres. I kept bleeding at the police station but they were not even ready to register our FIR for several hours." Two days after the incident, the president of Hindu Janjagan Samiti, Yagnesh Patel, who happens to be deputy sarpanch of Kwant, submitted a memorandum to the state government authorities against the missionaries alleging they had gone to Badiya village for converting the tribals. "We are investigating the complaint," says Kwant Mamlatdar Rushin Bhatt. "It is a false accusation," says Rodrigues, adding that the Don Bosco Education Society and the Dominican Sisters have been working for over 20 years in this tribal belt running a school and hostels for tribal boys and girls. (Indian Express 25/12/07)

Tension in Orissa district after attack on VHP leader (7)

Phulbani (Orissa), December 24: Tension gripped Orissa's Kandhamal district on Monday after four people were injured in a clash between two communities and an alleged attack on a VHP leader in two separate incidents, prompting heavy force deployment in sensitive areas, police said. Enraged over the attack on Laxmanananda Saraswati, a prominent anti-conversion leader in the tribal dominated district, VHP called a four-hour Orissa bandh on Tuesday from 8 am, VHP leader Umashankar Acharya said, claiming that Saraswati was injured in the incident. Saraswati was attacked near Darsinghbad village on his way to Brahmani village where a group clash had taken place earlier in the morning. "The situation is completely under control. Three persons have been arrested so far and more people will be arrested this night. We are alert to face the situation," Director General of Police (DGP) Gopal Nanda said. Sources said Saraswati and his personal security officer Kishore Chandra Pradhan and his driver Naresh Kahar were admitted to Daringbadi Government Hospital. Eighty-year-old Saraswati had sustained injuries on his nose, they said. Meanwhile, police planned to shift Pradhan to MKCG medical college hospital in Berhampur as his condition remained critical. Revenue Divisional Commissioner Satyabrata Sahu, who was on his way to the area, said he had asked the district administration to mobilise extra force as the situation became tense after attack on the VHP leader. (Indian Express 25/12/07)

Orissa churches burnt (7)

Phulbani (Orissa), Dec. 25: Curfew was imposed in four towns after a youth was killed and six churches and a minister's houses were targeted on Tuesday, Christmas Day, in largescale communal violence and arson in Orissa's Kandhamal district following an attack on a VHP leader who led an anti-conversion movement. A youth was killed in mob violence at Barakhamba, a senior police officer said, adding that he was yet to be identified. At least six churches, mostly built in thatched houses, were either ransacked or the vacant premises set on fire since Monday night as tension built up in the area, revenue divisional commissioner Satyabrata Sahu said. Two police outposts and a police vehicle were set on fire, he said. "Following largescale violence, we have imposed curfew in the district headquarters towns of Phulbani, Baliguda, Daringbadi and Brahmanigaon to prevent any further flareup," Mr Sahu said. Unconfirmed reports said 12 churches were targeted by vandals since Tuesday night and additional forces deployed in sensitive pockets of the district, where of the total 6.50 lakh population more than one lakh belong to the Christian community. The violence, which began at Brahmanigaon village in the Daringbadi police station area on Monday, gradually spread to other parts of the district with miscreants

attacking two houses of the state's steel and mines minister, Padmanabha Behera, at Phiringia and Nuapadar villages, 10 km from here. While three churches were set on fire at Baliguda on Monday night, three others were burnt on Tuesday in different villages of Nuagaon block, official sources said. Churches at Chakapada, Giringia and Phiringia were also ransacked before being set on fire, the sources said. A police station and a police outpost were also set on fire and the official jeep of the circle inspectors of Phulbani and Tikabali were torched by mobs, which attacked the offices of some organisations, including an orphanage run by Christian missionaries, in different parts of the district. Policemen who went to Daringbadi, Phiringia and Chakapada blocks were not allowed access by the mob, which took to the streets after 80-year-old VHP leader Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati was allegedly attacked on Monday. "The situation is tense but we are trying to get back control," Orissa director-general of police Gopal Nanda said, adding that additional armed forces were being sent to the violence-prone areas of the tribal-dominated district. The DGP said IGP (Special Armed Police) Pradip Kapoor was camping at the district headquarters though police movements were restricted due to the felling of trees on the road. A large number of trains were delayed and the movement of vehicles on the roads hit as bandh supporters blocked railway tracks and highways in Cuttack, Balasore, Bhubaneswar and Bhadrak during the four-hour shutdown. Activists of the VHP and Bajrang Dal blocked traffic in many areas and moved in groups to enforce a four-hour bandh called in protest against the attack on Saraswati. Thirteen persons were taken into custody in connection with the alleged attack, the IGP, Mr Pradip Kapoor, said. Expressing concern over the violence on Christmas Day, Orissa chief minister Naveen Patnaik appealed to the people to maintain peace and communal harmony. Thousands of people were denied entry into churches in different parts of the tribal-dominated district to offer special prayers and services on the occasion of Christmas as saffron activists started picketing during the bandh called by them in protest against attack on Saraswati. (Asian Age 26/12/07)

One killed, six churches attacked in Orissa as VHP, Bajrang Dal call bandh (7)

Bhubaneswar, December 25: Curfew was imposed in four towns of Kandhamal district today after a youth was killed and at least six churches as well as a minister's house were targeted in largescale communal violence and arson, following the reported attack on a VHP leader. Police officials said an unidentified youth was killed in mob violence at Barakhamba. At least six churches, mostly built in thatched houses, have either been ransacked or the vacant premises set on fire since last night. Two police outposts and two police jeeps were also set on fire. "Following largescale violence, we have imposed curfew in district headquarters town of Phulbani, Baliguda, Daringbadi and Brahmanigaon to prevent further flare-up," Revenue Divisional Commissioner Satyabrata Sahu told PTI. Additional forces have been deployed in sensitive pockets of the tribal-dominated district, which has more than one lakh Christians among the total 6.50 lakh population. Tension has been brewing in the area since yesterday, when clashes broke out between some Hindu and Christian groups. The situation worsened after a VHP leader, 80-year-old Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati who leads an anti-conversion movement, was reportedly attacked. VHP and Bajrang Dal activists called a four-hour bandh today to protest against the attack. Kandhamal district SP Narasingh Bhol said establishments and schools run by Christian missionaries were targeted by the bandh supporters. Picketing posts were set up outside churches, denying entry to many who had come to offer prayers on Christmas Day. The violence, which began at Brahmanigaon village under Daringbadi area yesterday, gradually spread to other parts of the district with miscreants attacking two houses of the state's Steel and Mines Minister Padmanabha Behera at Phiringia and Nuapadar villages. Several trains were delayed and vehicular movement hit in Cuttack, Balasore, Bhubaneswar and Bhadrak. (Indian Express 26/12/07)

Christian leaders urge PM for safety (7)

New Delhi, Dec. 26: Christian leaders who called on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh have urged him to ensure the safety of members of the community in Orissa following a spate of attacks on them in the state over the last three days. In the memorandum, the leaders expressed the fear that the ongoing violence in Orissa's tribal district of Phoolbani is heading towards the kind of violence that was seen in Gujarat's Dangs district in December 1998. The violence targeting the

Christian community has also evoked the concern of the Left parties. Both the CPI(M) and the CPI have condemned the violence and sought action against the perpetrators of the violence. The All-India Christian Council in a press release issued on Wednesday detailed the various attacks that have taken place against the community. It said that "Hindu fundamentalists" attacked 13 churches and three people were shot on Christmas Eve, and that members of the community have been facing increasing religious persecution in the state from "Hindu fanatics". Among those who were part of the Christian delegation that met the Prime Minister were the Archbishop of Delhi Vincent Michael Concessao, Rev. Dominic Emmanuel, spokesperson for the Delhi Catholic Archdiocese, and Mr John Dayal, president of United Christian Action. The memorandum called for "immediate and urgent action" and said the attacks on Christians in Orissa were part of a "planned conspiracy against the Church and our faith". According to the memorandum, the main aggressor is the Kui Janakalyan Samiti, which had called for a bandh on December 25 and 26. However, the memorandum maintained that the aim of the bandh was really to disturb Xmas celebrations, unleash a reign of terror and drive out Christians from the region. Further, the memorandum said efforts to get the Orissa government to contain the violence and arrest the culprits have "met with a phlegmatic bureaucratic response" and that "aggressive religious fundamentalist elements, local ashrams and political organisations are openly threatening the Church". The CPI(M) politburo in a statement issued on Wednesday condemned what it described as "organised attacks" against Christian institutions in Kandhamal district in Orissa. It noted: "Kandhamal district has been, for years, the target of communal activities against the community." Accusing the state government and district administration of failing to take adequate measures to protect the minority community, the CPI(M) politburo demanded the immediate arrest of those responsible for the violence. The CPI, too, condemned the violence against Christians in Orissa and asked the state government to take stern action against those responsible for it. Party MP D. Raja said the attacks on Christians were a matter of serious concern in the light of what had happened after the cold-blooded murder of missionary Graham Staines and his children. Mr Raja also demanded severe action against those targeting people belonging to minority communities. (Asian Age 27/12/07)

Orissa: churches attacked, Govt office set afire (7)

Phulbani (Orissa), December 26: In a fresh outbreak of communal violence in Kandhamal district, suspected saffron activists on Wednesday targeted two churches and 10 houses mostly belonging to Christians, injuring 11 people while tribal Christians set afire a Government office. The saffron activists torched a police station at Phiringia, one of the violence-hit areas in Kandhamal, Director-General of Police Gopal Nanda said. Two churches came under attack in Kalinga and Tikabali on Wednesday evening but there was no immediate report of casualties from there, police sources said. Four houses were set ablaze in Brakhama in the wee hours on Wednesday and stones were pelted, leaving 11 people injured, the sources said. About half-a-dozen houses belonging to Christians were attacked and residents were threatened by unidentified persons in Jaleshpata, they said. On the other hand, tribal Christians set a revenue department office on fire in Khajuripada during a 36-hour bandh they enforced to press for Scheduled Tribe status for them. The Hindu Jagaran Sammukhya, a religious organisation, alleged that three temples were attacked at Jaleshpata and Baliguda in the Tumundibandh area. However, the claim of attack on temples was not confirmed by officials. Curfew remained in place in the four sensitive towns of Baliguda, Daringibadi, Brahmanigaon and Phulbani, which witnessed communal violence, and there was no report of fresh trouble from there, Revenue Divisional Commissioner Satyabrata Sahu said. The fresh communal violence came a day after six churches were attacked in the district on Tuesday in a backlash to the assault on VHP leader Laxmananda Saraswati who led a movement against conversion in the district. Prohibitory orders have been clamped in the entire district, Home Secretary T K Mishra said adding that the situation was under control even as sporadic violence took place during the day. Sahu claimed that the situation was gradually improving but did not rule out sporadic violence in villages which remained out of the purview of curfew. (Indian Express 27/12/07)

Protect Christians, Left tells Orissa Govt (7)

NEW DELHI: The Left parties on Wednesday condemned the attack on Christians and the institutions run by them in Orissa, urging the Government to beef up the security in the area. US Embassy bypasses MEA, writes to Himachal Govt for security to its diplomat They, the privileged Centre approves development plans of Anandpur Sahib, Talwandi Sabo Remember Staines Poor mathematics undervalues Tourism dept's forex earning. Condemning the "the organised attacks against Christians and Christian institutions in Kandhamal," the CPI(M) demanded "immediate measures to protect the Christian community and its institutions in the district by deploying adequate security forces". The culprits must be arrested and proceeded against, the party said, adding that the Orissa Government and district administration had failed to take adequate steps to protect the minority community. CPI national secretary D Raja said the attacks on Christians were not new to Orissa, and was a matter of serious concern in the "light of what had happened after the cold blooded murder of missionary Graham Steines and his children and a number of incidents after that". Seeing a pattern in the attacks in Orissa as well as states ruled by the BJP, he demanded severe action against those targeting people belonging to minority communities. (Indian Express 27/12/07)

NCM to send fact-finding team to Orissa (7)

NEW DELHI: The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) on Thursday decided to send a fact-finding team to the Phulbani district of Orissa to get an on-the-spot report on the attacks on Christians. The two-member team is to visit the affected area from January 6 to 8. Ahead of the visit, the NCM has also sought a report from the Orissa government on the situation in Phulbani, which has seen a spate of attacks on Christians since Christmas-eve. The team will comprise Zoya Hasan and Dileep Padgaonkar. (The Hindu 28/12/07)

3 killed in police firing as churches, more prayer houses attacked in Orissa (7)

BHUBANESWAR: At least three persons were killed in police firing as several churches and houses were burnt down in different parts of the communal violence-hit Kandhamal district of Orissa on Thursday. The situation across the district continued to remain volatile for the fourth consecutive day even as additional forces were called in from other places to bring the situation under control. Three persons were killed as police opened fire at a mob that attacked the Brahmanigaon police station, Revenue Divisional Commissioner (Southern Range) Satyabrata Sahu told The Hindu over the phone from the district headquarters town of Phulbani in Kandhamal. Mr. Sahu said the situation in the district was tense but under control. Policemen, who had maintained the maximum restraint, opened fire in self-defence, he added. The mob comprising the Vishwa Hindu Parishad activists attacked the police station between 1 and 2 p.m. when the police tried to prevent them from attacking members of the local Christian community, official sources said. Superintendent of Police of Gajapati district Amikendranath Sinha, who was camping at the police station, was injured in the attack. According to sources, a prayer house was damaged at Sankarkhol village, while a mob burnt down a panchayat office at Sugudabadi village of the district. An official said it was difficult to say how many places of worship were damaged as thousands of prayer houses dotted the district, mostly in remote areas. The Brahmanigaon violence and arson took place soon after Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik visited Phulbani town to review the situation. On his return to Bhubaneswar around 2 p.m., Mr. Patnaik claimed that the situation in Kandhamal had "normalised" to a great extent. Confirming that many churches and prayer houses had been damaged, Mr. Patnaik said more than two dozen people had been arrested in the district. "Action is being taken against the guilty," he said, while reiterating his appeal to the people of Kandhamal to maintain peace and harmony. "Peace committees have been formed and meetings are being held." As regards the local tribals' opposition to alleged granting of Scheduled Tribe status to Dalits, Mr. Patnaik said the government would look into their grievances. In Bhubaneswar, Rajya Sabha MP from Kandhamal R. K. Nayak blamed the administration for its 'failure' to bring the situation under control. "The administration has collapsed. There is no law and order in the entire district," Mr. Nayak said. State Congress chief Jayadev Jena criticised the government saying that it had failed to control the situation. (The Hindu 28/12/07)

Central forces for Orissa (7)

New Delhi, Dec. 27: The Centre has been unable to contain the brimming violence in Orissa, even as fresh reports of violence against members of the Christian community came in on the third consecutive day on Thursday. While the damage already seemed to have been inflicted, in a token gesture the Centre decided to rush three companies (just 300 personnel) of paramilitary forces to the riot-hit Kandhamal district of the state. Significantly, the state government of Orissa had been pressing the Centre to send additional forces to control the situation that seemed to be spiralling out of control. Earlier in the day, Union minister of state for home Sriprakash Jaiswal expressed concern over the emerging situation in the state. "If the situation is not brought under control today, we'll send a team. We will get the latest report by Thursday evening. We have to get the violence under control and strict action has to be taken," Mr Jaiswal told reporters. Given that home secretary Madhukar Gupta is on leave, special secretary (internal security) in MHA, M.L. Kumawat, spoke to Orissa director-general of police Gopal Nanda and asked the state to deal firmly with the situation. A report has already been sought by the home ministry from the chief secretary, Orissa, about the situation. Thursday also saw home minister Shivraj Patil holding several meetings in the ministry to discuss the steps needed to tackle the violence in the state, MHA sources said. The ministry also issued an advisory to the Orissa government on Wednesday asking it to protect all religious places. "While two companies of CRPF were sent to the state on Tuesday, one additional company was sent on Thursday on the request of the state government," said Onkar Kedia, DDG, media in MHA. In a related development, the National Commission for Minorities too has already written to the Orissa government seeking a report on the violence against members of the Christian community and the attack on churches in certain parts of the state. Speaking to this newspaper, commission chairman Mohammed Shafi Qureshi confirmed that the commission has been in touch with the Orissa government and had sought a report from them. The state government, he said, has sent a preliminary reply in which it has stated that things are being brought under control. But clearly not satisfied with the state government's reply, the commission has decided to send a team to the state. Mr Qureshi said that the team will be leaving for Orissa in two days time. The two-member team will visit those areas in Orissa that have seen attacks on church buildings and on members of the Christian community. (Asian Age 28/12/07)

700 Christians move to relief camps (7)

BHUBANESHWAR: Nearly 700 Christians fearing attacks by Hindu hard-liners took shelter in government-run relief camps on Saturday after four people died in sectarian violence in Orissa since last week. Authorities were providing food, medicine and security to Christians who moved into the four relief camps on Friday in the rural district of Kandhamal, said Pradeep Kapoor, the inspector-general of police. Meanwhile, two police officers were suspended for failing to prevent violence on Christmas Eve, when long-standing tensions between the Hindu majority and the Christian community erupted over conversions to Christianity, Kapoor said. Nearly 800 police and paramilitary forces were trying to restore calm, he said. No fresh incidents of violence were reported on Saturday for a second day in Kandhamal, nearly 200 kilometers (125 miles) west of Bhubaneswar. The state government also transferred district administrator Bhabagrahi Mohapatra for failing to stop the violence. Three people were killed on Thursday when police fired on a group of hard-line Hindus who burnt a police station in Kandhamal district's Brahmangaon village. They said police failed to protect them after a group of Christians burned several Hindu homes in an apparent retaliation for attacks on churches, officials said. A person also died last week in communal fighting. About 19 churches have been ransacked and burned since Monday and several homes have been destroyed. At least 25 people have been arrested, Superintendent of Police Narsingh Bhol said. Hindu groups have long charged Christian missionaries with trying to lure the poor and those who occupy the lowest rungs of Hinduism's complex caste-system away with promises of money and jobs. Orissa has one of the worst histories of anti-Christian violence. An Australian missionary and his two sons, aged 8 and 10, were burned to death in their car in Orissa following a Bible study class in 1999. (Times of India 29/12/07)

2 days before attacks, Christian leaders wrote to SP: protect us (7)

Phulbani, Kandamal (Orissa), December 28: On December 22, local Christian leaders of Kandamal met the District Collector and the Superintendent of Police, seeking protection. They

handed over a letter which said they felt "insecure and paralysed" and requested that their "life and day-to-day livelihood should be ensured at least from 24th to 26th of December." While the Christians of Bamaniga village were erecting a decorative gate for Christmas, for which they had got permission from the local administration, Vishwa Hindu Parishad activists protested and the two groups clashed. The fight happened just 100 metres from the local police station. There were 16 policemen there but they did not come out. That was the incident that sparked off the violence that engulfed the entire district, leaving at least two dead and a number of churches burnt and police stations vandalised. "It is true that the Christian leaders met and gave the SP and Collector the letter. I think they tried his best. Some additional policemen were scheduled to be posted on Christmas. But everything happened suddenly. In Bamaniga, where the first small incident took place, we gave the permission to erect the gate, but did not pre-empt the following situation. Outsiders instigated the trouble," said Satyabrata Sahoo, Western Range District Commissioner, now in charge of peace-keeping. "Such communal incidents spread fast and cannot be predicted, whatever the police arrangement. Regarding Bamaniga, the personnel were not adequate to control the crowd," said Pradip Kapoor, Inspector General of Police. When the representatives of the Christian Janakalyan Samaj, Phulbani, met SP Narasinga Bhol and District Collector Bhabagrahi Mahapatra, they had expressed concern over the Kandamal district bandh on December 25 and 26 called by a tribal organization, Zilla Kuin Samaj Smarvaya Samiti. Their letter, a copy of which is with The Indian Express, said that Christians feared "attack and disturbances in their faith, worship and holistic approach by the miscreants." "The administration and the police did not act. Had they taken action, the situation would not have become what it is today. Almost all local Christian leaders are in hiding, being hunted by the VHP. We have written to the chief minister to take immediate action to protect the Christians," said Bishop Sarat Chandra Nayek. "Our men are not involved. We have maintained restraint, despite the attack on Swamiji (Laksmanananda Saraswati). These are all lies," said Priyanath Sharma, district secretary of the VHP. The VHP leader was assaulted when he rushed to Bamaniga on hearing the news of the clash on December 24. Within four hours, a number of churches and schools run by the Christian community were vandalized or set afire. Violence spread to nearby areas and hostels and convents in Baliguda, Sankarakhole, Pobingia, Padangi and Barakhama were targeted. Police stations in Bamaniga and Firingia were set afire on Thursday. The administration has imposed curfew in Phulbani, Baliguda, Daringbari and Bamaniga, and section 144 in other blocks of the Kandamal. (Indian Express 29/12/07)

Church attacks: Orissa inches towards normalcy (7)

BHUBANESWAR/BERHAMPUR: The riot-hit Kandhamal is fast limping back to normal. Six days after communal violence flared up in the tribal-dominated district of Orissa, the officials and policemen managed to reach the interior pockets by clearing all the major roads on Saturday. In Bhubaneswar, chief minister Naveen Patnaik said, "The situation is under control in Kandhamal. More forces are on their way to the district." Senior bureaucrat Suresh Mohapatra, who is camping in Kandhamal told TOI, "Though no major incident was reported, curfew would remain in Phulbani, Baliguda, Daringbadi and Brahmanigaon during the night as a preventive measure. All major roads are now open to vehicular traffic." As a "preventive measure" the state government did not allow a seven-party opposition delegation to visit the trouble-torn district. "The Boudh collector and SP stopped us on the way and said it would not be possible for them to allow us to proceed. The chief minister is saying the situation is normal, but by preventing our visit it has been proved that things are not normal," CPM leader Janardhan Pati said. The death toll since violence broke out on December 24 between Christians and Hindus in the district went up to three with the recovery of a decomposed body at Barakhamba area. The administration also suspended two police officers and a revenue inspector on grounds of dereliction of duty. It also transferred a police inspector. "We have suspended the officers in charge of Tikabali and Phiringia police stations, while the inspector in charge of Phulbani Sadar police station has been transferred," revenue divisional commissioner (south) Satyabrata Sahu said. Action would also be initiated against some other officers. At least 35 persons have been arrested so far, Sahu said. "We have set up at least four relief camps at Baliguda, Tikabali, Brahmanigaon schools for the riot victims," a senior official said. In another development, VHP denied that it had attacked churches and prayer halls. "We had only organised a four-hour state-wide bandh the day after

Swami Laxmanananda Saras-wati was attacked. Whatever happened was because of spontaneous reaction of the public against the attack," said Orissa VHP general secretary G P Rath. (Times of India 30/12/07)

Christian leaders meet Ansari over Orissa incidents (7)

NEW DELHI: A delegation of Christian leaders met Vice-President Mohammad Hamid Ansari here on Saturday and appealed for action by the Central Government to stop the continuing attacks on Orissa Christians. The delegation submitted a list of confirmed attacks and sought Government action to re-establish the rule of law and justice in Orissa. Those who met the Vice-President included members from various Christian organisations including the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the All-India Christian Council, the Evangelical Fellowship of India and the Christian Legal Association. "We told the Vice-President that in spite of assurances from the Orissa Government and the Union Home Minister, the situation remains very tense, especially for Christians in rural Orissa," said Abraham Sahu, president of the Delhi chapter of the All-India Christian Council. "Many tribals or Dalits are not only poor but unaware of their freedom of religion and legal rights under the Constitution," he added. "Reports from Orissa indicate that sick people aren't getting medical attention. Many rural Christians have run away from villages into the forests and don't have enough food," said Madhu Chandra, regional secretary of the All-India Christian Council. The delegation also plans to appeal to the National Human Rights Commission of India. According to a release issued by the All-India Christian Council, the violence in Orissa began when Christians in a village 150 km from the district headquarters of Phulbani began celebrating on Christmas Eve. Some local Hindu fundamentalists opposed the event and a fight ensued. Also a Hindu religious leader was attacked by unknown assailants – allegedly Christians – near Daringbadi while he was travelling. The next day Vishwa Hindu Parishad called for a strike and its members allegedly began attacking Christians across the State. (The Hindu 30/12/07)

PM assurance to church leaders (7)

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Sunday assured a delegation of church leaders that the government would take steps to provide full security to the community, and protect the religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution to all citizens. The delegation — led by Archbishop of Delhi Vincent Concessao — met the Prime Minister to apprise him of the situation in Orissa, where the Christian community and its institutions have been under attack since Christmas-eve. Dr. Singh told the delegation that steps would be taken to offer appropriate compensation for the damage caused to property. A Union Minister would visit Orissa to take stock of the situation. The Prime Minister expressed deep concern at the incidents and told the delegation that he reviewed the situation in the affected areas on Sunday morning while speaking to the Orissa Chief Minister. The delegation included Archbishop Raphael Cheenath of the Cuttack Bhubaneswar diocese of the Catholic Church. (The Hindu 31/12/07)

In an Orissa refugee camp, New Year (7)

Baliguda/Barakhamba (Kandhamal district), December 30: A new year is just hours away, but 2007 is likely to last a long time for over two thousand people crammed in refugee camps in Kandhamal district of Orissa. In the space of one week, they have had their houses burnt to ashes, their lives turned upside down, and with no immediate hope of a turnaround, they enter the next year with fear in their hearts. The communal violence in the district since Christmas eve has left them running from their homes for shelter to refugee camps. The authorities admit that the three camps at Baliguda, Firinghia and Bamuniga — set up only yesterday — may not be enough, and more are being planned. As winter reaches its peak, the refugees have no warm clothes or blankets, or utensils to cook food. "There is no report of fresh violence," says Satyabrata Sahoo, Western Range Commissioner, who is in-charge of the district. "But since a number of houses were burnt and property destroyed, we had to set up relief camps. The camps are open to everyone, but only Christians are coming so far." It's been a week since the attacks started, but the fear is palpable in one of the affected villages, Barakhamba, and the Baliguda Higher Secondary School, the refugee camp nearest to it. "I was at my home in Barakhamba village on the night of Christmas along with my wife and five children. Suddenly word spread that our church was being set fire to. Minutes later people carrying arms tried to enter my house. We

escaped through the backdoor, but I lost my family in the dark,” says 50-year old Adam Kumar Digal, a converted Christian now staying at the Baliguda camp. Struggling to keep the nervousness from his voice, he adds: “Over a 100 people from the village are missing. I have heard they are hiding in the forest... some may be dead.” The two-storey school is home to over 600 refugees, all Christians. Cradling her baby, who has fever, Inogin Digal of Barakhamba village is anxious for news about her husband, among those “missing” .”I ran away with my baby and hid in the forest. The next morning I came to the high school. I could not bring anything with me and heard that they have torched our house,” she says. Illias Naik is looking for his three young boys, Baja, Sisir and Samir, who were not home when the attackers came. “There were over 200 people armed with spears and axes. I pleaded for mercy, but they dragged me and my wife out and beat me up. Then my house and shop were burnt. They also burnt the church next door.” Standing in front of his charred house, hoping for information on his sons, Naik says no policeman or official has come to meet him yet. Sahoo admits that the conditions at the camps are bad, but adds that they are doing their best. “What can we do? There are so many of them. Now we can only provide dal and rice, we will provide utensils tomorrow. Rs 30 lakh has come from the Chief Minister’s Relief Fund.” He promises that a rehabilitation plan is being drawn up and BPL families would be provided 50 kg of rice for two months. At Barakhamba, all that stands are rows and rows of charred houses, and ransacked churches, schools, convents and educational centres. Children are among those sifting through the remains, for whatever they can find. Seven small churches in the area apart from 60 houses were either burnt or ransacked. A student of Class X in the local convent, Tina Digal asks why the attackers didn’t spare even her books. “There is nothing left. They set all on fire.” Tina’s father Thadesh Digal is the pastor of a local church. The Baliguda church is in ruins, with images and idols destroyed and even the vocational training centre, computer and typewriters not spared. The classrooms and hostel of the convent on the premises have also been vandalised. Sahoo says while they are still to make an estimate of the number of houses and other properties damaged, “so far we think it is above 200”. (Indian Express 31/12/07)