

Christianity in India. A Rising tide in the face of Persecution

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Introduction

According to Pope John Paul II «at the end of the second millennium the church has once again become a church of martyrs». The prophetic words of the holy Pope can be actualised in the present context of the world especially in the Middle East. When I was doing my theology in St. Thomas Apostolic Seminary, Kerala (India), I could attend one sharing session of a religious nun who had been working for many years in the northern part of India especially in the state of Orissa. She was one of the victims of persecutions at Kandhamal in the year 2006 and 2007. She said Christians in Orissa were strong and brave holding their faith in Jesus even before the death. The driving force of that community were the words of St. James. In the letter of St. James we read: «My brothers and sisters whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may become mature and strong, lacking in nothing» (Jam 1, 2-4). Whoever suffers is rich in faith. The richness of the church is not her big churches and institutions, but richness lays in the people who are living the faith even in adverse situations. In the great history of the Church, the history of the glory and history of the persecutions cannot be separated from each other. These two realities are parallel. If one part of the world is celebrating its faith in a secure situation, the other part may be suffering to survive its faith. The Church is founded on the rock of faith of the martyrs from the time of the apostles. Therefore, we can say that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

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1. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church

The most famous phrase «The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church» is the paraphrase of the words written by the very famous church writer Tertullian in his book, *The Apology for the Christians* in 197 A. D. He says: «But your worst, rack your inventions for tortures for Christians - it is all to no purpose; you do but attract the world, and make it fall the more in love with our religion; the more you mow us down, the thicker we rise; the Christian blood you spill is like the seed you sow, it springs from the earth again, and fructifies the more»¹. The word *martyr* is derived from the Greek, and it means “witness”. All members of the church are to be called to witness the master in every field of their lives. When we trace back the deep foundation stones of the gospel, we can realise the ultimate vocation of each Christian is to bear witness to the master until the death. When referring to the sacrifice of Jesus, the ultimate martyr who innocently died at the hands of persecutors, but was still able to forgive those who had plotted against his death. Through the long history of the church we can realise the fact that the fate of the Christians is nothing other than this. «The early church historian Eusebius claims that there were ten persecutions of the early church from the time of Christ to his time (fourth century) – those under Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Diocletian etc. ...»². The history of the persecutions is going along with the history of the church. The big threat for being a Christian, which was faced by the early Christian communities, is continuing even in the twenty-first century. Whoever overcame these sufferings had his faith in his mind that even dying in the name of Jesus Christ has a salvific and redemptive value. In the words of St. Paul: «For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain» (Phil 1, 21).

Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world. An average of at least 180 Christians around the world are killed each month for their faith. Even in the postmodern liberal society, Christians in more than 60 countries face the lot of sufferings from their governments or surrounding neighbours simply because of their faith in Christ. «One of the worst countries in the world for the persecution of the Christians is in North Korea. With the exception of four official state controlled churches in Pyongyang, Christians in North Korea face the risk of detention in prison campus, severe torture and, in some cases, execution for having practiced their religious beliefs. And those caught in possession of a Bible, have been known to be executed. The conditions in this country have remained the worst in the world

¹ TERTULLIAN, *Apologeticus*, 50; English translation in http://www.tertullian.org/articles/reeve_apology.htm (cons. 04/03/2016).

² *A short saying often contains much wisdom*, a-short-saying.blogspot.ch (cons. 04/03/2016).

for Christians for the past 21 years»³. Currently we are speaking about the attack on Christian denominations by ISIS, especially in the Middle East. When we look back in history, the persecution of Christians by Muslim fanatics has started around the 7th century. «In short, Muslim persecution of Christians exists in 40 nations today as part of continuum that started nearly 14 centuries ago; the very sample patterns of Christian persecution prevalent throughout the Muslim world today are often identical to those from centuries past»⁴. On Monday January 25th 2016, at an ecumenical gathering marking the close of the week of prayer for Christian Unity, Pope Francis said the persecution of Christians is nothing less than the persecution of Jesus Christ.

2. Christianity in India

India is one of the most diverse nations in terms of religion. It is the birthplace of four major world religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. «The Constitution of India guarantees certain fundamental rights for the citizens as well as non-citizens. The preamble of the Constitution declares that the provisions of the Constitution have been made to assure the dignity of the individual which is also the basic objective of the International Humanitarian Law. Article 21 of the Constitution of India, guarantees the right to life and personal liberty. No person can be deprived of the fundamental right to life and liberty except by the procedure established by law»⁵. But the practice of this religious freedom is not an actualised fact in the current Indian context. Even though the Constitution assures this liberty, the government authorities are not willing to make vigilance over this practice. «Though India counts almost a billion people within its borders, it has at least twenty-five billion Christians; and most Indians think of Christianity as a holdover from the British Raj. In fact, Christianity may have arrived in India earlier than it did in Britain. Legends suggest that India may have first been evangelized by the Apostle Thomas: Christianity did not come to England until centuries later»⁶.

But most of the Indians were converted to Christianity by the missionaries who

³ J. CARTER, *Five Facts about Christian Persecution*, erlc.com/article/5-facts-christian-persecution (cons. 04/03/2016).

⁴ R. IBRAHIM, *Muslim Persecution of Christians: A Centuries Old Phenomenon*, http://www.breitbart.com/ national- security (cons. 05/03/2016).

⁵ N. B. SRIKRISHNA, *International Human Rights and Protection of Refugees – The Indian Experience*, in INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REFUGEE LAW JUDGES, *The Changing Nature of Persecution/La nature changeante de la persecution. 4th Conference/4ème conférence, October/Octobre 2000, Bern, Switzerland*, Bern 2001, 162.

⁶ R. ROYAL, *The Catholic Martyrs of The Twentieth Century*, New York 2000, 310.

arrived in India with European powers from the 16th century. The Europeans arrived here for commercial reasons, especially in the trade of spices; but they also started converting local Indians to Christianity. The Portuguese were the first European power to arrive in India. Later the British arrived in India at the end of 17th century. The British were unlike the Portuguese; they never supported the Christian missionaries to work along with them. After one century the English missionaries were allowed to enter their territory. But the main focus of the English missionaries was not conversion but humanitarian help such as giving the needy basic necessities of like food, clothes and shelter. In the education field they contributed much to the Indian society, many of them even today have Christian or European originated name. «There are about 30 million Christians in India. The major centres of Christianity in India are Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Manipur and Mizoram. There is also a big community of Christians in Mumbai. The main division of Christians in India is like in the Christian world, Catholics and Protestants. There are also different denominations among them, the Syrian Church, the Armenian Church, the Anglican Church and others. Most of the Indian Christians were converted by the Portuguese. There is also an Anglo-Indian community in India»⁷. According to the Census of Religious commutes in 2011, India now has 966.3 million Hindus, who make up 79.8 per cent of the population and 172.2 million Muslims who make up 14.23 per cent. Among the other minorities, Christians make up 2.3 per cent of the entire population. «The total number of Christians in India is numbered 24.08 million. About 70 per cent Indian Christians declare themselves Roman Catholics including 3.5 million of the Syro-Malabar Church and 300,000 members of the Syro-Malakara Church. The Syro-Malabar church constitutes the second largest among twenty two Eastern Catholic Churches who accept the Pope as the “Visible Head of the Whole Church”. During the 20th century, the fastest growing Christian communities have been located in the northeast, among the Khasis, Mizos, Nagas, and other tribes. Today Christians have their largest numbers in the north-east and in the south-western states of Kerala and Goa. Indian Christians have contributed significantly to, and have been well represented, in various spheres of national life. They currently serve as chief ministers of the states like Andhra Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Kerala»⁸.

3. Christian Persecutions in Indian Background

Pope John Paul II in his visit to New Delhi in November 1999 published a special document *Ecclesia in Asia (The Church in Asia)*. In this document, the Pope high-

⁷ ADANIEL'S INFO SITE, *Christianity in India*, adaniel.tripod.com/Christianity.htm (cons. 06/03/2016).

⁸ NEW WORLD ENCYCLOPAEDIA, CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA, newworldencyclopedia.org (cons. 09/03/2016).

lights a vision of the Asian continent and the Church's future there for the new millennium. «Just a few months before the Pope's visit, a hate campaign by the Hindu fundamentalists led to riots that caused the murder of a catholic priest, Father Arul Das, and a Muslim shopkeeper on August 25, in the state of Orissa. Similar deaths and mob destruction of churches is fortunately uncommon in India. Even Mother Teresa of Calcutta was a controversial figure in this environment»⁹. Historically Hindus and Christians had been living in relative peace before the arrival of colonialism. When the European colonialists arrived in India, they brought about large-scale missionary activities. They popularised the Christianity in Indian background. In more contemporary period, Hindu-Christian amity has been threatened by the hidden Hindu fanatic groups. Some Political leaders of today are playing a wicked game in order to be in authority, using the religious faith of the common people as medium of political policy and propagating religious fanaticism as India is for Hindus. In short, a way of pleasing the majority and transmitting the fanatic mentality of Hinduthuva are the current tactics of the crooked party politics. India is the most popular democracy and federal constitutional republic government in the world with a parliamentary system. There are 29 states and 7 union territories. Among these 29 states, seven of them have already passed the anti-conversion bill. «In 2002 the Government of Tamil Nadu issued an ordinance to prevent people from converting to Christianity. In 2006 Madhya Pradesh Government passed legislation that, who desires to convert to provide the government with one month's notice or face fines and penalties»¹⁰. In the words of great Pope John Paul II «at the end of the second millennium, the church has once again become a church of martyrs». This prophecy is actualised in this contemporary scene in the world. When we analyse the Indian context, the potentiality to spread the Christian faith is blocked by the anti-conversation bill in the majority of the states. Even though India is considered as a secular country, the freedom of practicing each ones' faith is not an easy task as in the previous years.

In recent decades, the reports of destroyed churches and cruel attacks on Christians have become a frequent reality in India. «The rise of anti-Christian violence during last few decades in Adivasi areas, Gujarat, MP, and Orissa has been an unnerving experience for the community as a whole and for those believing in pluralism and diversity of the country in particular. The violence, which picked up from mid-1990s peaked in the burning alive of Pastor Graham Stains (January 1999) and later Kandhamal violence in 2007 and 2008. After this, there was a type of low intense scattered violence in remote areas, until the attack on churches in Delhi during the last several months. These churches which were attacked were scattered in five corners of Delhi: Dilshad Garden (East), Jasola (South), Rohini (Outer Delhi), Vikaspuri

⁹ R. ROYAL, *The Catholic Martyrs of The Twentieth Century*, New York 2000, 309.

¹⁰ NEW WORLD ENCYCLOPAEDIA, *Christianity in India*, newworldencyclopedia.org (cons. 11/03/2016).

(West) and Vasant Kunj (South West), as if by design the whole area of Delhi was to be covered for polarization»¹¹. «Prof Ram Puniyani is the mentor of Plural India and an authority on Hindutva, having studied the saffron right wing brigade for decades, said that the Hindutva affiliates had now clearly turned their attention to Christians, as they found the community to be soft targets, with little fear of retaliation. He said on going through the reports coming in from all over the country, the incidents were widespread and scattered (urban and rural), but more in the latter – Tribal, Adivasi, Mofusil and Backward and Adivasi areas. It is here, where Christians have been rendering yeoman service (as few fear to tread), that the RSS affiliates like VHP, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, Bajrang Dal etc have intensified their activities, so the Christians are helpless»¹².

3.1. Example of Orissa incidents

Christians in India faced a lot of cruel attacks especially in the years of 2006 and 2007. Reports from Orissa in 2006 and 2007 indicate that the violence wrought against Christians is constant and there is no likelihood of an ebbing tide of violence in the near future. Hindu extremists have resorted to forced re-conversions; on October 4, 2006, Hindu extremists abducted, tonsured, and tortured a convert to Christianity. Just two days prior to this attack, «the VHP reconverted 129 tribal Christians to Hinduism. The minority Christian community in Kandhamal district [of Orissa], many of whom are forest tribal people and low-caste Dalit converts from Hinduism to Christianity, say they've been targeted by radical Hindu nationalist organizations seeking to put an end to the church and its activities in the region»¹³. The statistical report on loss of life and destruction of Christian institutions notes that the persecution of Christians in the state of Orissa is the biggest attack on Christianity in India in history. «In the waves of violence triggered by the death of the controversial Hindu religious figure Swami Laxmanananda, hordes of Hindu militants burnt down hundreds of Christian homes. The attacks were being carried out mostly at night. Most of the homes were ransacked, looted and burnt down. The report says that over 4000 houses were burnt and destroyed. In many places people from neighbouring villages also joined in looting and destroying the houses of Christians who fled into the surrounding forest and hills»¹⁴.

¹¹ R. PUNIYANI, *Are Christians persecuted in India*, mattersindia.com (cons. 13/03/2016).

¹² NEWSGRAB, *Ram Puniyani Exposes Hindutva Strategy Against Christians*, cmpaul.wordpress.com (cons. 13/03/2016).

¹³ I. DAN, *What is Behind Hindu-Christian Violence*, BBC News Jan 29, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/7214053.stm (cons. 14/03/2016).

¹⁴ P. PRAKASHAN, *The Recent Attacks on Christians in Orissa. A theological response*, Patna 2009, 4.

«*Kandhamal's Forgotten Children*, a study by Haq – a child rights group based in New Delhi –, brought out the catastrophe that unfolded in Kandhamal due to thousands of Christian families languishing in dingy refugee camps and in no-man's areas on empty stomachs. The sudden spurt in stillbirths, witnessed in Kandhamal, was the outcome of the distress women underwent during months of fleeing and malnourishment in the refugee camp. Kandhamal witnessed several horrendous acts as the bigots laid bare their perverted minds with the sadistic torture of dozens of Christians. One such act was the rape of a young catholic nun in public»¹⁵.

3.2. Dr. Graham Staines Episode

The history of India had faced many communal riot and assassinations of many innocent people. Among them, Dr. Staines' death may be the most heart-breaking incident. It will be always a black mark in the glorious India history. «Dr. Graham Stuart Staines was an Australian Christian missionary who along with his two sons Philip (aged 10) and Timothy (aged 6) were burnt to death by a gang while sleeping in their station wagon at Manoharpur village in Kenjhar district in Orissa, India on January 22, 1999. In 2003, the Barjang Dal activist Dara Singh was convicted of leading the gang that murdered Staines. Staines had been working in Orissa among the tribal poor and especially with leprosy patients since 1965. Hindu groups allege that he forcefully converted or lured many Hindus into Christianity, but Staines' widow Gladys denied these allegations. She continued to live in India caring for leprosy patients until 2004 before going back to Australia»¹⁶. The reaction of the widow Gladys which was seen in the India popular newspaper The Times of India in the very next day was blissful. She said: «Because of forgiveness I hold no bitterness towards the persons who killed my family». In the midst of these kinds of suffering, if one could hold his faith will be the real manifestation of faith in God and complete trust in the words of Jesus Christ. In 2005 she was awarded the fourth highest civilian honour in India "Padma Shree" as the sign of honouring her work with leprosy patients in Orissa.

4. Conclusion

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right. The universal declaration of

¹⁵ A. AKKARA, *Early Christians of 21st Century*, Bangalore 2013, 183.

¹⁶ MISSIONARIES BIOGRAPHY, *Dr. Graham Stuart Staines*, www.missionariesbiography.com (cons. 14/03/2016).

Human Rights guarantees people this right. In spite of this, religious freedom is fast declining in the world. In some countries, the state takes the lead in suppressing the faithful. They impose bans on particular faith, prohibit conversion and restrict religious practice. In other countries, the people make their societies unfriendly to minority beliefs. According to research, 80% of all religious persecutions are against Christians. This makes Christians the most persecuted religious group in the world. Through the lectures of the Intensive week from 15 to 19 February 2016 on *Cristiani perseguitati martiri oggi* I could understand different perspectives and peculiar characteristics of each persecution in the different parts of the world. On this basis, I attempted to write on the attacks on Christianity in India, my mother Land. These persecutions are eye openings for us, how our ancestors kept the faith even in the time of miseries and handed it over to us. It is our duty to live and hand over to the generations without losing its valuable contents. Whatever may be the conditions, the Church will continue on because the head of the Church is Jesus Christ, our Saviour.