

Resource materials for Prayers for Peace between Christians and Hindus in Orissa

This resource contains

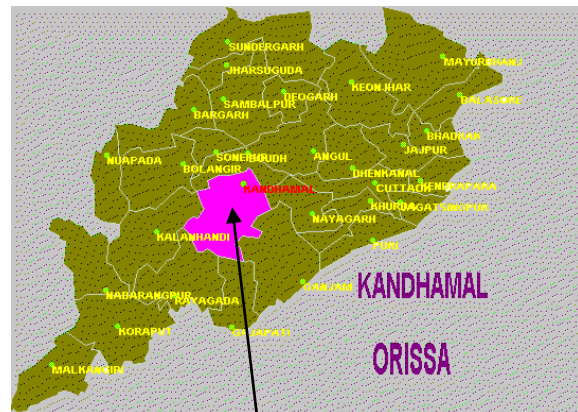
- An outline of the present situation in Orissa and the background to it
- Suggestions for prayer
- A list of the names of Christians who have been killed in the violence
- Links to further resources

It has been prepared for the Day of Prayer for Peace in Orissa on Sunday 2nd November, but is also suitable for other occasions.

The violence and the context



Orissa



Kandhamal district, where much of the violence has taken place

Orissa is one of the poorest states in India. It is largely rural, and levels of deprivation and illiteracy are high.

In recent years, Christianity has been growing strongly among the tribal peoples of the state, thanks to the efforts of local church leaders and missionaries from overseas. The Christian faith has proved especially attractive to people who, over many generations, have suffered oppression as a result of the caste system. As a result, many tribal Christians in Orissa are now being seen as a social and economic threat by certain Hindu groups.

This, combined with a growth in religious intolerance on the part of some hard-line Hindu organisations, and a rise in nationalism, has led to Christians becoming targets for violence in Orissa and some other parts of India. The Kandhamal district of Orissa, where around a quarter of the population are Christians, has seen particularly severe violence.

The latest upsurge of violence occurred following the murder in August of a Hindu activist, Swami Lakshmananda Saraswati. While responsibility for the assassination has been claimed by Maoists, Christians have been blamed and thousands of Christian houses have been burnt down. Large numbers of churches have also been damaged or destroyed. Over twenty Christians have been killed, and there have been some horrific stories of beatings and rapes.

Thousands of Christians have had to flee to relief camps, or have taken refuge in the forest or in nearby towns and cities. Many of those who wish to return to their homes are being told that they must convert to Hinduism if they wish to be safe. While the police and army have intervened to restore calm, they have been criticised for not responding quickly enough and in some cases for being pro-Hindu.

The violence has been covered very extensively in the Indian media, and there is clearly serious concern over much of Indian society that such 'religious cleansing' can occur in a society which claims to give religious freedom to all. Christian leaders have lobbied at the highest levels for stronger government action, and in early October a seven day vigil of prayer and action for the Church in Orissa was held in Delhi.

At the time of writing – mid October – the situation in Kandhamal and other parts of Orissa remains tense, and there have been outbreaks of violence against Christians in other parts of India. It must be said, however, that the great majority of Hindus are peace-loving and would wish to distance themselves from the violent actions of extremist groups. Nevertheless, it is hard to see how the thousands of Christians who have had to flee their homes will be able to return and rebuild their lives, without some very strong safeguards from the national and state authorities. In some villages, Hindus are being asked to display saffron flags on their homes, to mark themselves out as non-Christian – which means that all houses which do not display such a flag are a target for religious violence.

Suggestions for prayer

Below are listed ten prayer topics: these can be used as part of the intercessions for services on Sunday 2nd November, or as the basis for a more extended period of prayer, such as a vigil. The theme of All Saints and All Souls relates well to our prayers for those who have been affected by the violence, and in particular who have died as a result of it.

- The churches in the state of Orissa, particularly the congregations whose church buildings have been destroyed by the violence
- The thousands of Christians who have had to leave their homes, and who are now in relief camps or other temporary accommodation
- The families and communities who are mourning for those who have been killed in the violence, and those who are caring for those who have been injured or raped
- All those who are trying to rebuild relationships between Christians and the Hindu communities
- The Church leaders in Orissa, especially Bishop Bijay Nayak, Bishop of Phulbani, and Bishop Samson Das, Bishop of Cuttack
- The police and army in Orissa, that they may act wisely and fairly in their attempts to restore order and peace
- The state government of Orissa, especially its Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, as it responds to the violence and tries to provide safeguards for Christians
- The national government of India, that it may give effective protection to religious minorities, especially at this time the Christians in Orissa
- The children from the Christian communities in Orissa, who have had to leave their schools as a result of the violence
- The agencies who are working in the relief camps, bringing help to those who have fled the violence

List of names of those killed in the violence against Christians in Orissa, August-October 2008

In some churches, the names of those from the parish who have died over the past year are read out at a service for All Souls' Day. The names of the Christians of Orissa who have died in the recent violence could also be read out in our churches this year:

Dasarath Pradhan
Kamolini Nayak
Pastor Samuel Nayak
Romesh Digal
Jacob Digal
Sureshon Nayak
Abhimonyu Nayak
Bikram Nayak
Goyadhar Digal
Dibyasundar Digal
Parakhita Nayak
Trinath Digal
Joseph Digal
Gopan Nayak
Khogeswar Pradhan
Ajuba Nayak
Rosananda Pradhan
Jaka Nayak
Akhar Digal
Sidheswar Digal
Praful Nayak
Mary Digal
Pastor Daniel Mallick
Michael Nayak
Gulu
Bidyadhara Digal

Further resources

The Derbyshire Churches' CNI partnership website has a page which gives links to additional information about the violence: <http://www.northindia-derbyshirechurches-partnership.org.uk/orissa.htm>

See also this excellent video from the BBC:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7670747.stm

This is a particularly good article about the background to the violence -
http://tehelka.com/story_main40.asp?filename=Ne130908CoverStory.asp

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