

Date: October 13, 2021

To,

**Shri Atif Rasheed**

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*Subject: Complaint against attack on Christian nuns and Christian prayer congregation*

Dear Sir,

We, at Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP) are writing to you to bring to your attention that widespread reports of right-wing vigilante mobs have been out on the streets in Mau, Uttar Pradesh and disturbing peaceful prayers and have even mistreated nuns and handed them over to the police under the false allegation that they were carrying out religious conversions. In two different incidents on October 10, such mobs who claimed to be activists of Bajrang Dal as well as Hindu Yuva Vahini disturbed a prayer meeting and took the worshippers to the police station including the pastor and in another incident two nuns were taken to the police station on similar allegations of 'religious conversion'. The allegations moreover appear to be completely baseless, never mind that Article 25 of the Indian Constitution gives every Indian citizen the right to freely profess and practice he/his faith. Our interviews with many of those religious persons, women, reveal a disturbing pattern of vigilantism that clearly enjoys high degrees of immunity from the authorities. Repeated efforts by us to speak to concerned law and order officials came to naught. We believe that these called for a concerted *suo motu* investigation by the Hon'ble National Commission for the Minorities.

**The incidents**

On Sunday October 10, a school principal Sister Gracy Monteiro, her colleague Sister Roshni Minj and their driver were attacked by a right-wing vigilante mob as they were at a bus stand in Mau, Uttar Pradesh. The mob was reportedly a part of Hindutva groups such as the Hindu Yuva Vahini.

Sister Monteiro spoke to CJP's sister organization, Sabrang India and gave a detailed account of what happened on October 10. Sister Monteiro had come to the city bus stand around noon, with her colleague Sister Minj, and school driver when a mob of Hindutva radicals, dragged them out, roughed up the driver and forcibly took the three to the police station where there were kept

till 6 p.m. Sister Monerrio says she kept asking the mobs who they were, and kept trying to prevent them from hitting the driver, a non-Christian, even as the mob continued abusing and attacking and accusing the three of religious conversion. The driver who has worked in the school for a long time, has not converted to Christianity, and now was harassed and victimized for merely being with the sisters. At the police station they were held without reason and later released, recalled Sr Monterio, only once she managed to contact the relevant authorities.

“There were just the three of us. I was accompanying Sister Minj who was going home to Ranchi to visit her dying father. As we did not get the direct bus, we went to the Mau bus stand and Sr Minj went to ask about the bus, while the driver and I stayed in the car. Then a mob came and attacked the driver dragged him out, forced is nuns to walk to the police station,” she recalled, adding that they were perhaps identified as Christians because they were in the nun’s uniform of cream-coloured salwar kameez and the convent's name was painted on the side of their Bolero.

“They said get out of the car, I asked them why. They started hitting our driver, and I told them not to hit us as I was going to answer whatever questions they had. They told us to ‘get out of the car and we will show you who we are,’” she recalled the mob took out the vehicle's key and made them walk to the police station. It was more shocking for her that no policeman intervened when the mob attacked.

“We were in shock, this was sudden and unprovoked. Sister Minj was already under stress as her father is critical. I demanded that a policewoman come and we will not come with them. Even the police asked us ‘are you converting?’” It was hours later, that an inspector showed up and spoke to them, “We showed him all our proof. Even the photo of Sr Minj’s critically ill father. Then the inspector said it was by mistake that we were picked up.” However, while there were no apologies, the nuns say it was the most traumatic experience.

“Who were the two attackers. They have no right to attack us. I am against mobs, we have to complain. They have no right to attack. Who gave them the authority to ask her ‘who are you, where did you come from?’” she asked adding “We are also human beings, no? I objected to them berating my driver, they kept holding his collar. What kind of security, protection do we have? I do not have any safety to go out alone. Now we have to be careful.”

She added, “We are citizens of India. We are not doing something wrong. We have a lot of work. The entire day was wasted in the police station. Sister Minj lost money as her ticket was wasted. She had to travel the next day. I had identified the attackers to the lady police, but the cop asked me for the photo. But the police had put us in a room by then and that man who attacked was not seen again”.

On the same day a regular Christian prayer service was attacked by a Hinduva mob some of whom claimed to be activists of Bajrang Dal as well as Hindu Yuva Vahini. The group then forced the Christian worshipers, including the priest to the police station. According to the First Information Report (FIR) filed by one Radheshyam Singh the worshipers have been accused of forcing people to convert to Christianity through allurements, as well as “violating Covid-19 protocol, using musical instruments, consuming narcotics and other intoxicants.”

Those arrested included Pastor Abraham Shakeel Ahmed, his wife Pratibha, Vijendra Rajbhar and Geeta Devi, the couple in whose house the worship took place. Rajbhar was then questioned on camera by ‘youtube journalists’, and he maintained that no forcible conversions were taking

place and that the worship in his house had been a regular one. Even the pastor is heard saying in a video clip that anyone can attend the worship without discrimination and that they pray for those who are unwell or need any kind of support and prayer.

According to local Christians those from the independent churches are the ones most easily targeted as vigilante mobs barge into house churches, and disrupt prayers, beating up the ones leading the prayers. Some pastors, who themselves often hail from poor families, often then go into hiding and some even stop preaching.

### **Impact**

We would humbly like to point out that on October 7, we wrote to you about the multiple attacks that took place between October 2 and October 3 in Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh by right wing mobs who vandalized a church and disrupted prayers in many incidents. This is clearly therefore not just a case of isolated incidents but a sinister pattern here at work.

This incident of Mau, UP is of similar nature and pattern. The intention is to create a fear psychosis to carry out such attacks every few days attacking common [people belonging to one particular faith and dissuading them from worshipping their gods. This instance has gone a step ahead and the mob has attacked nuns who were simply waiting in a car at a bus stand. It was their clothes that gave away their religious identity and they were targeted only on the basis of their religious identity and false allegations of religious conversion were made.

Clearly, these attacks had a motive of intimidating the members of the minority Christian community and creating an environment of fear psychosis on communal lines.

Such expression of extreme hate with a clear communal (majoritarian) objective to establish religious hegemony upon a community that is already a minority in numbers in the country, is deplorable and against the constitutional values that we uphold as citizens of this country.

The intention behind these attacks seems to be to subjugate the minority community and its members which will create fear in them while even going to church and worship their god, thus seriously impeding their right to practice their religion. No society should reach such limits of threat for a community that they fear from exercising their fundamental rights.

Admittedly, locals from the area have stated, as mentioned above, that independent churches are/have been targeted and pastors who are economically poor have stopped preaching their faith due to the fear that has been created.

**We are hopeful that this esteemed Commission will do the needful to protect the interest of minorities in India so that targeted violence does not destroy the social and secular fabric of our democratic country. The very mandate of the Hon'ble NCM is to investigate and report such instances to ensure that the inherent tenets and values of a democracy preserves the valued concepts of the right to life the right to equality before the law and the rights to a life of non-discrimination and diversity.**

In a democracy like ours, it is important as citizens to respect each one and other's beliefs and religion and any form of interference with one's personal choice is an act of perverse invasion and beyond the scope of law. Our Father of the Nation, Mohandas Karamchandi Gandhi had

once said, as was also quoted Jagmohan Reddy and Nusserwanji Vakil in the **Judicial Commission Report on the Ahmedabad Riots, 1969**,

“There are many religions as there are individuals; but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another religion. If Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dreamland. The Hindus, the Mahomedans, the Parsees and the Christians who have made their country are fellow countrymen and they will have to live in unity if only for their own interest. In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been so in India”.

Persecution Relief, an organisation that provides support to persecuted Christians in India and records hate crimes against the community, releases reports about hate crimes against Christians. As per its third quarterly report in 2020 titled, “Hate Crimes against Christians in India”, over 450 cases of attacks on the minority community had been recorded. From August 2020 to October 2020, Persecution Relief recorded 157 cases of such hate crimes. Its quarterly report released lists these crimes to include 4 murders, 46 attacks, 32 crimes against women, 43 false complaints against Christians, 45 cases of ‘collusion of authority’, 22 boycotts, 20 church attacks, and 21 unjust arrests. Hate Crimes against Christians in India have risen by an alarming 40.87 percent, even at a time when the nation was under Covid-19 lockdown. Persecution Relief’s half yearly report of 2020 has on record 293 cases of hate crimes against Christians, including five rapes and six murders. In the same months of 2019, Persecution Relief had recorded 208 such incidents. From January 2016- June 2020, Persecution Relief states that they have recorded more than 2067 cases where Christians have been attacked in India.

*The SabrangIndia articles dated July 31, 2020 and October 15, 2021 is annexed hereto as **Annexure A** and **Annexure B**.*

The attacks on Christians in India have a long historical background which dates back to the 1990’s, for instance the attacks on Christians in Gujarat in the late 1990’s as also documented in a Human Rights Watch report. A majority of reported incidents of violence against Christians in 1998 occurred in Gujarat. Between January 1998 and February 1999, the Indian Parliament reported 116 incidents of attack on Christians in India. When the HRW team visited Dangs, Gujarat in 1998, they were told how the Hindus removed ornamentations from the churches in the region, on December 25, 1998.

*The Human Rights Watch report is annexed hereto as **Annexure C**.*

And almost 20 years later, similar instances continue to take place to harass the minorities. In December 2020, the doors of every church in the city of Silchar, Assam were closed on Christmas eve with Police and CRPF deployed inside in anticipation of violence by Bajrang Dal. Ramakrishna Mission has a long tradition of celebrating Christmas and worshipping Jesus Christ. Portraits of Jesus Christ and Mother Mary are placed next to the idol of Sri Ramakrishna and Mother Sarada and cakes are decorated the same way every year to mark the birth of Jesus. But all such rituals were disrupted by the Sangh Parivar.

*The SabrangIndia report dated December 26, 2020 is annexed hereto as **Annexure D**.*

India has a long-standing history of printing books with extremist content that militate against the constitutional vision in some privately run schools, clearly used for the dissemination of

blatantly partisan and prejudicial ideas, again which are anti-Constitutional. CJP's sister publication Sabrang communications (now SabrangIndia) has documented many such issues in **Communalism Combat**, its monthly magazine. In 1999, the Vidya Bharati schools used textbooks with statements about the followers of Christianity read, "It is because of the conspiratorial policies of the followers of this religion that India was partitioned. Even today Christian missionaries are engaged in fostering anti-national tendencies in Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal, Bihar, Kerala, and other regions of our country because of which there is a grave danger to the integrity of present-day India".

*The Communalism Combat cover story from October 1999 is annexed hereto as **Annexure E**.*

This historical injustice and systematic alienation are important to be considered before taking into account such violent hate crimes. It is imperative that the culprits in all of these incidents do not go unpunished and are brought to book, arrested and taken through due process of law and that such acts are not taken lightly by the police and are dealt with firmly.

In a shocking display of unaccountability –and what amounts to making the victim pay as perpetrator, one of these incidents the pastor and other members of the prayer congregation have been put behind bars by Mau Police on false allegations while they were merely offering prayers.

## **Prayers**

We humbly urge this Hon'ble Commission to

1. Conduct a full-fledged inquiry/investigation into these brutal and targeted attacks and publish a comprehensive report on it for widespread distribution in the country.
2. Take cognizance of the attack on the nuns who were needlessly targeted on their religious identity under section 9 (1) (d) of the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992
3. Undertake studies into the various problems arising out of such discrimination against minorities and take up such matters with appropriate authorities under section 9 (1) (e) of the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992
4. Seek information on the case registered against the Pastor and others by Mau Police and the charges against them under section 9(4) of the 1992 Act.
5. Ensure physical protection to members of the religious minorities in a state like Uttar Pradesh where a culture of violence-driven immunity appears to prevail.
6. Issue an immediate statement –pending the deeper investigation/inquiry --condemning these attacks urging police to take stringent action to ensure the immediate release of those innocents in custody.
7. Issue guidelines/advisory to all State Governments/ administrations, State Police Departments to deal with communally motivated and partisan attacks in a stringent manner and urge the authorities to follow through with these complaints in a swift manner
8. Take any other action as it may deem fit, including pursuing the issue with other statutory authorities and even the courts if need be.



Yours sincerely,

Citizens for Justice and Peace

Nandan Maluste, CJP President

Teesta Setalvad, CJP Secretary

Annexures

Annexure A SabrangIndia report dated July 31, 2020

Annexure B SabrangIndia report dated October 15, 2020

Annexure C Human Rights Watch report

Annexure D SabrangIndia report dated December 26, 2020

Annexure E Communalism Combat, October 1999