

Fact Finding Report of attacks against Christians in North Karnataka

New Delhi, 13th December 2021

Religious Liberty Commission of EFI records 39 incidents against Christians in Karnataka since January 2021.



Introduction

In the wake of the media reported attacks against Christians in North Karnataka, a fact-finding team from EFI's Religious Liberty Commission visited the region, travelling to 8 towns and cities and meeting at least 12 pastors and Christian leaders who have experienced opposition and harassment in the recent past. The team also met over 50 pastors and Christian leaders, including the Presidents of various Pastors Fellowships from the region.

It is clear and obvious that an atmosphere of fear and apprehension prevails in the Christian community and its grassroots religious clergy because of a systematic targeting through a vicious and malicious hate campaign. It is equally obvious that those involved in carrying out this hate campaign and fear mongering enjoy protection and possibly support of elements in the political and law and order apparatus on the state.

The EFI is making its report public in the interests of the Christian community in the state and the country, and to help safeguard peace and harmony by calling upon the State government to act immediately before any major untoward incident takes place. This report is also being sent to the Governor of Karnataka, the Chief Minister, the National Commission for Minorities, to the Ministry of Home Affairs and to the office of the Prime Minister of India for their information.

The EFI team has come to the conclusion that the constant talk at the highest levels of the government of Karnataka in recent weeks about the introduction of a so-called Freedom of Religion Bill which is widely better known as the Anti-conversion law, in the forthcoming Legislative Assembly session to be held in Belagavi from 13th December 2021 has empowered non-state actors to target Christians who are a miniscule minority in the state (1.87%), even less than the national average of 2.3 %

The escalating situation seems to be getting out of hand and so far there is no effective response from higher political and police authorities to stem the hate campaign and threats which are being carried out by persons and through social media. The Christian community in Karnataka has a good reason to apprehend an outbreak of violence against them.

Government Survey of Christians and Churches in the state

News of a government proposal to survey “official as well as unofficial churches and bible societies aimed at preventing alleged religious conversions” surfaced in the first half of the month of October from the state of Karnataka. The proposal was backed by Mr. Goolihatti Shekar, BJP legislator from Hosadurga and the Acting Chairman of the Committee on the Welfare of Backward Classes and Minorities. Mr. Shekhar claimed that even his mother had been converted. However, on 28th October it was reported that the state government put a hold on the survey.

Following this the Karnataka government ordered the Department of Minorities Welfare to provide information about people who have converted to another religion in the past 25 years while the Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai made known his plan to bring an anti-conversion law during the winter session of the Karnataka legislative assembly to be held at the Suvarna Vidhan Soudha Belagavi from 13th December 2021. He confirmed to news reporters that the draft law will be influenced by similar laws in other states particularly Uttar Pradesh.

Recommendations were issued to the Department of Minorities Welfare that they should gather information about religious conversions in coordination with the Police Department, Revenue Department, Social Welfare Department, district commissioners, and chief executive officers. The information was to be submitted within 30 days.

Media outlets have also reported that on 16th October, Karnataka's Intelligence Department issued an order to top police and intelligence officials to gather information about "authorised and unauthorised" churches in Karnataka.

In the Hosdurga taluk, the Tehsildar had issued orders on 4th October asking revenue officials to conduct a "door-to-door" inspection to find "Hindus who have converted to Christianity." This exercise was sanctioned by the District Collector of Chitradurga and seems to have been triggered by "WhatsApp and Facebook messages", and "concerns raised" by the BJP sitting MLA in the constituency, Goolihatti Shekhar. The order states that the MLA "believes Christian missionaries throughout the taluk are luring Hindus and converting them to Christianity".

It was reported by media later on that the Tehsildar of the Hosdurga Taluk, Mr. Thippeswamy, told the Times of India that the survey had been called off since there was no substance in the allegations. "Since the families claimed that they had wilfully converted to Christianity, we decided to call off our survey,". He also reported that the Christian families claimed their conversion was on account of "a string of health issues and other constraints that drew them to Christianity". "These families say they are in a much better place now and believe the new faith is the reason for their wellbeing," he said.

However, all this points to a massive intelligence gathering on the Christian community in the state just before tabling the anti-conversion bill.

Attacks against Churches in Karnataka

The Religious Liberty Commission of EFI has documented 37 incidents of violence / threat against the Christian community in Karnataka from January to November 2021. It is noteworthy however that since October this year, the frequency of incidents has increased, especially after the announcement of the tabling of the anti-conversion law and the reporting of the survey on Churches.

The government proposal of surveying the Christian community in the state, the proposal to bring an anti-conversion legislation and the media bytes of various leaders belonging to the ruling dispensation of the state seemingly has emboldened elements subscribing to a religious-political majoritarian ideology and the attacks against Christians and stopping of the Christian worship services in various places clearly demonstrates that impunity.

RLC's compiled list of 37 incidents is by no means exhaustive and should be considered as an indicative list for many incidents go unreported either due to the fear of retribution or the non-cooperation of the local police.

Even while this report was being written, the national media has reported two more incidents from the state one from Kolar and the other from Belagavi in North Karnataka. While a group of Christians was attacked in Kolar and Christian religious books were burnt by Hindu right-wing members, in Belagavi, a man entered a Catholic Church with a machete and threatened the priest

and chased him. No one has been arrested in either case till the writing of this report, but the Christians have been warned by the police in Kolar.

This takes the total tally of incidents of Christians against Karnataka to 39, as recorded by the Religious Liberty Commission.

Below are the total number of incidents in different districts as recorded:

District	Number of Incidents
Bangalore	3
Belgaum	7
Bijapur	2
Chikkaballapur	1
Chikmagalur	1
Chitradurga	3
Dakshina Kannada	1
Davangere	1
Dharwad	1
Gulbarga	3
Hassan	3
Haveri	3
Kodagu	1
Kolar	2
Koppala	1
Mysore	1
Ramnagara	1
Shimoga	1
Udupi	1
Uttar Kannad	1
Yadagiri	1
Total Incidents	39

Brief details of the incidents as per the interaction with the affected people

These accounts were prepared after speaking with the affected people during the fact-finding trip. The team was not able to meet everyone in different locations and could not go to visit some locations due to paucity of time, so these are not all the cases that took place.

1. Pastor Vinay, Full Gospel Assembly Church, Belgaum, Karnataka



During the second week of the month of March 2021, when Christians were praying in Bailhongal, Belgaum, Karnataka, their prayer meeting was disrupted, and they were taken to the local police station by a right-wing group. As per the Church Pastor Vinay, a complaint was submitted against Christians. The right-wing group told Christians that they are all Hindus, not Christians, and asked why they needed churches, and if they are getting money, and why don't they go to Hindu temples and visit Gurus. From morning until evening, Christians were detained at the police station. Before releasing the Christians, police also told them not to conduct prayer meetings at the same location as they wouldn't be able to provide protection. Consequently, this congregational Christian prayer is still closed.

2. Pastor Prabhakar Sathnapalli, New India Pentecostal Church, Belgaum, Karnataka

On 14 March in Bailhongal, Belgaum, Karnataka, Pastor Prabhakar Sathnapalli was threatened for conducting a prayer meeting by a right-wing group. He was interrogated to find out who gave him permission to hold prayer meetings and why he even conducted prayer meetings. The Pastor politely responded that he had taken the place on rent for the prayer meeting. Members of the right-wing group asked him to stop the prayer and told him that Christianity is a foreign religion and Indian only belongs to Hindus. Then they manhandled the pastor. Police came to the spot and took all the Christians including the pastor to the police station. Police questioned the Christians about why they gathered with the pastor and pray to Jesus. Christians responded by saying they follow Christianity out of their own free will. On the same day, some Christian leaders also reached the police station and Pastor Prabhakar was released. However, Pastor was told not to conduct prayer meetings going forward. So, till date, the Sunday prayers are not happening.



3. Pastor Sanjay Bhandari, Zion Church, Belgaum, Karnataka



On 5 April in Halaga village, Belgaum city, Belgaum district, Karnataka, Pastor Sanjay Bhandari was publicly paraded on the streets on allegations of illegally converting people. The pastor and his wife were at the home of his sister when fanatics barged into the house. They grabbed him by his shirt collar and dragged him outside, where 50 to 60 other extremists were waiting. Though the pastor explained that it was only a casual visit to his relative's house, the men refused to listen. The mob paraded him more than a kilometre to the rented worship hall where he has been leading Sunday services for five years. They continued to drag him and hit him, verbally abusing him and Jesus Christ, and pressured him to hail "Jai Shri Ram" while beating him. Once at the church hall they applied kumkum (vermillion) and haldi (turmeric powder) on him. They left him after warning him of worse consequences if he did not stop Christian prayers in the area. On 6 April Shahpura police filed charges against seven assailants for unlawful assembly, rioting, and voluntarily causing hurt. The pastor continues to receive treatment and medical examinations.

4. Pastor Devendhrappa Jamalappa Lamani, Ebenezer Prarthna Mandir, Koppal District, Karnataka



On 3 January 2021 in Abbigeri village, Koppal district, Karnataka, Pastor Devendhrappa Jamalappa Lamani was severely assaulted by a mob of about 20 people. The mob dragged pastor Devendhrappa Jamalappa Lamani from a home where he was teaching from the Bible to three other Christian families at about 6 p.m. In foul language, they told him that he had maligned their culture by introducing a foreign faith and that he was a traitor disloyal to his motherland. Koppal Rural police registered a First Information Report (FIR) against six of the 20 assailants – the only ones the pastor could name – for criminal intimidation (Section 507 of the Indian Penal Code), insult intended to provoke (Section 504), rioting (Section 147), house trespass (Section 448), being a member of an unlawful assembly (Sections 143 and 149), voluntarily causing hurt (Section 323) and assault or use of criminal force to outrage the modesty of a woman (Section 354). Also, an FIR registered against Pastor Lamani and three people who tried to rescue him – his wife and another Christian couple, Mallikarjuna Mukkumbi and Sanna Savithreva – lists the charges as criminal intimidation (Section 506), inducing a person to believe that he will be rendered an object of divine displeasure (Section 508), voluntarily causing hurt (Section 323), wrongfully restraining any person (Section 341), insult intended to provoke breach of the peace (Section 504),

assault or use of criminal force to outrage the modesty of a woman (Section 354) and abetment (Section 114) under the IPC. Since the mob jumped on him and kicked his chest with their shoes, the pastor's chest still hurts. Despite his efforts, he is still unable to raise his left hand, which is very sore and painful. He experienced hearing issues in his left ear for months. There was severe pain in his jaws, and he was unable to chew food.

5. Pastor Noah Lingshappa, Horeb Holy Minstry, Gulbarga, Karnataka

On 14 April Pastor Noah Lingshappa visited a house where he was invited to a prayer meeting at Rajiv Gandhi Nagar, Gulbarga, Karnataka. While the prayer was underway, around 50 people gathered to oppose the prayer meeting and attacked pastor Noah. They accused the pastor of carrying out religious conversion work. Attackers had come from several surrounding areas where the pastor was invited to a prayer meeting.



Pastor sustained internal injuries. The host family and other Christians requested the pastor not to file a police complaint as this could cause further trouble to them from religious extremist elements.

6. Pastor Somappa F Aviradi, Assemblies of God Church, Hubli, Karnataka



In Bairidevarkoppa, Hubli, Dharwad, Karnataka, on 17 October, activists of right-wing groups and non-Christian religious groups protested at the church of Pastor Somappa F Aviradi. The video of the incident went viral as well, showing dozens of men and women inside the church sitting and singing hymns. There were around 35 to 40 right-wing group members who barged into the premises where prayers were ongoing and made false accusations against pastors and other

Christians. Seven Christians were physically assaulted, of whom, one of them was severely injured. Even though police took the pastor's complaint and registered a first information report (FIR) against some of the members of right-wing groups. However, police also registered a first information report against pastor Somappa and other church members with one of the sections being 295A of IPC, among the others, which is a non-bailable section. There have not been any arrests so far on Christians FIR. The pastor was arrested and kept in jail for 12 days on account of a counter FIR filed by the right-wingers and finally was able to

procure bail. Because of the uproar created by the right-wing group, the pastor had to stop the prayer meeting at the location and move to a new location.

7. Pastor Suresh D Naik, Gypsy Prayer House, Bijapur, Karnataka

On 3 October, around 10 am members associated with right-wing groups disrupted a Sunday prayer meeting being led by Pastor Suresh D Naik. The right-wing groups accused the pastor and Christians of carrying out religious conversion and brought a false witness-cum-victim who claimed that he



was compelled to convert. Members of the right-wing also manhandled the pastor. Subsequently, pastor Suresh submitted a complaint to the police. Though police took a copy of the complaint, but they did not register the first information report. According to the investigation, one of the right-wing members was involved in criminal activity on the police record. Pastor Suresh has been previously targeted because of faith reasons, around 4 years ago as well.

8. Pastor Bhimashankar, Emmanuel AG Church, Bijapur, Karnataka



While Pastor Bhimashankar was conducting his weekly prayer services on 10 October at Indi Taluka, Bijapur, Karnataka, 30 members of a right-wing group barged into the prayer meeting and disrupted it. They shouted slogans in the name of a Hindu deity and verbally abused Christians gathered for prayer. Members of the right-wing group wanted to attack the pastor but fortunately, other Christians intervened. The right-wing group called the police from Indi station and levelled allegations of conversion, while whoever had come to the prayer, it was out of their own free will. Thankfully, no first information report was registered against Christians. The police assured Christians of complete assistance following their investigation.

9. Pastor Chandrakant B K, Jeevadayaka Church, Haveri, Karnataka

On 7 Nov in Aladakatti Village, Haveri Taluk, Haveri District, Karnataka, around 70 people came to Pastor Chandrakant B K's church and stood at the entrance to oppose the ongoing prayer. Out of 70 people who opposed the prayer meeting, around 30-35 entered the prayer hall and told Christians to stop the prayer meeting. They said the pastor did not have the necessary permission for the same. To stop the ongoing prayer, the mob also physically assaulted the associate pastor, Ganesh F. Yeligar, of the Church.



Pastor Chandrakant approached the local police station and submitted a complaint with the names of 9 individuals whom the pastor could identify. However, the next day when he talked to police, the names of the accused were replaced with those he did not recognize, nor did they appear to be part of the mob. Despite submitting a written complaint to the local police station, the first information report was not registered. The attackers also complained about prayer gatherings, alleging the gatherings cause a lot of disturbance to non-Christians in the community. Pastor Chandrakant and some of his church members were charged with 107 of CrPC. Subsequently, the village council also instructed the pastor not to conduct prayer meetings at his place. About a week later, pastor Chandrakant along with other local pastors went to the Superintendent of Police (SP) regarding the issue. Consequently, SP visited the pastor's prayer venue along with DSP and Circle police inspector and checked the pastor ministry's registration documents and ownership of the land and house. After getting fully satisfied, SP permitted the prayer meetings to continue and deployed police personnel for three following Sundays. It was also reported by the pastor that he has been denied permission for renovation work at his property by the village council. He says that it is because of his faith. The pastor gave his request in writing in the month of Feb 2021 to the village council head.

10. Pastor Lema Cherian, New Life Fellowship, Belagavi, Karnataka

On 7 Nov in Maratha Colony in Karnataka's Belagavi district on Sunday, right-wing members laid siege to a community hall alleging mass religious conversion. They claimed that as many as 200 people, including women and children from rural backgrounds, were put up in the building on the pretext of prayers for religious conversion. However, in the community hall, Sunday prayers are a routine occurrence and are led by Pastor Lema Cherian. Pastors and local Christians confirm that the prayers have been going on peacefully for years, and whoever participates in prayer does so out of their own free will. Pastor Lema Cherian denied the allegations of religious conversion and said such meetings are regularly held on Sundays.

He said that they had informed the local police about their meeting. “We have not forced anyone to come here. We are not doing anything against the law. We are only practising the rituals of our religion, which is our fundamental right,” he said. Before the police reached the spot, members of the right-wing group locked the Christians in a room. Following the incident, about 20 policemen have been stationed near the building as a precautionary measure. The police themselves acknowledged that prayer used to be offered every Sunday at the spot. A First Information Report, with one of the sections being 295A, was filed against the pastor who was conducting the prayers. Pastor Cherian is now out on bail. As per a new development, six other Christians have been issued notice by the police to present themselves at the Tialkwadi police station. This recent notice also includes the elder son of Church pastor Cherian.

11. Pastor Praveen M Ingle, Bethel AG Church, Haveri, Karnataka



Pastor Praveen M Ingle is associated with Bethel AG Church at Bankapura, Haveri, Karnataka. On 28 November 2021, the pastor’s wife, Uma Ingle, and two other Christian ladies were on their way to the prayer site when 4 men stopped them. Two persons out of the four were policemen and they brought the women to the Bankapura police station straightaway refusing them to participate in prayer. At the station, there were around 12 to 15 people who had submitted a memorandum to the police station accusing pastor Praveen and his wife of conversions. Two other women were also questioned by police as to why they go to church and how they were converted. They responded by saying it is out of their own free will they come to participate in prayer, and nobody has forced or allured them to convert. Then the pastor’s wife was forced to sign a document, whose contents were not made known to her and she was threatened if she did not sign the document then she and her husband would be booked for not following covid appropriate behaviours.

12. Pastor Narayan, Belgaum, Karnataka



The team also met Pastor Narayan, whose under construction church was vandalized by local villagers on 16 December 2019 in Belgaum, Karnataka. As per the Pastor the materials destroyed were worth Rs. 2 lacs. As per the pastor, while the construction began, some of the locals and village leaders gave a verbal nod for the construction work. However, when the church construction reached the final stage, some locals made their way to the church construction site on the above-mentioned date and threatened the pastor to stop the work. But then they eventually said let us discuss this at the village council meeting. However, late in the evening of 13th December, the same individuals came and destroyed part of the church. Pastor Narayan along with other pastors visited the local police station to register a complaint about the incident. Opponents also came and the police tried to broker a compromise. The issue was subsequently brought to the village council head where attackers agreed to pay Rs. 30,000 for the losses incurred for the damage. The money was supposed to be paid by 22nd Dec 2019 to the pastor. However, on 22nd Dec, in the night, the same people covering their faces came to the church site and set the church on fire. Post this incident, a FIR was registered and around 6 to 7 accused were arrested. To get revenge on the pastor, radical elements have also filed cases against him. Presently, there are about 6 to 7 cases registered against him.

Released by:
Rev. Vijayesh Lal
General Secretary
Evangelical Fellowship of India

Evangelical Fellowship of India

Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI), founded in 1951, is the national alliance of evangelical Christians. Its membership includes over 54 protestant denominations and related congregations (over 65,000 Churches), over 200 Church related mission agencies and organizations and thousands of individual members. As a central network of evangelicals and a service organization, it represents the Evangelical voice and builds capacity to promote participation in nation building.

EFI is a charter member of the World Evangelical Alliance. The WEA is a global organization of evangelical Christian churches, serving more than 600 million evangelicals, founded in 1846. WEA has a consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

Religious Liberty Commission of EFI

The Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) is an initiative of Evangelical Fellowship of India and is established in accordance with biblical principles to facilitate reconciliation, to promote religious liberty and fundamental freedoms for all, and to seek justice for those who are abused and oppressed. The RLC promotes through its activities a suitable response to violations of religious freedom in the complex context of India while speaking for the marginalized.

It was formed in 1998 and is envisioned as a platform for all like-minded Christian groups, clergy and activists working on issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief and other fundamental freedoms. The RLC played a pivotal role in the formation of the Christian Legal Association which is a separate body today consisting of lawyers from across the nation.

Helping and empowering victims of persecution through practical and legal means is something that the RLC has done since its inception and continues to do so. It has been documenting incidents of hate and targeted violence on the Christian community since 1998 onwards and has since 2009, released an annual list of incidents. The RLC continues to engage in advocacy to raise awareness on issues connected with religious liberty and other fundamental freedoms.