

REBUILDING TRUST BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND HINDUS

Interview With Bishop Sarat Chandra Nayak

BERHAMPUR, India, SEPT. 13, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The principal challenge facing the Church in India is not the reconstruction of buildings destroyed by anti-Catholic violence by Hindu fundamentalists, but rather the restoration of interreligious trust, says a bishop of Orissa.

Bishop Sarat Chandra Nayak heads the Diocese of Berhampur in the state of Orissa. In that region, some 300 Christian villages and 4,000 homes were destroyed by Hindu fundamentalists in 2008 alone.

In this interview given to the television program "Where God Weeps" of the Catholic Radio and Television Network (CRTN) in cooperation with Aid to the Church in Need, the bishop spoke about the anti-Christian violence in his region, the factors complicating relations between Hindus and Catholics, and the hope that he has despite these difficulties.

Q: Why is Orissa one of the least developed states in India?

Bishop Nayak: Mostly, the people are agricultural-oriented. The coastal area is about 20% of the total geographical area and the rest is mountainous where most people of the scheduled cast or scheduled tribe, or now are known as Dalits, live.

In fact, over 40% of the population are Dalits, and why is there such a high percentage of Dalits in this area?

Dalits are there because when the higher caste people occupied the fertile land in the costal areas, they had no place on that side, so they had to move into the jungles, and higher areas where there is no cultivatable land.

Q: What is your episcopal motto and why did you choose this episcopal motto?

Bishop Nayak: My episcopal motto for my service is: "To be a happy servant."

People can be servants but they may not be happy. They are forced or coerced to do, but I would like to be a happy servant.

Q: I noticed earlier when your cross was reversed and on the back it says: "Duc in

Altum." Did you also choose this to be imprinted on the reverse side, and why did you choose this statement?

Bishop Nayak: I did not choose this but it was given -- and it was also my view and my wish.

Q: Following the call of Pope John-Paul II?

Bishop Nayak: Yes.

Q: Was he a particular role model for you?

Bishop Nayak: Yes, one thing is that I have to give 100% of myself. As a bishop, I'm not there to solve all the problems, but what I can do is give myself 100%.

Q: Your Excellency, Orissa State has, unfortunately, been in the news in the past as a consequence of the violence against Christians there. Can you give as an idea of why there is this violence against Christians and where is it coming from -- predominantly from Hindu extremists as we can read?

Bishop Nayak: Why the violence? The source of violence is surely from the radical Hindus, no doubt about that, though they give different colors nowadays.

People see different aspects, which is why this violence is complicated, not only seen as a communal violence, but other aspects are also there.

For example the economic reasons: Shopkeepers, the businessmen up in these hill areas are mostly from the plains areas and are from the higher caste system. They've been doing business all along. Now, through education the Dalits and the Tribals are taking up some business and becoming entrepreneurs. This hampers these local business people who are Hindus. So they try to create trouble by enflaming religious feelings and damaging the business of the local Dalits and Tribals. This happened in 2007.

The first distraction and attack was on the Christian shops, the bombing. So there is economic reason.

All over Orissa, particularly in these troubled areas, the business people are from the higher caste.

Q: I think it is important here to clarify that the majority of the Christians are Dalits.

Bishop Nayak: Yes, 60% of the Christians are Dalits; 38% maybe Tribals and the rest

are from the other castes.

Q: So the first attack was an economic one because the business people felt threatened by the increasing development of the Dalit population in this area of business. Is there also a political reason?

Bishop Nayak: Yes there is a political reason.

Dalits and Tribals in this area are 40% of the total population in Orissa, and when they come together, they become a strong political force. So the higher caste tries to divide these two communities.

So there is another aspect in these; it becomes a fight between the Tribals and the Dalits.

Q: Provoked by?

Bishop Nayak: By the outsiders, higher caste people whose interests are at stake when these two groups come together.

I think it is important at this time to talk about this, a note from the Global Council of Indian Christians. They have catalogued some of the violence.

I would like to state this here for the viewers: 92 incidences of violence were catalogued against Christians. For example, four Christians were killed with swords by a mob of about a thousand Hindu nationalists; two nuns were publicly raped, and a pastoral center priest, Father Thomas, was seriously beaten, stripped naked and paraded.

The violence is very dramatic -- in addition to homes being burned, Churches being attacked and convents being destroyed; it's very aggressive.

In December 2007 the attack was aimed at institutions and not personnel. Why? Because the Hindu fundamentalists believed that because of our service -- schools, the health, and social "upliftment" of those people -- people are attracted to Christianity. So the numbers are getting higher.

Their aim was to destroy these institutions through which Christian service is given to the people. But they were not satisfied with that; this time it was an attack on the people, and the institutions, to traumatize, to make them fear and not go further with their ministry.

Not only did they attack one priest, but three deadly attacks on three priests. One of

them was Father Thomas; the other is the treasurer of the Archdiocese of Bhubaneswar, Father Bernard, and Father Edward from Sambalpur, Rourkela.

Q: Were they killed?

Bishop Nayak: No, they were beaten very badly.

Q: Is the fear tactic working? Are the Christians leaving the area? Are they afraid for their faith? Are they abandoning their faith?

Bishop Nayak: It is -- after attacking the person, the attack has gone to the villages, and in the villages they've destroyed houses and in those houses that have not been destroyed, they tell the Christians that they either become Hindu or their life is at stake or property can be destroyed.

In that way they force them, and some of them do give in.

Q: They do convert?

Bishop Nayak: Yes. There are many cases, more than a thousand in number. I do not have the exact number now, but before I came to Europe, more than a thousand were converted to Hindus.

Q: Why, if Christians make such a small percentage of the population, are the Hindus so threatened by the Christians in this area?

Bishop Nayak: There are many reasons why this threat perception is there. First of all, the Christian presence, though we are hardly 2%, our service in terms of education, the social services, and the health service is almost 20% -- service that we are giving.

And they say that this is the reason for the increase of conversions in the area, so this is one. They are threatened by this increase in number. If however, you see the total population after many years now, there is no substantial increase in Christian population.

Q: It has remained steady.

Bishop Nayak: Yes, more or less it has remained steady, but Hindus always point out: conversion, conversion, conversion, and the fear is because of the past historical experience with the British.

The British came for business, then conquered India and ruled for 200 years and Christianization and conversion took place. So if you allow Christians to grow in

number they will take over India.

Q: They will eventually conquer.

Bishop Nayak: They will conquer, so that is the fear -- that is the unfounded fear.

We are Christians; we are Indians, not foreigners.

Q: Yes, and there is also a threat, if I understand correctly, to the caste system itself?

Bishop Nayak: Yes, that's one reason: for political dominance.

The second is the caste system; Hinduism is infused with the caste system. The Hindus, those who are the dominant, the Brahmins, they think that without the caste system their dominance will not remain, so when Christianity spreads the value of equality of all, they feel threatened.

Q: They are afraid?

Bishop Nayak: They are afraid that they will lose their power and dominance over the people.

Q: Especially that the most of the Christian conversion is coming from the lowest caste?

Bishop Nayak: From the Dalits and the Tribals; so they were using them for their benefit, now they cannot use them because Christianity gives them equal rights, and education gives them "upliftment" financially and they [in the higher caste] feel threatened and their dominance and interest is hampered.

Q: Don't they have a point? If Christianity continues to grow and the Christians are teaching that everybody is equal, it is a threat to the caste system. Is it not a reality at some point that the Dalits will say: Why should we be treated differently? We are the same and Christianity teaches us as such. So, in fact the Hindus do have a point that it is a threat to the caste system.

Bishop Nayak: Yes, it is really a threat to the caste system.

Why should there be a caste system there, making people less than a cow, less than an animal? The Hindus, we respect their sentiments; they treat and respect cows as gods, but they don't respect human beings; not all the Hindus, but there are these particular groups who think that they are the custodians of Hinduism.

We have 84% (Hindu) in India, and in Orissa, more than 90% are Hindus, and we are living together happily and they respect each other; they understand the human value and dignity, but there is a small group, which is dominating.

I think that it is also, perhaps, important to state that it is a group of fundamentalist extremists that have been provoking this violence -- that in many cases, Christians who were being persecuted sought shelter with Hindu families and received welcome and shelter by these families.

Very much, that is the joy and hope given to us and those who are persecuted; that there is still hope to live together.

We have lost so many buildings and lives; we can rebuild, but what is lost is trust, trust among the people of different groups and religion.

They were living together for ages, and now that trust is in question, and how to develop that trust; that is the challenge for each one of us.

In fact, the Catholic Church in Orissa State, because of the violence, threatened to close perhaps one of the most important strengths, which is the schools.

The bishops suggested that if the violence continues, the schools will be closed.

Q: Can you tell us the importance of the schools and education to this area and what does this mean?

Bishop Nayak: Education is one of the very important services the Church is giving to the people. Though it is a Christian school 90% of the students are from the Hindus and Muslims. So the service is well accepted and also respected.

And why the closing of these schools? Because on one side our brethren are suffering, persecuted: no houses and no security. And on the other side you ask us to give you service without giving solidarity to these [persecuted] people.

Closing these schools is one way of showing our solidarity -- we don't approve of this -- and also calling the attention to the fact that you cannot take our service for granted.

Q: In 2007 there were serious attacks; 2008 there have been serious attacks, and the extremists promise more. Are you afraid? What measure can you take in order to try to prevent these extremists from carrying out more of these kinds of attacks?

Bishop Nayak: One is to build up this peaceful co-existence among the people of good

will. The local level is very important because this is where people are living and if they are together, it's the people coming from the outside instigating and dividing the people. If the local people remain together, they [outsiders] will not be able to enter.

So building up solidarity locally among different groups of different religions will be the first, and to build up the lost trust, to bring back, again that we can live together as we have been living from time immemorial. That will be the first priority.

Secondly, of course, is to have a dialogue with these extremists, these fundamentalists because their ideas about the Church are very narrow and erroneous.

This idea that the Church will dominate and take over India is a very wrong impression; if conversion is more and in a vast way, Christian numbers should have gone beyond expectation, but this is not the case. The official census shows that the number is stabilized. Our number grows even less than other groups, so there is no threat.

We actually had one dialogue between Christian leaders and this fundamental group of VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad), Bajrang Dal on the 5th of this month when the troubles were still on. A certain "Mr. J" from J TV had arranged this meeting, and there I came to know how they have misunderstood the Church, their concepts of the Church and they see our service as a ploy to conversion.

If our service is a ploy to conversion, then thousands of people who have gone through our schools and hospitals would have converted; even some of our ministers, including some BJP leaders -- they have studied in our Christian schools, and they are not converted. But it is to divert the attention of the people by giving false impressions and giving false facts about the Church. So dialogue will certainly clarify certain matters.

Q: Is it not within the Hindu faith -- perhaps just to clarify, that because of the question of reincarnation -- that if someone is a Dalit it is because he did not live the proper life -- in the life previous -- so his position is what he deserves? And that if he lives a good life, perhaps in the next life he will come back in a higher caste? Does this also play a role, that in this understanding of the Hindu faith that the Catholic Church in trying to improve the social situation of the person now is, in fact, an obstacle or a confusion of the Hindu tradition in which that person has to improve their life for the reincarnation of their life to come? Would you agree with that?

Bishop Nayak: I don't agree with that; after all, I don't believe in reincarnation because human life is so precious. It is an image of God himself. It cannot go and become a life of a dog. It is now.

This opportunity is given to human beings when he or she is created. You choose: Do whatever you do now -- or never.

After death, you won't have anything to do. Now you can select: You believe, accept, live a good life and your reward is either heaven or hell.

These are the two things we have in our Christian faith -- not that you become a dog or cattle; that we don't believe. But even these fellows who think that they are in the Hindu tradition of reincarnation, if that is how they believe, they should live it.

Some of them, however, do not see their responsibility now; if they think that in the past that they have done good works and that is why they are in a better position, don't they have the danger of losing that better position if they do bad work? So they don't believe it, because if they do believe they should be careful that if they do bad work they could...

Q: They could go backward.

Bishop Nayak: Go backward, so their faith is not in that light, I don't think.

Conceptually they believe, but actually they are not, they are busy with only now, whatever suits, whatever is interesting to them economically, socially, and the political dominance they want to keep. So that is the reason: the economic, political and religious reason and also the caste. All these things are complicating this situation.

Q: What is your hope for the future of the relations of the Christians in Orissa State?

Bishop Nayak: Relations of Christians with other groups, mainly Hindus, will revive because there are voices already raised, seeing the good things the Church and Christians are doing, and now innocently suffering.

On one side, from the part of my faith, that our suffering will never go wasted. God may say that: "every drop of your tears is collected in a bottle," but in my case it will be in a pool, but surely it will not be wasted.

The seed of martyrs, the blood of martyrs are the seeds of faith. That I believe -- and surely it will revive us and the Christian faith and Church will live up to its call being the sacrament of salvation in Orissa, in Kandhamal.

Q: So these are the lambs?

Bishop Nayak: Yes, it is not a new thing. Christians have suffered; it's not a new thing. It is from the beginning of Christianity, in fact from the beginning of the

Church; the birth of Church is said to be from the pierced side of Jesus.

The salvation of the world is not going to come from our word or service only, but giving up life itself and giving up life through suffering.

Q: Is this how you encourage your Christian faithful? By telling them: part of our life as a Christian is the acceptance and the awareness that we have to carry the cross of Christ too?

Bishop Nayak: Yes, there is no other way than the cross for Christians. There is that: Whether you kill or be killed, Christians are not to kill.

Jesus has taught us: Be killed. If my death will save the people, I'm ready.

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This interview was conducted by Mark Riedemann for "Where God Weeps," a weekly television and radio show produced by Catholic Radio and Television Network in conjunction with the international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need.

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