‘Police did not help… warned us instead’: Bengal victims of attacks on Christians tell ‘people’s tribunal’

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A “people’s tribunal” comprising members of civil society and former bureaucrats on Monday said that 48 incidents of violence against Christians have taken place in West Bengal in the last six months.

The BJP came to power in the state for the first time in May this year.

The “people’s tribunal” hearing was organised by three outfits – Karwaan-e-Mohabbat, Sabar Institute, and Amra Ek Sachetan Prayas at Kolkata’s The Muslim Institute. The “tribunal” comprised author and social activist Harsh Mander, journalist Aakar Patel, former bureaucrat and ex-TMC Rajya MP Jawhar Sircar, human rights and Christian political activist John Dayal, former chairperson of the National Commission for Minorities Wajahat Habibullah, historian and feminist Tanika Sarkar, peace and conflict studies researcher Omair Khan, and social activist Vidya Dinker.

From allegations of sexual assault to destruction of property and police inaction, several residents recounted the alleged attacks on them by Hindu groups.
During the recording of the testimonies, a woman alleged that a mob of 80 to 100 men attacked a congregation of Baptist Christians at her home in a Paschim Medinipur village on October 2.

She alleged that the men assaulted her, forced her to plant a tulsi plant and chant ‘Jai Shri Ram’. “My saree and blouse were torn,” she said.
The woman also accused the police of inaction. She said that after the attack, she went to the local police station to register a complaint, but was made to wait till late night, with a local BJP leader present there. An FIR was registered two days later, she said, alleging that the local police station in-charge warned her against conducting prayer meetings.

Ratna Mandal from Hingalganj village in North 24 Parganas said that she was threatened by members of Hindu Jagran Manch (HJM) for hosting an Argentinian couple, both students in Kolkata, who visited her to teach guitar.

“On August 30, 150-200 members of Hindu Jagran Manch (HJM), both men and women, showed up at my house. They accused the visiting couple of conversion, and pointed weapons at the Argentinian woman. Mandal alleged that HJM members destroyed her property, stole phones and other valuables from her home,” she said, and alleged that police did not help her either. “I was made to wait at the police station. In the end, I had to give in writing that I do not have a complaint against anyone,” Mandal said.

Mandal said since the incident two months ago, she has not been able to stay at her home. “I do not stay there for more than a couple of days,” she said.

A resident of Haripal in Hooghly district, who refused to be named, alleged that 40-50 people broke into her home on September 13 and abused a congregation of around 20 people, including women and children. She said that “property worth Rs 20 lakh was destroyed by the right-wing group members.

The local police, according to her, “showed up late, and confiscated property papers and phones”

While FIRs were registered, she said that “no action was taken”, despite the assurances from the Superintendent of Police.

After hearing the testimonies, former Rajya Sabha MP Jawhar Sircar observed that “since the BJP does not have a local base, they hit soft targets like informal Christian congregations to gain prominence”. This is “maaro-peeto psychology of the ruling party,” Sircar said.
Concurring with Sircar, Harsh Mander said that “there is an accumulated incentive to commit violence”.

Father Ritesh Kumar of Believers Eastern Church, a Christian denomination in India, said, “These brutal attacks are an agenda to persecute Christians, while the police and administration stay inactive. People are taking law and order into their own hands to unleash pent-up anger”.

On Saturday, a group of people allegedly vandalised a church during its inauguration in Basanti in South 24 Parganas district and attacked priests as well as devotees, injuring them, police said. The attackers allegedly vandalised a Cross of the church, assaulted priests and devotees, and smashed mobile phones of those trying to record the incident.

— Basu is an intern at the Kolkata office of The Indian Express

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