

# My journey to Orissa

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Months of persecution against Christians in India's Orissa state in 2008 took about 500 lives and destroyed thousands of homes and churches, including this one. (IMB PHOTO)

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Persecution against Christians in India's Orissa state has a long history, but it escalated in August 2008 when extremists blamed the Aug. 23 murder of a Hindu leader on Christians. A radical Maoist group claimed responsibility, but months of persecution against Christians has taken about 500 lives and destroyed thousands of homes and churches. This is an account of one international Christian who made a brief visit to Orissa in November 2008.

Currently three ladies from the United States are blessing us with a visit. Two of them are magnificent singers. One is a choir director, and the other is a lead soprano. Everywhere people are enjoying their southern gospel singing. Our program this last week was to meet with a number of people we currently are training. After everyone enjoyed the ladies' singing, we began listening to testimonies. One man was from Orissa state. He told his story about how he had to flee the area and was currently living as a refugee. The Lord led me to speak on a verse that I had been contemplating and struggling with all week.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse”  
(Romans 12:14, NKJV).

I asked the group how the persecuted could bless their persecutors. I told them that the persecutors are already cursed (see John 3:18) and that we can bless them by giving them the Gospel message. After the program, “Pastor Pranay” suggested that we go to the place where the violence had started in August — a Roman Catholic compound away from any towns. The compound was safe and convenient to enter and exit quickly; we felt the responsibility of protecting our visitors by not being too venture-some. We could go in and leave quickly without drawing attention. I was elated by the idea, as were the ladies with us, so we set out the next morning.

## First sign of Christianity

The road was not good, and our driver frequently had to swerve to avoid potholes. Finally, behind a hill on the right was a steeple with a cross, which is in

fact a prayer tower. Road construction had ceased Aug. 23, and equipment still blocked the road. We had to park in a field and walk.

The assistant priest and a nun greeted us when we arrived. At first glimpse, it was hard to notice anything, but then the damage became apparent. The first building we visited was a nuns' compound. A wall was around the building, and to the right of the gate, a vehicle-size hole had punctured the wall. Each window had ironwork in it as part of its design, but then broken glass helped you understand that this was once a glassed window. Charred items and unrecognizable rubble were piled in front of the door. They told us these items were from inside, a TV and some Catholic religious objects that the Hindu extremists had taken out, destroyed and burned.

### Only a shell standing

We went by a bore well that they had damaged beyond repair. Then we entered from the back. Broken glass crackled under my feet as I looked inside at the utter destruction of everything that was not floor, wall or ceiling. The extremists had crumpled every fan, smashed furniture and light fixtures to bits, destroyed every electrical box and disturbed every wire. Only the reinforced concrete walls, floors and ceiling were still intact. Every single item to the smallest dish, spoon, pot, picture, clothing, book, pin, nail or belt buckle was systematically trashed, burned or damaged beyond repair. I found a burned wooden cabinet. In it was a Bible charred on the outside but clearly readable and usable on the inside. I thought of Isaiah 40:8.

*"The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8, NKJV).*

We walked through the rubble to another room, which was the nuns' prayer room. Again, the extremists had trashed everything to the point of uselessness. We stood in a room with nothing in it but debris. I felt moved to bring prayer back to this

prayer room, so we joined hands with the nun and assistant priest and prayed for them and this place.

We continued throughout the compound. We saw the young ladies' hostel and saw where the extremists had dug holes with picks into the solid sheet-iron portions of the gate to that facility. On the inside, the destruction was the same.

### Hundreds came to destroy

Hundreds of people had come in three trucks and on motorcycles and crashed into the facility the afternoon of Aug. 25. The police were already on the scene and did nothing but urge everyone to leave. Everyone who could fled to the jungle. The extremists caught, abused and burned to death on the kitchen fire one girl who had studied there and worked in the kitchen. They beat the priest badly and left him in a room where they tried unsuccessfully to burn him to death. Then they proceeded with the systematic destruction of the entire facility.

I went into the church. The cross on the roof had been broken. The buildings had solid, heavy-gauge corrugated steel roofs. The extremists climbed on the church roof and tore open huge holes in the steel in several places. It struck me, just how ferocious and angered they were that day that they would have the adrenaline to dig holes in solid steel.

The extremists stripped the church entirely bare. If it were not for the church-like ceiling, it would be unrecognizable as a church. Nothing was on any wall, no glass in any window, not one thing on the floor. The statue of Mary, the altar, all the sculptures, paintings, candle stands, every light fixture, fan and all other contents were destroyed. Just a bare, concrete church building with a partial steel roof remained standing.

### Grieving for the victims

My heart felt compassion and grief for those who had experienced this most recent offense. I could do



no more than hug and pray for these two and the others who had been subjected to this horror.

*“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18-19, NKJV).*

I told the assistant priest and the nun that the churches in our country stand with them in prayer and in their grief.

The estimates of those staying in refugee camps vary from 10,000 to 50,000. Even the refugee camps are not safe; perpetrators have raided relief supplies and terrorized the occupants. About 500 Christians have been killed. Extremists have burned thousands of homes, eight in the past two weeks, and laid bare whole villages.

### **Aftermath for the attackers**

The young Hindu man who broke the cross on the top of the church and the young man who killed the girl were brothers. Their parents were ashamed and angry at the actions of their two sons. The young men both swallowed poison, committing suicide. Other Hindus in the area are also ashamed and angry at what happened. Police have arrested many of the

ringleaders of the August violence. A few days ago, an assassin took the life of a local but prominent anti-Christian leader in Orissa. This time, there has been no anti-Christian reaction because the police have become very strict. There is much grief to share.

*“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18, NKJV).*

We can wonder and hope that the murdered girl was a believer; certainly, she was an innocent martyr for Christ. The two young men who committed suicide, the five men assassinated Aug. 23, and the anti-Christian leader who died this past week all died without Christ.

How can we bless those who persecute us? We can bless them by giving them the Gospel message.

*Name in quotations marks has been changed for security reasons.*

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