

This article deals with vicious attack on the American missionary by activists of the Hindu right

I have no ill will or hatred against my attackers. I would be glad to invite them for a lunch, instead. Of course, initially I was angry. But, later I realized that whatever had happened was according to God's will", said Pennsylvania-based U.S. missionary, Bishop Joseph W. Cooper (67), while convalescing at Kerala Institute of Medical Science (KIMS) hospital in Thiruvananthapuram, a day after he was attacked reportedly by RSS activists on January 13 night at Koppam near Kilimannor in Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala. He had gone there to attend a Gospel Convention at Friends of Bible Church.

His right hand, nearly chopped off, was rejoined in an operation. There were other minor injuries and he was still writhing in pain when he talked to the stream of people who made a beeline to the hospital this past week-end. Among the visitors were top leaders of both the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) and opposition Left Democratic Front (LDF). According to KIMS doctors, who operated upon him, he was out of danger but may have to remain in hospital for another fortnight or so.

There was wide condemnation of the dastardly attack from within and outside Kerala and India. All right-thinking people opined in unison that this should not have ever happened in Kerala. Not because 45 percent of the State population belong to the minority Muslim and Christian communities. Not because Christian and Muslim parties are ruling UDF partners. But because Kerala has a proud and exemplary history of communal amity, to where both Christianity and Islam reached at the same time it spread respectively in Europe 2000 years ago and in Arab peninsula 1,400 years ago. Also, because, Kerala is not Orissa, where the Australian missionary Graham Steins and his two kids were brutally burnt alive by Hindutva forces three years ago, and surely not Gujarat which witnessed the ethnic cleansing of Muslims last year under the aegis of ruling Moditva forces. Keralites also co-existed with Jews, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, and the British, which is an unenviable and unparallel history from rest of India. Malayalees also maintain the exceptional inborn nature of going anywhere in the world and settling there by easily getting mingled with the local populace.

Notably, the January 13 attack on Cooper and other missionaries came within weeks after President Dr. A. P. J. Kalam inaugurated the 1950th anniversary of the arrival of St. Thomas to Kerala at massive convention of Christians at Kochi last month. The attack took place five days before the Kerala Government's prestigious Global Investment Meet (GIM) to be held at Kochi on January 18-19, which was to be attended by major foreign investor delegates from USA, Europe and Middle-East region. It also came a week before the International Pentecostal Convention to be held at Kumbanad near Thiruvalla in which around 100,000 believers and 3,000 pastors from various countries are scheduled to attend. And, more significantly, the Sangh Parivar onslaught was carried out when top RSS functionaries like RSS Sarsanghchalak, K. S. Sudarshan, and Akhil Bharatiya Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram president, Jagadev Ram Orone, was in Kerala making wanton statements on conversions and foreign missionaries. The attack took place amidst the Sangh Parivar leaders taking strong exceptions to President Dr. Kalam accepting the invitation to attend a jubilee function of Jesuits to be held at Calcutta soon. The incident, therefore, cannot be treated either as a coincidence or isolated case, although Chief

Minister A. K. Antony wanted the world to believe so in an apparent attempt to dilute its seriousness on the eve of the GIM.

In the post-Cabinet meet press briefing on January 15, Mr. Antony termed the attack as an "isolated incident" and said : "Such incidents are very unfortunate and should not take place". He pleaded ignorance as to who the attackers were. "I directed the police to conduct a thorough investigation of the incident. I am following this up and at the moment I have nothing more to say", he added. Antony's ignorance should be read along with his holding charge of police (Home) portfolio and that the police have already arrested one known RSS local leader, Raju, and took into custody four others (Shaji, his brother Shan and Shaiju) for questioning. The Kilimanoor police registered a case under IPC 307 (attempt to murder) and other counts under Explosives Act and Rioting, since the attack took place after throwing of bombs. "Although it is known to all that the attack was carried out by the RSS, why Antony is scared of uttering these three letters", questioned CPI-M State Secretary Pinarayi Vijayan. According to CPI State Secretary, Veliyam Bhargavan, "the Sangh Parivar is trying to repeat in Kerala their agenda of intimidating and attacking Christian missionaries in Gujarat and Orissa".

Bishop Cooper was attacked along with the local preacher, Pastor Benson K. Sam (37), his wife Sali Benson, their two children (Joy and Judith), singers Jayakumar and Mercy Christudas, of whom Pastor Sam also suffered serious injuries. The colony settlers are "Vedars", a Dalit community, with 60-odd houses and around 150 population, who follow both Christian and Hindu faiths. With no conversion in recent past, some of the Vedars' forefathers had converted into Christianity. Although the January 13 attackers belong to nearby area and are known Sangh Parivar activists, the area witnessed total communal harmony until a bomb exploded in a nearby school three days before the attack took place.

Those attended the Bible Convention are still at a loss to grasp as to what provoked the RSS men to carry out the attack. Surely there was no provocation from us, they said. According to one source, two RSS activists, auto-driver Kumar and the owner of upholstery shop at Kilimanoor, Shaji, came to the venue of the Convention and asked the mike operator whether the public address system belonged to the US missionary and left the place. Later two or three unidentified people came to the venue, stayed around for some time listening to the Bible speeches. Even then there was no hint of the impending attack.

The gruesome incident took place after the convention ended at 9.30 p.m. and when Bishop Cooper, Benson and others were walking along the narrow path to where their vehicles were parked. The vehicle tires were deflated in advance by the attackers to ensure that the missionaries won't get away. The Bible hall was situated on a high range amid rubber plantation, and the vehicles were parked below on the road.

The gang, comprising more than a dozen people and waiting in the rubber plantation, suddenly pounced upon the missionaries by throwing country bombs to create scare and started attacking

with knives and swords. While Cooper's right hand was nearly chopped off, Benson had a head injury, and his wife and daughter were left unconscious on the spot.

The terrified local people did not come forward to rush them to the hospital, until the police reached the spot after half-hour. According to Pastor Benson, there were no electric lamp posts in the area and they were approaching the car, 150 metres away, with the help of torch-light when the unexpected attack took place. The main target of the attackers was Rev. Cooper. They detained the missionary and other preachers for some time before attacking them with swords, crowbars and knives.

Pastor Benson told the police that the attack was carried out by known RSS activists in the area and named some of them, including the auto-driver. Confirming Kilimanoor Circle Inspector D. Rajagopal's version that the area had no history of communal discord, He said: "There had been no threat whatsoever to the functioning of the church in the area so far". According to him and the police, the church was constructed in the area three years ago and "Gospel Conventions" were held in the past as well.

Pastor Benson further stated: "We were told that the attackers were listeners at the Convention and they were all armed. Before the attack started, a country-made bomb exploded just inches away from me." Lizzy, a colony resident narrated their plight: "Most of us eke out our livelihood through manual labour. We are totally neglected by the Government and politicians. Being converted Christians, we are denied reservation benefits. In this grim situation, we rest our hopes only on God and decided to hold the Bible Convention". Despite electric lines were taken through the colony to a nearby locality four years ago and promise of power connections given to them, the "Vedars" colony still has no electricity. Plugs, switches and other electric materials that they purchased long ago lie unused. Neither do they have pure drinking water in the colony. Following the attack, although all the politicians expressed grave concern on the incident and showered promises on communal amity, people in the colony no more trust their promises on upliftment of socio-economic conditions from their own hard and bitter past experience.

A senior police officer said : "This is the first organized attack on a foreign missionary in Kerala, whose one-third population are Christians". According to Pastor Benson, "it was a silent attack since the assailants did not utter a single word even though we pleaded them to reveal their motive". "We could identify most of the members of the ten-member gang. All of them are known RSS activists in the locality and we have mentioned this in the police complaint," he added.

Bishop Cooper has been a missionary for the past 25 years and this was the first time he has been attacked anywhere in the world. This was his 12th visit to Kerala, "which is a great place with fantastic people, except what happened to me which is not good for the State's reputation."

He was a professional parachute jumper in his young days. He entered missionary work in early 1970s as an energetic youth and after resigning job from a professional firm. Since then, he has been actively involved in evangelization in many countries. He reached India for the current tour early this month to attend a series of gospel conventions in Kerala, Goa and Andhra

Pradesh. He was scheduled to leave for Visakhapatnam on Tuesday but, instead, landed in the intensive care unit at KIMS. "This is not going to deter my spirits and I will certainly be back in Kerala. I am happy that I was able to speak to my wife and my close friends who appeared tensed after hearing what happened", Rev. Cooper said. He added: "I've forgiven my attackers. Now that the case has been registered, I do not know if there is a provision by which I can withdraw it. In the U.S., one could sue for damages, but I am not going to do any such thing."

Expressing shock and concern over the attack, a US embassy spokesperson in New Delhi said : "This is a very serious matter. You cannot just go on attacking anybody. Naturally we are deeply concerned". The United States condemned the attack and a State Department official in Washington said that authorities were in touch with the consulate in Chennai. US consulate officials from Chennai are reaching Kerala to ascertain the facts relating to the attack. They already had a telephonic discussion with Cooper on Jan. 17 night.

Expressing deep concern and pain on the attack, Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil, Major Archbishop of Syro-Malabar Church, said it was ominous to see certain groups resorting to violence to settle any difference of opinion in a democratic country. "Unfortunately these violent elements have been emboldened by the rhetoric of certain fundamentalist leaders of Hindutva, who spread hatred against minorities. Fundamentalism was consistently destroying the religious and democratic foundations of this country. The attack is a sad betrayal of the country's heritage of welcoming a guest as God himself into our midst", Vithayathil, who is also the Chairman of Kerala Catholic Bishops Council, said.

Meanwhile, the Kerala State Human Rights Commission, which took suo motto cognizance of the issue, sought a report from Thiruvananthapuram (Rural) Superintendent of Police to be submitted within 15 days.

RSS operation cover-up

No sooner the widely condemned dastardly act took place, the entire lobby of Sangh Parivar plunged into action with their customary leveling of baseless accusations, wild allegations, and unsubstantiated charges against Rev. Cooper and the evangelist missionaries. Panic and fear prevailed in and around Kilimanoor after the Sangh Parivar undertook a procession within 24 hours of the attack accusing the police of harassing "innocents" by conducting raids and arrests. RSS Malayalam organ, "Janmabhoomi", said that two of the evangelists were earlier involved in a sex racket, and that a woman resisted their sexual advances which led the "local people" to "protest against the missionaries" on January 13 at the Bible Convention!

In the first statement, the RSS "Vibhagh Sahakaryavah", K. Rajasekharan, alleged that Sangh workers were "falsely implicated" in the case and termed the incident as "shrouded in mystery". He fired the first salvo against Rev. Cooper: "It was unlawful on the part of Cooper, who was on a visiting visa, to preach religion in India. There should be an inquiry into the circumstances under which the U.S. citizen on a visiting visa was allowed to speak at a Gospel Convention." Sangh Parivar leaders also alleged that Rev. Cooper and other preachers at the Convention

made "inflammatory and insulting speeches" against Hindus, which was stoutly denied by all those who attended the convention, including Pastor Benson.

On January 27, VHP Kerala unit demanded the "arrest and prosecution" of Rev. Cooper for alleged violation of Foreigners' Act. The VHP State Organising Secretary, Kummanam Rajasekharan, asked the State Government to initiate prosecution proceedings against Rev. Cooper for "carrying out religious propaganda after coming to the country on a visiting visa". He claimed that "as per the Foreigners Act of 1956, foreigners visiting the country should not engage themselves in religious preaching and are only supposed to do sight-seeing and visit relatives". Besides, Rev.Cooper and his team of evangelists "slandered" the Hindu "dharma" and traditions and sought to convert the residents of a Scheduled Caste colony by allurements and compulsory means, the VHP leader alleged. The Kilimanoor incident, according to the VHP leader, "underlined the need for a code of conduct for missionary activities".

While Sangh Parivar is taking the opportunity to demand introduction of an Act banning "forcible conversion", they are left without answers as to how people like Mata Amrithanandamayi are frequently visiting Western countries for preaching religion and how her "Ashram" at Vallikavu, near Kollam, has a large number of Western devotees. In fact, a French lady in the Ashram died under mysterious circumstances in August last year. "What will be their reaction in India if any such attack took place on Amrithanandamayi abroad", reacted an evangelist in his reaction given to a Malayalam TV channel.

Notably, inflammatory statements, if any, in Kerala had come from people like RSS chief Sudarshan before and after the attack on Rev. Cooper. On the day of the attack, Akhil Bharatiya Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram president, Jagdevram Oraon, told a press conference at Kozhicode: "West-promoted conversions into Christianity were causing divisiveness among the people in the country. Countries like the United States and Britain were creating their own pockets through missionaries. Issues like 'Nagas', causing divisions in the country, are a consequence of this. The foreign churches through conversions made the tribals isolated from the mainstream of the society".

The day after the attack on Rev. Cooper, the RSS chief, while inaugurating the Akhila Kerala Vanavasi Sangamam, at Wayanad said : "Even Mahatmaji had cautioned against weaning Hindus. The British had invented many theories like the Aryan invasion to divide the Hindus. Though the theory has logical validity, it was used to create schism within the community. The Arya-Dravida, Brahmin-non-Brahmin, North India-South India divisions are the by-products of the theory."