

## Orissa violence: 45,000 Christian institutions remain shut across India

Contributed by Correspondent  
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New Delhi: Protesting continued violence against Christians in Orissa, nearly 45,000 schools, colleges and other educational institutions run by the community across India remained shut on 29 August 2008.

From Kerala to Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi and the trouble-torn Orissa, all Christian educational institutions across the country observed a peaceful protest but there were stray incidents of stone pelting in Madhya Pradesh. "All our schools and colleges are closed. Let me clarify, survival is more important than education," said Babu Joseph, spokesperson of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI).

Babu Joseph said they held peaceful protest rallies to voice concern against continued violence against the community in Orissa, where at least 13 people died in communal violence since 23 August 2008.

He said, "There are around five million students studying in these 45,000 institutions and this protest will certainly bring spotlight on the issue."

Orissa has been on the boil since 23 August 2008 when Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, a member of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and four others were killed at his Jalespata ashram in Kandhamal district. His killing triggered violence in the State against the Christian community by some Hindu fundamental groups.

Babu Joseph said their community members had carried out protest marches across the country. In Delhi, scores of Christians marched to Orissa Bhawan, the office of the state resident commissioner, to protest the violence. "Christians from at least 30 churches across the country participated in the rally in Delhi and chanted slogans against the human rights violation in Orissa," Babu Joseph said.

Several social activists like Udit Raj and Teesta Setelvad also participated in the protest march to Orissa Bhawan and addressed the gathering there. Several schools and colleges in Delhi, including St Stephens College, St Columba's School and Somerville School, were closed for the day.

Institutions run by the missionaries in Shimla, Dharamsala and Dalhousie towns in Himachal Pradesh remained closed. "The college is closed to express solidarity for the violence victims," said Shimla's St Bede's principal Sister Melba.

In Kerala, around 5,900 educational institutions remained closed. The institutions that were closed in Kerala include four medical colleges and 11 engineering colleges run by the Catholic Church.

Other Christian denominations like the Church of South India (CSI) and Marthoma Syrian Church joined the protest against the violence. "All those attending our institutions will attend work wearing black badges," said an official of Marthoma Church at its headquarters in Thiruvalla in Pathanamthitta district.

In Orissa, over 100 educational institutions observed the shutdown to express solidarity. Over 20,000 students and teachers of Agra's dozen Christian schools stayed away from their classes to protest events in Orissa.

John Fareira, principal of St Peter's College, said the protest was against atrocities in Orissa and also against increasing violence in society. "We pray to God for peace everywhere," he said.

But Madhya Pradesh reported stray incidents of stone pelting at a few Christian schools.

"While all Christian schools and colleges in Madhya Pradesh remained closed on 29 August 2008 in protest, a group of people pelted stones at Carmel Convent School, St. Theresa School and Church and St. Paul's Church in Gwalior," said VK Suryavanshi, superintendent of police. "However, no major loss occurred, except minor damage to the vehicles parked inside the campus of the schools," he said.

(Source: The Times of India, 29 August 2008)