Indian priest jailed for rape acquitted after two years

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Police arrested Father Victor Mundargi based on accusations made on social media

Sanguinist Father Victor Mundargi poses for a photograph March 1, a day after he was freed from jail. The priest was arrested and jailed two years ago accused of raping a 10-year-old girl but a court in central India Feb. 28 acquitted him of all charges. (Photo provided)

A Catholic priest jailed two years ago on charges of raping a young girl was released Feb. 28 after a court acquitted him of all charges in central Indian Madhya Pradesh state, a hotbed of anti-Christian activities.

Sanguinist Father Victor Mundargi, now 40, was arrested and jailed on March 14, 2016 on charges of raping a 10-year-old girl residing in a hostel under his care in Tappa village of Dewas district.

Along with the priest, Catholic nun Lalitha Minj and the hostel’s physician Lilly John were charged with not reporting a sexual violation of a minor to the police. While the nun got bail after two months in jail, the physician was given bail without being detained.
“The priest and others have been acquitted of all charges,” said lawyer Raghuvir Yardi who represented the accused. “The prosecution could not prove the allegations, and finally the court cleared them of all charges,” he said.

According to prosecution the girl accused Father Mundargi of rape during a conversation she had with a classmate, who in turn informed the teachers at her school. The allegations then spread on social media which attracted the attention of the police.

The girl did not complain to the police who arrested Father Mundargi based on what was being said on social media. The police immediately put the priest in jail and charged him with rape.

Father Maria Stephen, spokesperson for all Catholic dioceses in Madhya Pradesh, said what happened to Father Mundargi was done to tarnish the image of the church. Christians have been witnessing violence and intimidation in the state for several years now, said Father Stephen.

“The truth has triumphed at last,” he told ucanews.com.

The priest said that Father Mundargi has been involved in many activities aimed at bettering the lives of poor villagers, mostly Hindus. “Some people opposed him so they hatched a conspiracy and framed him,” Father Stephen said.

The priest said the family of the alleged victim demanded money from the church to withdraw the case but then suddenly went in hiding.

“What occurred clearly indicated that someone was pulling the strings,” to tarnish the image of the priest and church, he said. “But we did not succumb to such offers [to pay money] as we were sure our stand would be vindicated in the court.”

Christian leaders say hard-line Hindu groups dedicated to make India a Hindu theocratic nation are active in the state and receive tacit support from the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that runs the state government.

Hard-line Hindu groups have also been accused of engineering violence against Christians and tarnish Christian missioners.

Attacks against Christians, who constitute less than one percent of the state’s 73 million people, have more than doubled in 2017, according a report by Persecution Relief, an ecumenical forum that records Christian persecution in India. The state witnessed 52 attacks against Christians in 2017 and 28 in 2016, said the report.

Hindu violence across India has increased in the past year and it has been spiraling ever since the BJP came to power in New Delhi in 2014.
There were 736 reported attacks against Christians in 2017, against 348 in 2016, said Persecution Relief.

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