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COMMUNITY

Caught in the Middle

India's schoolchildren face religious confrontation

The Associated Press

They stormed in without warning, 300 men who burned Bibles and told Hindu students that their Christian school was trying to subvert their religion. "They said, 'This religion is not worth following,'" said Vibha Ghare, 15, a Hindu who attends the I.P. Mission School. The school is run by Christians, but two-thirds of its students and staff are Hindu. This western Indian city is better known as the hometown of Mohandas Gandhi, a Hindu and India's messiah of nonviolence and religious tolerance. But lately, Rajkot and surrounding Gujarat state are becoming known for what Christian leaders claim is growing intolerance.

The mob that ransacked the school was searching for copies of the New Testament that had been distributed by a traveling Christian group. As the children watched, the attackers made a bonfire of 400 Bibles and told the students, all girls, that the school was conspiring to make them marry Christian men so they would be forced to become Christian. "This is completely false," said S.H. Desai, an Indian Christian who is principal of the 103-year-old school in Rajkot. "They think, 'These are

Christians, very few in number, let's intimidate them.'" Christians make up just 2.5 percent of India's nearly one billion people, while Hindus account for over 80 percent of the population and Muslims 12 percent. Despite their small numbers, Christians have a certain prominence because schools founded by missionaries are among the most prestigious in India. Hindu parents compete to enroll their children.

The attack on the I.P. Mission School was one of more than 90 violent incidents aimed at Christians in 1998, according to the United Christian Forum for Human Rights, a group of lay Christians. The group says that was more than in any other year since India's independence in 1947. The forum blames what it says is an atmosphere of intolerance that has accompanied the Bharatiya Janata Party's political rise. The party won national elections in March and heads the national governing coalition and the state government in Gujarat.

For now, fear of assault has eased. The government, under political pressure, has tried to curb attacks during the holidays. On December 4, Christian schools across India closed for a day in protest over the violence. The Roman Catholic archbishop of New Delhi, Alan de Lastic, addressed 5,000 demonstrators at a rally in the capital. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has condemned attacks on Christians. His government denies there is any orchestrated anti-Christian campaign and questions the United Christian Forum's numbers of such attacks.

In some cases, violence described as anti-Christian has had

other explanations. For instance, several men broke into a convent in a remote area in central India in September and raped four nuns. Police later arrested 24 suspects, half of them Christians and half Hindus. But the forum and Indian news media have recounted serious violence toward Christians. In April, a mob razed a Catholic church in western India. Earlier, a priest in the eastern state of Bihar was beaten and paraded naked by a mob who accused him of sodomizing a boy.

"The Christians are making a fuss because they are afraid that Hindus who have converted to Christianity want to return to their religion," said Kishorebhai Mangalpara, a Hindu activist in Rajkot. Hindu groups say missionaries take advantage of the poverty and backwardness of lower caste Hindus and tribal groups, beguiling them into becoming Christians at revival meetings where they claim to work miracles.

Although there are no overt calls for conversions at Christian schools, subtle pressures exist. In Catholic schools run by nuns and priests, prayers are held several times a day. In boarding schools, non-Christian children sometimes are required to pray and are encouraged to go to chapel and read the Bible. Lower-caste Hindus considered social pariahs in their own religion and indigenous peoples have been drawn to Christian missionaries who run schools, hospitals and homes for the poor. Many conversions have occurred in tribal areas suffering extreme poverty.