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## Indian nun's killer denies he has become a Christian

False conversion claims made by media serve to underscore the highly explosive issue



Sr Selmy Paul (left) stands with her sister's murderer Samandar Singh in front of Udainager Clarist convent last week (Photo by Saji Thomas)

Saji Thomas, Udainagar

India

November 27, 2014



An Indian man jailed for murdering a Catholic nun says news stories claiming he had converted to the faith of his victim are media fabrications.

Samandar Singh, 46, was convicted of killing Franciscan Clarist Sister Rani Maria in 1995. In an interview with ucanews.com, Singh said he was "greatly pained" about false media reports claiming that he had converted to Christianity. He remains a "devout Hindu", he said, and has never considered changing his religion.

Singh admitted that he was hired to kill the nun by people who opposed her work exposing exploitive money lenders. He was released from prison in 2006, after spending 11 years in jail. But in recent years, some Catholic news media have circulated stories suggesting he had converted to Christianity.

Singh said the misunderstanding began after he publicly spoke of how the victim's own sister, Sr Selmy Paul — also a Catholic nun — accepted him as a brother while he was in jail.

During the 2002 Raksha Bandhan, a Hindu festival celebrating the close bond between siblings, he said, Sr Selmy tied a symbolic *rakhi* thread around his wrist, accepting him as a brother. Singh found the moment deeply moving.

When he was released from prison, he began to appear on television and told journalists he appreciated Christians and their religion, which encourages forgiveness.

"But I have never converted," Singh stressed. "And I have no grudge or ill will against any religion."

Singh's eagerness to squelch the conversion rumors underscores the sensitivity of the issue in Hindu-majority Madhya Pradesh state. Extremists have been known to accuse Christian missionaries of orchestrating conversions under the guise of offering social services. Right wing Hindu groups, who oppose the conversion of Hindus to Christianity, even target Christians carrying religious

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literature and have attacked institutions and churches.

The pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party-led government in the state has also enacted and implemented stringent anti-conversion laws.

Bishop Chacko Thottumarickal is the bishop for Indore, which includes the village where Singh now lives a farmer's life on his family's 8,000-square-meter plot. False conversion stories, he said, are troubling for everyone involved.

"The media publishes incorrect information on sensitive issue like conversion ... without clarifying with the concerned people," he told ucanews.com. Such stories can create trouble for not only Singh, but the Catholic Church itself, he said.

When asked why Church officials did not deny the fake reports when they appeared four years ago, the bishop said the Church should not be held responsible for careless reporting.

"After publishing false stories it is not good to blame the Church for remaining silent," said the bishop, who is the head of the Indian bishops' office for social communication. He said it is the media's responsibility to fact-check its information.

For the murdered nun's own sister, Samandar Singh's religion is of no consequence.

"It is immaterial to me if he remains a Hindu or becomes a member of any other religion," Sr Selmy said in an interview. "He will continue to be my brother."

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