



THE **Voice** OF THE **Martyrs**

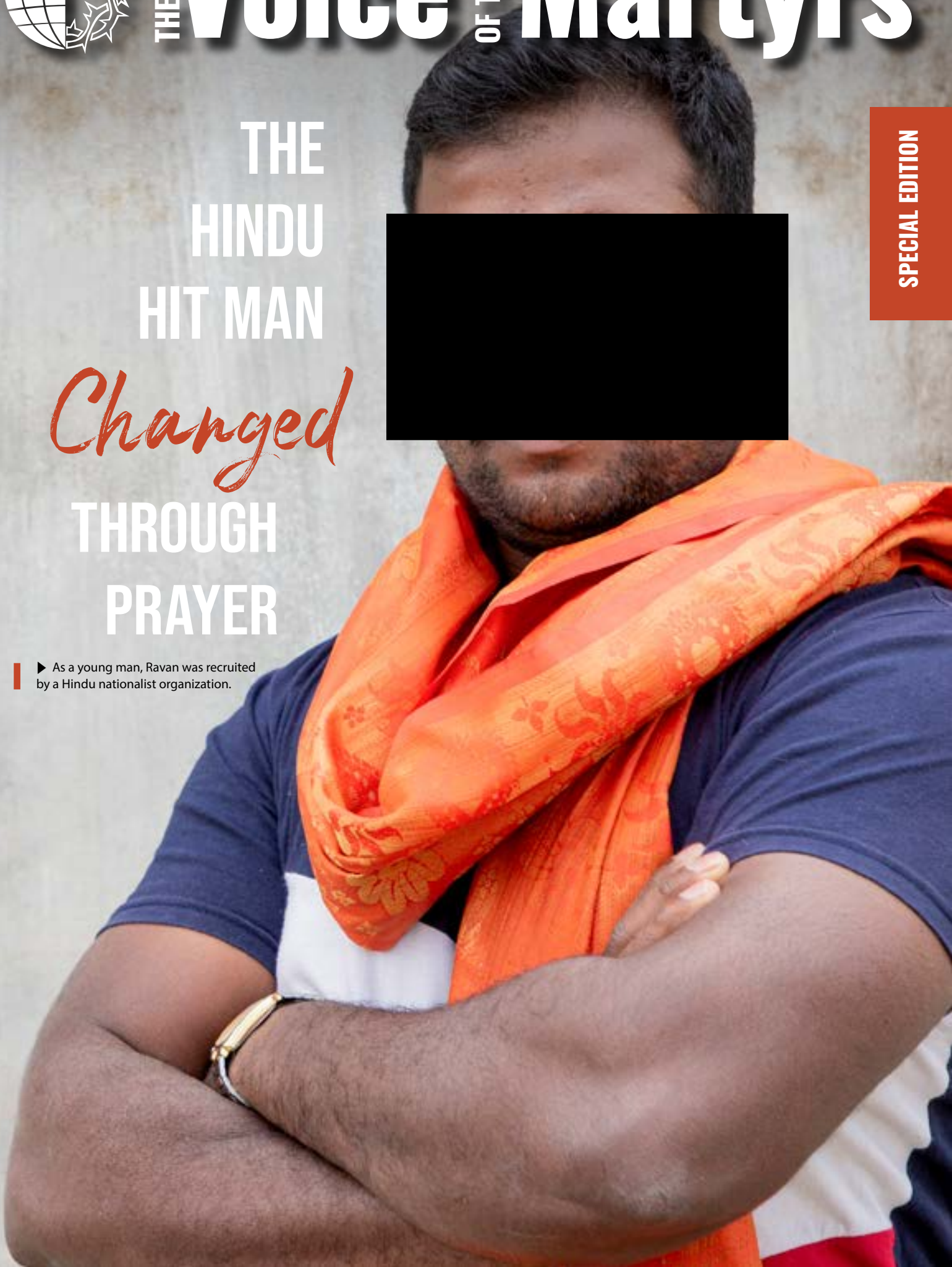
THE
HINDU
HIT MAN

Changed

THROUGH
PRAYER

► As a young man, Ravan was recruited by a Hindu nationalist organization.

SPECIAL EDITION



Recounting the life he led before coming to know Christ, Ravan's voice thickened with emotion. "Thinking about that ... brings me to tears," he said.

Today Ravan is a church planter in southwestern India. Before he became a Christian, however, he worked as a paid assailant for the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organization affiliated with India's ruling, right-wing political party. He and a gang of other recruits were the muscle behind RSS harassment of area Christians and Muslims.

For seven years, Ravan relished his role as a hired hoodlum, enjoying the power, good pay and free alcohol. But even as he carried out violent attacks as directed by his Hindu bosses, he was being prepared for a new role in God's service. His mother, who had become a Christian years earlier, prayed fervently that her son would turn to Christ. "Ever since I was small, my mother used to pray for me," Ravan said. "I used to tell her to pray quietly, and sometimes I would wear headphones to drown out the sound of her praying."

Enticed to Hate

Before joining the Hindu gang, Ravan had suffered multiple hardships. His family had struggled financially, and Ravan had dropped out of school in the seventh grade. His father, whom he described as a nominal Christian with alcoholism, died when Ravan was 15 years old. And Ravan was on track to follow in his footsteps, drinking himself to an early death. "I was very much an alcoholic," he said.

In Ravan's eyes, his mother was also on the wrong path. "I did not like my mother following Jesus," he said. "I warned her many times not to follow the Christian way of life."

In 2003, when the RSS began recruiting in his area, Ravan was eager to take up a cause. The Hindu nationalists sent squads of recruiters throughout India to lure young people to join what was portrayed as a social organisation dedicated to India's resurgence and global peace. That resurgence and peace could be attained, according to the RSS, by forcing other religions out of India

and creating a "pure" Hindu nation.

As the RSS recruiters entered a new area, they would rent a local school building or community hall and speak

"They spoke words that encouraged the destruction of Christians in India. I wanted to be a part of this movement to bring India to Hinduism."

about the difficulties Hindus were facing in their own land, blaming their problems on Christians and Muslims. "They spoke words that encouraged the destruction of Christians in India," Ravan said. "I felt moved and wanted to be a part of this movement to bring India to Hinduism."

If the ideological lectures weren't enough to persuade potential recruits, the RSS also promised money, alcohol, drugs and women. And those who still declined to join the RSS were threatened. When 20-year-old Ravan joined the group in 2005, he was a nominal Hindu motivated primarily by seductive promises. The RSS assigned him to the *Sri Ram Sena* (Brigade of Ram), named after a Hindu god, and his national ID card identified him as a member of the group.

Ravan underwent special training in a nearby city before being assigned to a team of eight that covered a 10-mile radius around the city. His team's mission was to create chaos when the RSS leaders called for it. His first jobs involved intercepting small shipments of cattle headed for the slaughterhouse; in Hinduism, cows are venerated and protected as sacred. "Our goal was to attack the drivers of the trucks carrying cows, bulls, oxen or buffalo," Ravan said. "If the person driving the truck was a Hindu, we were directed to warn them and let them go. But if it was a Muslim or a Christian, I was directed to stop, warn, beat, and hand them over to the police. Then I was to bear false witness and go to any extent to get them arrested."

Ravan was trained to inform the police

ahead of an attack so they would arrive at the right moment, and he also learned how to get false charges to stick. Team members were never sent on missions to their own villages, to avoid being recognized. They also were trained to use unconventional weapons such as tree branches and cricket bats, items that might be readily available and would not suggest a planned attack.

Many of Ravan's attacks were directed at Muslims, the largest minority group in his area. In one of his first missions, his team was ordered to attack two Muslim boys who had beaten a Hindu. Though recalling his actions brings tears to his eyes today, 15 years ago he was proud of how he and the other team members had tied the two boys to a water tank and beat them. "I felt powerful and happy because of the gifts and alcoholic drinks I was about to get when we got back to our team office," he said.

For each mission, Ravan had a roster of 45 people he could call to assist him. Attacking as a group was an RSS strategy to prevent a single person from being accused and to make the event look like random mob violence rather than a planned event. "My leaders assured me and our team that any violent actions we caused would never result in criminal charges," Ravan said. "We were always supported by our leaders and told to be bold and violent."

Before an attack, Ravan and his team tied saffron-coloured scarves around their necks and put large, blood-red *tilaka* marks on their foreheads. Orange, a holy colour in Hinduism, has been adopted by the RSS as their representative colour, and the *tilaka* — most commonly a dot on the forehead — proclaims their participation in a holy religious duty.

Though the group had religious origins, Ravan said there was little religion involved in his activities. "It was never about feeling religious worship or growing deeper on a personal level," he said. "Our teaching in the RSS was to hurt other religions and stop them from enticing Hindus to convert, not to preach or help Hindus grow in understanding of the spiritual truths of Hinduism."

The group used different strategies for dealing with Muslims and Christians. While RSS leaders worried that India's Muslim population would grow by



birthrate, they were concerned that the Christian population would grow through conversion of Hindus if the Christians weren't pushed out of the area. "We were taught to inform the Hindu people that the Christians give free goods, money and convert the low-caste people," Ravan said.

The RSS also told activists like Ravan that Christianity was a foreign religion imposed on Indians by a European country, so Christians should not be allowed to establish churches.

"If there were no pastors in a village, we were told to go to the Christians living in the villages and pressure them to turn away from their faith," Ravan said. "If they didn't, we had to attack them, inform the local public distribution centers to not give them their government-approved rations, and warn new Believers of the consequences of leaving Hinduism."

If there was a pastor in the village, the

▼ Meeting for worship is risky in India, where gangs like the one Ravan joined operate with impunity in nearly every village.

plan was straightforward — violence. "I attacked a pastor ... travelling with his wife and child," Ravan recalled. "We made him get off his motor scooter and threatened him not to do the work he was doing converting people. I broke his leg," Ravan said tearfully.

The group targeted pastors in the hope that by eliminating church leaders, they would prevent Christians from gathering and keep Christianity out of their villages. They followed the same systematic plan for each attack: Identify a pastor's name and address, physically assault the pastor, and then arrange for two or three people to file a case against the pastor accusing him or her of trying to convert them. They timed it so that the case would be filed within 30 to 45 minutes after the attack.

"This prevented them from ever filing a case against us," Ravan explained. "If the case against the pastors did not stick, we would arrange for one or two Hindu families to give a false testimony that the pastors had given them money in an attempt to convert them to Christianity."

For seven years, Ravan relished his role as a paid thug for the Hindu nationalists,

enjoying the money and drinks his leaders offered after every assault. But when he considered his position in the organization, he realized that his team was composed of uneducated, lower-caste people, while the leaders were from higher castes. "They used us for their own gain, to make money for themselves," Ravan said.

Betrayed

One night in July 2012, Ravan's RSS leader asked him and his team to beat someone up. As always, they carried out their orders. But when Ravan and his team awoke the next morning, they learned that the police were searching for them. "The leaders distanced themselves from us," Ravan said. "Only our names were involved. We had no one to help us in that situation." The team decided to split up and leave the city.

The next day, Ravan had a motorcycle accident. "Since I was drunk, I don't remember much," he said. "It was only after the accident, when I found myself lying in a pit, that I understood I had been injured."

Until the accident, Ravan had kept



► Ravan and his wife planted a church in a nearby village. At first it was just the two of them praying together.



his work for the RSS a secret from his mother. "I made sure she never knew what we were doing, attacking churches and pastors," he said. Now, however, Ravan needed help. And unlike his Hindu leaders, the Christians in his family did not abandon him. When he awoke in the hospital, his mother was at his bedside.

Ravan's facial wounds were so severe that his entire head was wrapped; only his eyes could be seen through the bandages. While checking in at the hospital, a hospital manager had told him the reason his eyes were not injured was that someone had surely been praying for him. "The first thought that came to me was that it was my mother who had been praying for me," Ravan said.

While Ravan's team members eventually paid bail money to the police and returned to their work for the RSS, Ravan had had enough. "I didn't go back," he said. "I felt betrayed."

On the first Sunday after Ravan's motorcycle accident, his mother asked him to go to church with her. He did not want to go, because he did not want to be seen by other villagers. "They knew how much suffering I had caused pastors," he said.

But his mother persisted, and Ravan gave in. "However, I decided that if the pastor said anything against my god or religion, I would not leave without

beating him up," he said.

The church was small, with room for only 30 or 40 people. Ravan sat next to the door and listened intently as Pastor Chandreshkar spoke from Psalm 1. "It was as if God was speaking to me personally," Ravan said. "Until then, I had only heard teachings of preserving my religion and not allowing other religions to grow. What I heard here was completely different."

The pastor prayed with Ravan after the service, and that day marked the beginning of a profound change in his attitude and behaviour. Within two months, he had overcome old habits of drinking and smoking too much.

Ravan married a Christian woman in 2013 and soon became the father of two children. Then, during a prayer meeting on 31 December, 2016, he suddenly felt called to a new work. "I saw how I had been in my old life and how I lived now," he recalled. "I felt a burden within me to do something in return for God."

Ravan and his wife decided to plant a church in a nearby village. A few others gradually joined them, until their small fellowship included 12 people.

From Persecutor to Persecuted

About six months after Ravan started the church, his former RSS friends became aware of his Christian activities. First,

local RSS informants began to pressure neighbours to prevent the church from meeting in Ravan's home. Then they used some of their old methods to frame Ravan for a robbery. When police called him into the station, they told Ravan they would drop the charges in exchange for 300,000 rupees, or about \$4,000.

As a poor pastor, Ravan could not pay the money. "I spent a week praying, crying out in the presence of God for help," he said. "I didn't mind going to jail, but I did not want my ministry to suffer. I was afraid that I would lose my name as a servant of God. People would start saying that I was both a pastor and a thief."

Finally, Ravan persuaded the police to accept \$600 that he got from selling his wife's gold wedding jewelry, and they dropped the case.

But the RSS has not forgotten Ravan. "To this day, I still face opposition," he said. "Whenever I rent a house, the RSS threatens the house owner, and out of fear they kick me out. I have had to move many times in the past. Although I have a two-year lease for the house I live in now, the owners are trying to get me to leave even before the lease period is up. This is one of the ways in which they oppose my ministry."

When he began his work as a pastor, Ravan simply obeyed what he felt God calling him to do. He knew enough

to share the Gospel, but not much else. "In those days, I had no idea how I was supposed to do ministry," he said. "Every week I used to preach from whatever felt right to me at the time."

At the encouragement of other pastors, Ravan attended a pastor's training course supported by VOM. Through the training, he learned how to develop disciples, what a church should look like and how to preach through the Bible. "Earlier I used to pick a verse," he said, "but they taught me how to continue to teach from certain passages, teaching the Believers profound truths from the Bible. If I start a topic now, I remain on it until I am finished."

The training also changed Ravan's understanding of what church growth should look like. "My idea of ministry was only to bring as many people as I could to my church," he said. "But I realized that when people were saved, I

needed to let them establish their own church in their villages and allow the ministry to grow in different places as well. This gave me a burden to visit the villages and start prayer cells in different villages."

Today Ravan leads a church of 50 to 60 Believers and has groups in six other villages. During breaks from working construction jobs, he visits the villages often to pray with Believers and teach the children stories from the Bible.

"I know from the way things are going that I will soon face a lot more opposition from radical groups," he said. "When I had only 12 Believers in church, they tried to stop me. Now that there are close to 60, there will soon be a lot more opposition. In the coming days, I know that my ministry will grow as well."

Expecting More Persecution

In 2021, Ravan and other church members

gathered at a Believer's home to celebrate a birthday. While they were there, the RSS arrived with the police and accused Ravan of forcing people to convert to Christianity. Threatening to beat the Believers, the RSS pressured them to support their accusations. But the Christians boldly told them they would continue to go to church no matter what happened.

The police did not arrest Ravan, but the RSS members shared his phone number with other Hindu radicals. Ravan now receives frequent threats as well as constant pressure from his landlords.

Recently, Ravan had the opportunity to share the Gospel with one of his former RSS teammates who was a devout Hindu when Ravan knew him. During the pandemic lockdown, the man returned to his village after losing his job in the tourist industry. Ravan helped him find construction work and in the process



▲ Because the community opposes his ministry work, Ravan has been unable to rent a house in the village. Several times a week, he rides his motorcycle 40 miles to minister in his church.

learned that his friend had many family problems. His parents both suffered from alcoholism, his sister was sick and the family was struggling financially. Ravan shared with the man how the Gospel had changed his own life.

"My friend had known me before," Ravan said. "He had seen how I used to live and saw how I lived now. That made it easier for me to share the Gospel with him. He accepted what he heard because he had seen the testimony of my life. This allowed him to accept it easily and follow the Lord."

The village where Ravan planted his church has many Hindu temples. Some pastors who had previously worked there eventually left because of persecution, but Ravan remained there for three years. "God has led us wonderfully," he said. "I know that there will be problems, but I trust that God will protect us no matter what comes. That is what gives me the courage to continue my ministry in the village."

Ravan hopes to lead at least one family to salvation in each of the 60 smaller

villages near the main village. Although he expects to face more persecution as he pursues his goal, he remains resolute. "There is a zeal within me that no matter what comes, even if it comes to the point of losing my life, I am determined to never turn back from my ministry," he said. "God gave me new life, so it doesn't matter even if I die. I have an immense burden to somehow share the Gospel with others."

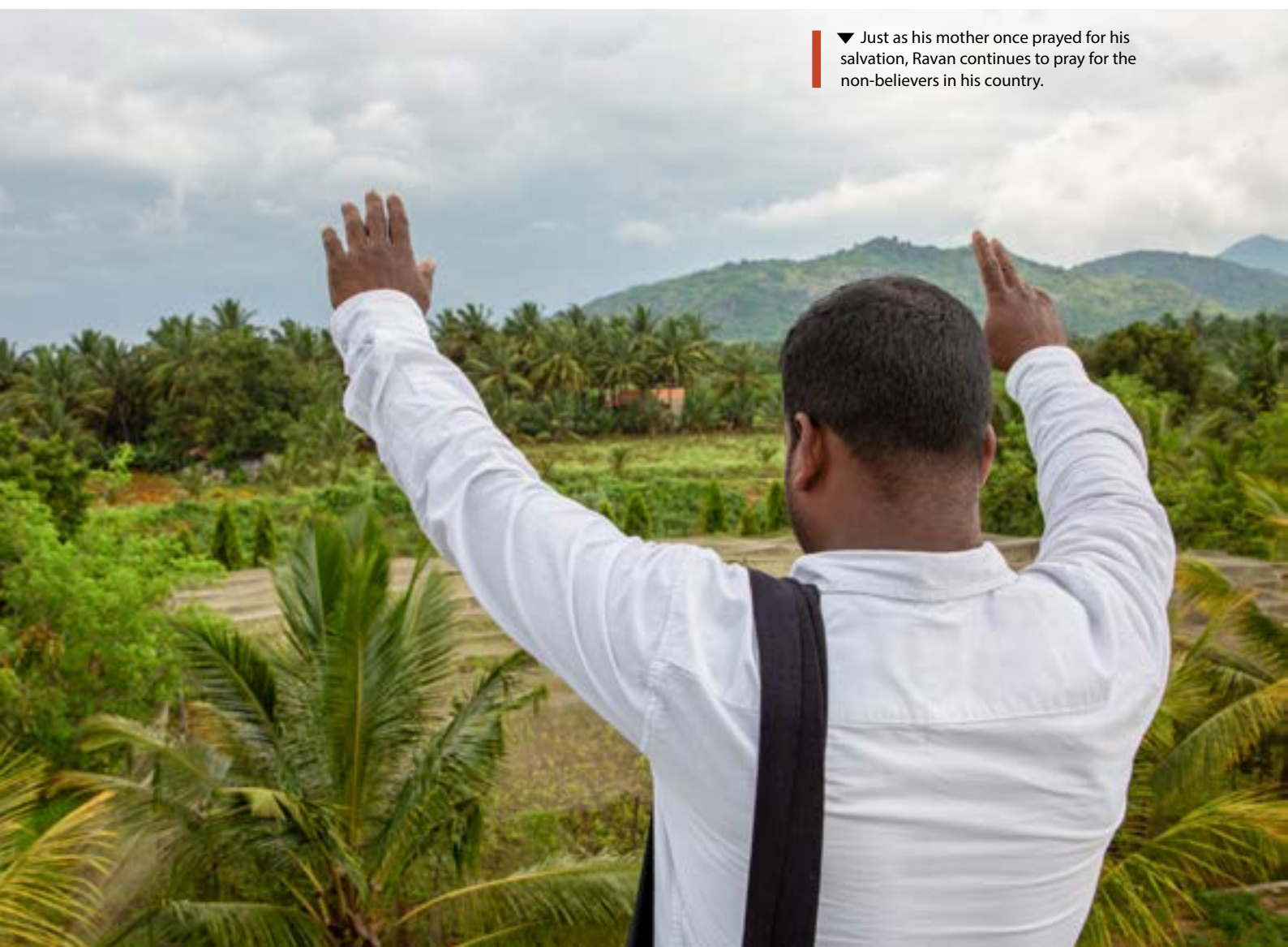
Ravan feels certain that those in his flock are firm in their faith, but he is eager to have a permanent church building where they can worship regularly. He knows, however, that some villagers are violently opposed to having a church there. "They know that if we build a permanent church building our ministry will continue to grow," he said.

"God gave me new life, so it doesn't matter even if I die. I have an immense burden to somehow share the Gospel with others."

"We face a lot of persecution, but when I read the Bible and pray, I have experienced God speak to me. He strengthens and leads me. I have certainly learned that persecution is a part of the Christian faith. However, my desire is to never turn back from the faith; I have that burden to always remain faithful to the Lord."

As he remains faithful and continues his work among well-established persecutors, Ravan recognizes the power of prayer in his life. "Just as someone prayed for me and that prayer led to my salvation," he said, "I ask that you would pray for the non-believers of my country, even if you do not know their names." ●

▼ Just as his mother once prayed for his salvation, Ravan continues to pray for the non-believers in his country.



Heavenly Father,

We praise the majesty of Your holy name!

As Your kingdom advances in India, may Your truth supplant the false religion, ideology and nationalism rooted in the hearts and minds of hundreds of millions.

Thank You, Father, for the forgiveness that persecuted Christians demonstrate toward those who oppose them. May the love they express win their persecutors to You, so that they, too, will seek to advance Your kingdom in every village.

May our Christian brothers and sisters in India be blessed with Your provision of housing, work, food and any other needs. We ask you, Father, also to provide healing to those who have suffered trauma from persecution.

Thank You for the bonds we share with our brothers and sisters in India through faith in Your Son, Jesus Christ. May we live more boldly for Him today as we are inspired by their example!

Amen.



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