

# Burnt Alive

Babu K. Verghese, Managing Editor of Gospel Literature Service in Mumbai, India, tells the story behind the book *Burnt Alive: The Staines and the God they loved.*

## A PUBLISHER'S RESPONSE TO PERSECUTION

The past two years witnessed unprecedented attacks against Christians in India. The violent incidents culminated in the most tragic event independent India has ever witnessed—the burning alive of Graham Staines and his two sons, Timothy and Philip. At the time of his death, Staines had served the lepers of Orissa for 34 years through the Mayurbhanj Leprosy Mission. There was widespread condemnation of the act.

“A crime that belongs to the world’s inventory of black deeds,” declared President K. R Narayanan, the country’s honorary head of state.

“My head hangs in shame,” confessed Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee.

The government ordered a judicial probe. Over a year later, the alleged mastermind of the crime, Dara Singh, was arrested. At this writing, the investigations are still in a deadlock.

Realizing God allowed his chosen ones to be martyred, it became imperative for GLS’s staff to consider how they could work with God to minister to India following this event.

### *Developing the book*

GLS staff wanted the world to know the strategies of Satan and the opportunities opened for God’s saints through

the Staines’ tragic death. However, GLS was concerned that a mere re-telling of the event would only create a sensation and a sympathy wave. But we were convinced God expected much more.

A ‘task force’ was organized under the leadership of GLS Chairman, A.T. Kurian. The team of writers and marketing personnel discussed the product endlessly. Amidst many differences of opinion and counter-proposals, all agreed on one thing: This was an important book for India. The staff recalled the words of Mordecai to Esther, “If you remain silent at this time ... and who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14; NIV)

The tone of the book was of special concern. Violence against Christians in India continues. Hundreds of churches have been demolished; evangelistic meetings have been disrupted and preachers beaten. Though secular media have exposed those who support the violence, the GLS book could not afford to provoke further anger against Christians, or it would surely also be burned. However, it did need to be thought-provoking. Some alleged missionaries were “converting” Hindus to Christianity and therefore deserved to be killed. GLS needed to decide how to

tackle this highly sensitive issue.

The staff felt the book needed to include a foreword from Gladys Staines, wife and mother of the martyred. Mrs. Staines is widely admired for her decision to forgive the killers, therefore her participation in this publication project granted legitimacy to the book and enhanced its position as a peace-making tool. The first edition of *Burnt Alive* had four sections and an appendix.

The first section told the story of the Staines and the events of that tragic night. The second part challenges reader to consider whether Jesus is worth dying for. The third detailed a Christian’s responsibility in responding to persecution and suffering. It also included stories of martyrdom and persecution of saints in the first century. The fourth part of the book included excerpts from many speeches and editorials decrying this barbaric event and defending religious freedom. Finally, the appendix listed crimes against Christians in India.

### *Marketing*

Traditionally, new releases of GLS titles are presented at Christian meetings or conferences, or announced through press releases to religious media. These steps were also taken to

promote *Burnt Alive*. In addition, major release functions were held in various towns and metropolitan areas of India, with Gladys Staines personally present at a few functions, which attracted thousands of people. These meetings were organized by Christians of various churches under the leadership of GLS, not as simply to promote the book, but as a "Tribute to the Martyrs." As a result, large numbers of both Protestants and Catholics attended these meetings. Other religious leaders, politicians and government officials also joined these meetings in large numbers.

Since not everyone in the target market could attend one of these events, GLS editors conducted interviews with Gladys Staines which were published in various journals. Thousands of single sheet handbills were produced and inserted in the city newspapers. For this service, GLS paid a nominal charge to newspaper vendors.

Publicity for *Burnt Alive* was sought in other ways. Review copies were sent worldwide to secular and Christian media. Christian leaders and pastors were provided with complimentary copies so they might recommend the book to others.

A series of press relations programs were carried out for the promotion of the book. Critics accused GLS of exploiting a tragedy for profit. As far as possible, when GLS staff learned of such allegations, they provided the critics with complimentary copies of the book. After reading it, some of them became heavy promoters of this work. In all public venues, GLS staff took a proactive approach, explaining its strategy to use the book as an effective evangelistic, apologetic, and peace-making tool.

No other GLS title has ever received such a promotion boost, nor made such news in India.

### ***Impact of the first edition***

Just 63 days after the tragedy, *Burnt Alive: The Staines and the God they loved* was released. The first edition of the book was presented by Vishal Mangalwadi, a well-known author and Christian leader, in April 1999 in Mumbai. This is India's largest city. Within a few months of its release, *Burnt Alive* became the single largest selling Christian book ever published in India. Though average annual sales of a Christian book in India are 500-1000 copies, over 30,000 copies of the English edition were sold within six months.



# 3 MARTYRS

On his 24th birthday, Australian national Graham Stuart Staines landed in Baripada, Orissa, India on January 18, 1965 to do what God wanted him to do—to wash the wounds of lepers, "Our world was darkness," recalls leprosy sufferer, Kutlumaji. "We always faced death. None of the religious leaders bothered to give us even one meal. When we begged for alms, they would throw stones at us and chase us away ... we were left to die in the jungles all alone, like worms ... But then came Staines Dada and his friends ... they stretched forth their hands of mercy and took us to the Leprosy Home ... there we saw the love of God."

Staines served the lepers for 34 years. In 1984, Staines married. Gladys, his wife, shared the same faith, vision and mission for ministry to lepers. The Staines had three children.

As part of his ministry to lepers, Graham Staines conducted Jungle Camps twice a year to teach believers the Bible. In January 1999, it was conducted in Manoharpur, 180 km from Baripada.

Around 9 p.m on January 22, 1999, Graham Staines and his two children, 10-year-old Philip and 6-year-old Timothy, had dinner and went to sleep in their station wagon, parked near the chapel. Graham closed the doors of the vehicle, knelt and prayed with his sons. By midnight, a Hindu militant group of 50-60 people, under the leadership of Dara Singh, reached the area.

The militants were armed with *lathis* (wooden sticks and iron bars) and tridents. They had just one target, the station wagon. As they approached it, they began screaming. Singh struck first, wielding an axe at the tires, deflating them. The others broke windows and prevented the Staines from escaping. Graham was beaten mercilessly and his boys were not spared either. All three were pierced with pitchforks. Singh then put straw under the vehicle and torched it. In seconds, the vehicle was ablaze. Graham held his two boys close to him. The killers stood there and watched the three roast alive as fire consumed the vehicle. Someone approached with water to douse the flame but was chased away. Within half an hour the militants fled the scene.

Later, believers ran to the vehicle, only to find the burnt-out shell and three bodies, charred beyond recognition, locked in an embrace.

Graham's wife Gladys, and their 12-year-old daughter Esther, were told of the gruesome murder by the afternoon of the next day. There dawned upon them "God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand" (Phil 4:7, New Living Translation). Gladys' response was most moving: "I am not bitter. Neither am I angry. I can forgive [the killers'] deeds. Only Jesus can forgive their sins. But they have to ask Him," she said. At the funeral, Gladys and Esther sang: "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow."

— Babu K. Verghese

*Burnt Alive* has become well known not just in Christian circles, but also in the secular world. It has received many excellent reviews. Moreover, it is not simply news, but is succeeding in touching the hearts of its readers.

Somappa, a Hindu and a chemical engineer, read *Burnt Alive* and was so moved he named his firstborn girl Gladys, after Gladys Staines. "Indeed, it's only the spirit of Jesus that can make you forgive the killers of your dearest ones," he says. He has now started reading the Bible.

"Thank you for sharing with me the truth of the Gospel," said a veteran leader of a Hindu fundamentalist organization, after reading *Burnt Alive*.

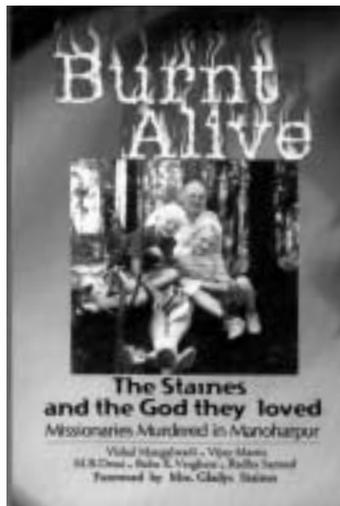
Neha Vyas, who first established a personal relationship with Christ three years ago, was studying towards a Master's degree in pharmacy. Her parents gave her an ultimatum: "Either leave Jesus or leave our home." This was a real test of Neha's faith. Then she read *Burnt Alive*. "If Gladys Staines could give her husband and two little sons for the Lord," she thought, "why shouldn't I be willing to give up my home for my Savior's sake?" Neha told her parents she will never leave Jesus.

Hundreds of nominal Christians have begun to kneel before God and search the Scripture after reading this book. Further, this book is challenging the Christian community all over India to stand united in this time of increasing persecution.

### **The revision**

Though it was a great success, GLS decided to produce a revised edition of *Burnt Alive*. The writers are Vishal Mangawaldi, a respected leader who adds to the book's credibility, Vijay Martis, an advertising professional, M.B. Desai, a renowned Bible teacher, Babu K. Verghese, GLS managing editor, and Radha Samuel, GLS associate editor. The book still includes Gladys Staines' foreword.

The new edition includes a section that traces the history of the 105-year-old Mayurbhanj Leprosy Mission, where through the years 22 women and three men, all missionaries from Australia, washed the feet of lepers of the remote Oriya jungle track. This section challenges many young educated Christians to dedicate their lives to missions.



*Burnt Alive's arresting cover design helped the book garner attention.*

In addition, since a major allegation against Christians is that they are "converting" non-Christians to Christianity, the revision includes a section on the issue of "conversion". It features an apologetic treatise that asks, "Freedom of Conscience: Can It Be Suppressed?"

In October 1999, when the second edition was presented at a massive gathering in the garden city of Bangalore, Gladys Staines was present. "It's a great book," she said, "Not because it has the story of my husband and our little sons, but because it has a message for every citizen of India." The new edition has enjoyed continued success.

### **Multiplying the message**

*Burnt Alive*, and its October revision, had a major marketing thrust. This included a book signing event, with Gladys Staines, at the first World Christian Book Fair held in Mumbai earlier this year, organised by CBA India.

GLS is convinced of *Burnt Alive's* effectiveness as an evangelistic book. GLS desires to see this title published in many languages around the world.

*Burnt Alive* has already been released in the Mizo, Malayalam and Marathi languages. Translations into Tamil, Oriya and Hindi are progressing. GLS will translate the book into 18 Indian languages within the next two years. Print-runs for these languages are between 5,000 and 10,000 copies each.

Many GLS titles have been published as Indian language translations. Foreign rights for some titles have been sold to

publishers in some African countries. *Burnt Alive* has also attracted attention in wealthier markets.

Rights negotiations for publication in German started with a phone call from Vera Wunderlich, an editor with Brunnen Verlag Basel Publishing based in Switzerland. She received a copy of the book through some of her friends who had recently visited India. Terms were simple, with a one-time down payment as royalty followed by a percentage of the retail price based on the number of copies, first 5000, then 5000 and a permanent percentage afterwards. The Licensing Agreement was signed for five years. Brunnen Verlag Basel will be publishing and distributing the book in Switzerland, Austria and Germany to missions-minded, German-speaking evangelical Christians.

Following the World Christian Book Fair event, Daniel Scott Mays, Sales and Marketing Director for Broadman & Holman International, Australia, expressed interest in *Burnt Alive*. He negotiated for an Australian edition and a licensing agreement has been signed. The printing of this English-language edition was done by GLS in India. Because freight is high, Broadman & Holman will be taking smaller initial quantities. Special marketing efforts will take place to promote the book in Australia, including an interview with a major national TV network.

GLS is looking forward to signing contracts for *Burnt Alive* with American, UK and other editions around the world. With the launching of *Burnt Alive*, opportunities for promoting other titles, and the GLS ministry, have received a tremendous boost. Though GLS is a 60-year-old pioneering evangelical publishing ministry in India, this book, along with a few other new titles, is helping GLS establish a new position in the publishing industry.

### **Still in the News**

According to the Associated Press and other news sources, in April police in Bhubaneswar, India arrested Abhi Ram Mohanta, wanted in connection with the deaths of Graham Staines and his sons. Mohanta is an associate of Dara Singh, who is accused of leading the mob that killed the Staineses. Dara Singh is reputed to be a member of the

Bajrang Dal, a group blamed for escalating violence against Christians. Bajrang Dal denies Singh is one of its members. It says its mission is to promote Hinduism and that it opposes Christians who try to convert Hindus.

Allies of the Bharatiya Janata Party, a Hindu party that heads India's coalition government, demanded that it outlaw the notorious group. Politicians called on the government to protect Christians and other religious minorities, especially in areas where they have been attacked.

Violence against Christians continues to be an issue before the Indian public. The Staines' story will continue to challenge Christians and non-Christians alike. From Stephen to the

Staines, the 2000-year history of Christianity is crowned with martyrs. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the

church," wrote Tertullian centuries ago. This was true in the first century and remains true in the 21st. ❖



Two weeks after the martyrdom of Graham, Phillip and Timothy Staines in Orissa, the Sathyam Literature Service Trust published the first biography of Graham Staines and his sons to appear in any Indian language. The Malayalam book, titled *The Graham Staines Family—Martyrs of India*, by Charles Wigg, is now in its fourth edition and has sold more than 25,000 copies. It includes a foreword written by Gladys Staines. A Hindi version will be available in August. This 136-page biography contains 50 photographs. The rights for publication in other languages are available free. Contact C.V. Vadavana, Director, Sathyam Literature Service Trust, Tiruvalla, Kerala, 689101 India; sathyamindia@satyam.net.in; fax 011-91-473-635-386.

## "THE DEATH CULTURE REIGNS IN COLOMBIA."

There is an early radio program where I live called *Cómo Amaneció Medellín* [*How Medellín Has Awakened*], and it begins each day by listing the dead of the day before.

Up to 30,000 violent deaths assail Colombian people each year. No one really knows how many die. Massacres and destruction are daily news. In 1998 there were 708 massacres, a million and a half refugees, and untold numbers of kidnappings. 85% of the world's kidnappings occur in Colombia. Many times individuals are kidnapped or assassinated just because they are active in helping resolve the social crisis of the people. The situation is very complex for all who serve the Lord Jesus.

Colombia's soil has drunk the blood of martyrs. A humble pastor in southern Colombia was faithfully taking the gospel to soldiers in their barracks in 1999. The men in their grati-

tude gave him a pair of shoes, for he had none. The guerrillas found the pastor, kidnapped him, and killed him because he was wearing government boots. The church was nailed shut. This is not an isolated incident. According to the Colombian press 37 pastors have been martyred in less than two years.

[Late last year] Lácides Hernandez, my colleague, received death threats. I am not immune (nor any of the team, for that matter). We have been warned through various means which enables us to take added precaution, but this is nothing new for us; we live in the middle of a death culture. Don't be alarmed, but pray for us. We do not focus on our circumstances, nor the threats, nor death, but solely on Jesus. Security is not the absence of danger, but the presence of Jesus. Here is true freedom!"

-Jeannine Brabon, Medellín, Colombia.