

'Politics of Difference'

While addressing the concluding session of the all-important national council meeting of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), L K Advani, party's prime ministerial candidate, tried to reclaim the idea of 'party with a difference' from the disrepute into which it had fallen ever since the Gujarat pogrom of 2002. It was a meeting with a declared purpose—mission Delhi. Advani hoped to make a mark in the voter's mind by providing good governance in all the nine states, currently ruled by them, with a view to having catalytic effect in the coming multiple state assembly as well as Lok Sabha elections in the country.

No doubt BJP is a party with a difference. And this 'politics of difference' emanates from a narrow and mechanistic ideological orientation. Their difference defines a political philosophy aimed at staving off democratic values and human rights. Their idea of difference doesn't really shed its image as the stingy politics of fanatics opposed to minorities and the welfare state.

Minority-bashing has been the hallmark of their politics of difference. And minority-bashing without communal polarisation is meaningless because it cannot translate passion into vote. As Gujarat model cannot be repeated elsewhere so easily, the saffronites can always pick up soft targets to execute their politics of difference.

The recent happenings in Orissa, a state ruled by a local outfit—Biju Janata Dal (BJD), in league with BJP, have a familiar ring. Not for nothing they are attacking Christian tribals, ostensibly to thwart forcible conversion. Orissa's 36 million population includes fewer than 900,000 Christians, mostly poor tribal people. Encouraged by Modi's electoral victory in Gujarat, despite systematic persecution of minorities, including Christian community, in that 'saffron laboratory', BJP and its frontal organisations are targeting Christian tribals in Orissa, hopefully to polarise tribal voters on communal lines because elections in Orissa state assembly are due next year.

With every passing day it becomes crystal clear that India's largest spate of anti-Christian violence, which has already rendered thousands homeless in Orissa's backward Kandhamal district cannot be anything but pre-planned. Though communal tensions were brewing on Christmas Eve, the BJD-BJP dispensation did not react despite repeated appeals by the minority community to provide adequate police protection. Beginning with a December 24, 07 attack on a Catholic Church in Brahmani Village, the anti-Christian riot continued under January 2, '08. Rioters killed around nine people and close to 90 churches were burned and 600 houses torched, affecting no less than 5000 poor people. "This is the first time in history since the independence (in 1947) that an estimated 3000 Christian men, women and children are forced to live in two refugee camps, eating boiled rice, not fit for human consumption because of sand and grit, and living in the cold without toilets, precious little medical care and no woollens". Thus observed the All India Christian Council, immediately after the christmas violence.

In truth the saffronites are sowing the seeds of mistrust among tribals, taking advantage of some legal loopholes. More than 60 percent of the Christians of

Kandhamal area belong to the Pana Community who are classified as scheduled castes or dalits. They are demanding recognition as a tribal community, claiming they too speak the local-dialect-Kui, a demand that is being vehemently opposed and contested by the Kui tribals as it would shrink their reservation benefits. As per law only Hindu Dalits are entitled to reservation in government jobs and educational institutions. So after conversion a Dalit hindu loses quota privileges. Here lies the crux of the matter. In the final analysis it is the reservation issue that is polarising tribals along communal lines and triggering anti-christian violence, much to the satisfaction of saffron elites.

Orissa in recent years have witnessed several bloody protests by tribals and poor villagers against illegal acquisition of land by state authorities and big business, both domestic and foreign. Communal violence always stands in the way of mass organising. As most established political parties, left and right alike, are hell bent on wooing big business at any cost, popular movements against forced displacement and eviction and police brutalities in Orissa and elsewhere are developing in depth under independent initiatives without any control of 'mainstream' parties, national or regional. Poor tribals are being pitted against poor Dalits to make it easy for the electoral hopefuls. So BJP is trying to create its hindu tribal constituency in Orissa including its tested game of communal culture while its ruling partner BJD looks the other way. As for the opposition the less said the better. A government by saffron mob is as much to be feared as a government by Gandhian mob. □□□