

Conversion and Re-conversion

FACED WITH SEVERE CRITICISMS from secular and democratic forces for its anti-muslim pogrom in Gujarat, the Bharatiya Janata Party and its frontal outfits, particularly Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) are targeting Orissa for diversions and creating political and social base among the downtrodden. And it is a good diversion because the target is soft—dalit and tribal (adivasi) christians. What is happening in Orissa's Kandhamal, otherwise one of the most backward and poor regions of India, is not an isolated event. There is a grand plan and ideological construct behind the recent terror campaign against dalits and adivasis. The core issue in Kandhamal is related to the aggressive drives to convert or re-convert christian tribals to hinduism. As they cannot convert muslims to hinduism, hapless tribals are being bombed for return to their "original" faith day in and day out with so many tactical manoeuvrings. Also, dalit christians are being attacked because they stand in the path of VHP.

Whoever is responsible for the murder of Swami Laxamananda Saraswati is definitely not interested either in tribals or Dalits. This heinous act would most certainly boost the VHP in a manner comparable to LK Advani's rath yatra. After all, Saraswati was a major Sangh parivar functionary who had been working among poor tribals since the late 1960s. He had been associated with the schools and ashrams, working with the idea of improving the lot of the poor tribals.

In the absence of any land reforms or serious governmental interventions to improve the condition of the poor, the schools and ashrams provide meagre alternatives, along with institutions run by Christian missionaries and NGOs.

Ironically, the activities of the VHP correspond to what they accuse the Christian missionaries of doing in western Orissa. Both work to attract and convert people to their respective faiths—something that is allowed under the Indian Constitution. More-over, both have access to resources—internal and external—to be used towards the uplift of the poor. But then how does one explain the way in which the term 'conversion' appears to be synonymous with Christian missionaries only?

Conversion campaign is sustained by poverty, lack of land struggles and reforms and the virtual non-existence of either civil society or the state in this area; further clothed by a finely-crafted 'reality' created by the VHP. According to the world vision of VHP Tribals are Hindus and Christian missionaries are the villains, who are spreading Christianity through inducements and converting the poor and ignorant tribals. So VHP has the divine right to re-convert them to their original faith. It is indeed amazing that most of the reports on Kandhamal wrongly assume that tribals are Hindus. In fact, what the Sangh parivar has been attempting in Orissa—their post-Gujarat laboratory—is large-scale conversion of tribals to Hinduism.

This is skilfully combined with terrorising sections of Dalits—who had opted to convert to Christianity after suffering social discrimination—to reconvert to Hinduism. This 'common sense' makes the conversion of tribals appear as 're-conversion'. And this has been skilfully woven with terror directed against Dalit Christians over quite some time. More significantly, the majoritarian orientation

of such conversion drives and their rituals with religious fervour—viz the *ghee-burning shuddhi karan* (re-conversion) etc. as seen through the electronic media—hides the real agenda. It's re-conversion. □□□