

Orissa : Tragedy Continues

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The after-effects of the anti-Christian violence (2007) in Kandhamal district of Orissa are not over, so to say. Recently the Archbishop Cheenath of the state said that the elections in the Kandhamal district should be postponed as the refugees living in the camps were not able to return. Many of them who returned were threatened by the local Bajrang Dal workers and associates. They were told to renounce Christianity, convert to Hinduism, pay the fine, withdraw the cases and vote for the candidate who they will be told to, obviously BJP candidate. Many of those who tried to return with such hostile conditions awaiting them if they return, came back, some to the camps, others to unknown destinations.

Meanwhile BJP candidate of the area Ashok Sahu, when he came to know about his likely arrest for 'Hate speech' first absconded for few days and then was arrested just three hours before the campaign was to be over (14th April 2009). He told his followers to keep calm—else the elections will be postponed, as being demanded by the Archbishop.

One also recalls a similar situation in the post-Gujarat violence. There, while state Government claimed that normalcy has returned, the Chief Election Commissioner James Michael Lyngdoh was visibly upset when he saw the condition of the Muslims living in the camps and their inability to be able to be part of the electoral process.

In Orissa the violence has taken a heavy toll of the amity of the region. The violence which began August 2007 continued till December. It resulted in death of close to 6-7 hundred Panos (Christians) and 90 Churches, 100 other Christian institutions were destroyed. The pretext was that Swami Laxamananand, the VHP swami working in the area has been murdered by Christians. At the same time the Maoist group owned the responsibility for the act. Since some pretext was needed to launch the attacks, the claim of Maoists was not considered and the VHP, BJP and company kept harping that the Christians committed the crime. As such the matter is tragic but simple. Whosoever has committed the crime should be punished. Why the whole Christian community has to be targeted and attacked for the act of some group or an individual.

Since at that time BJP was part of the ruling coalition it had its way. The death procession of swami was taken through a long circuitous route. The idea was to communalize the atmosphere in the region. This again is quite akin to Gujarat. After the Godhra train tragedy the dead bodies were taken in a procession to Ahmedabad, with VHP-BJP workers shouting provocative slogans. The whole hell was encouraged, rather permitted to be unleashed. Here also a long route was deliberately taken and police and other state authorities acted as the bystanders when the mayhem broke out. Surprisingly the VHP's Praveen Togadia was permitted to go to the area while the Central Minister of State for Home affairs was not permitted to visit the troubled spot.

The violence in Kandhamal is a case of how communal forces can divide and come to dominate, become strong through orchestrated violence. The Kandhs, (Adivasis) are close to 50% of population, and dalits, most of them Panos are 16.9%. Kandhs and Panos are the two major communities in the area. The

remaining 30% are called Oriyas, since they don't speak the languages of these two major groups, the local Kui language. These are from various urban regions, traders being a big chunk of them.

The Kandhs, Adivasis were mainly food gatherers. Panos were landless outcasts who came to hills in search of livelihood, close to two centuries ago; Kandhs put their land at the disposal of Panos, since Kandhs themselves were not into agriculture Panos came as servile labor. The communalists have propagated that Panos are grabbing the land of Kandhs. Kandhs come under the schedule Tribe category while Panos are dalits.

Today Kandhs own close to 9% of land, while the traders—Oriyas control much more of Adivasi land. The major land grab from Adivasis has been by traders, but no agitation has ever been done against that by the RSS affiliates.

Many of these dalits took to Christianity and many of them benefited due to education, and the consequent jobs. As noted they also came to possess some land over a period of time, still their land holding is much lesser than that of non-local Oriyas. A massive propaganda has been going on in the area that Panos have grabbed the Adivasi land that they are trying to manipulate caste certificates to take advantage of status of ST's. As a matter of fact both the Kandhs and Panos speak Kui. State has declared ST category for Kui speaking people and some Panos also got some ST concession.

These two issues were exploited by the VHP, Bajrang Dal people who have been spreading the Hate against Christians in the area. It is important to note that Christian missionaries have been working in the area for more than two centuries. Missionaries never used violence for conversion, while the RSS affiliates have resorted to all sorts of intimidation to convert them to Hinduism through newly invented conversion rituals. And asserting their political definition of Hinduism, they say that Adivasis are Hindus, who have drifted away due to allurements, so Adivasis coming to Hinduism is not conversion but a Ghar Vapasi (return home) for these misguided ones.

Swami Laxmananand came here and began his campaign of Hate against minorities. The result is there for all to see. The report on Kandhamal violence has recently (March 2009) been published by various human rights organizations.

Tragically the distorted version of History has been one of the main weapons of the social common sense, which forms the base of communal violence. One hopes that in due course society and all those concerned with preservation of plural values not only look at the immediate causes of Hate other ideology, but also the deeper propaganda against the minorities widely prevalent through various organizations practising politics. □□□