

Discussion Paper-II

Anti-Christian Riots in Orissa – Large Scale Destruction and Displacement

Background

The anti-Christian violence in the eastern Indian province of Orissa for the last couple of years has left hundreds of Christians dead and thousands displaced. For more than two decades the Hindu fundamentalist groups have been targeting the Christian population of the tribal district of Kandhamal in Orissa. The Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) a militant Hindu revivalist organization and Bajrang Dal, its more militant youth wing and the Rastriya Swayam Seva Sangh (RSS) are in the forefront of a virulent campaign against the evangelical activity in the district. The missionaries since a long time as elsewhere embarked upon the twin tasks of serving the dispossessed and proselytizing resulting in the burgeoning of the Christian population in the district. An overwhelming majority of the Christians are *panas* a Scheduled caste (untouchable caste placed in the lowest rung of the Hindu social order). The Church not only baptized them into new faith but also initiated them into a new world of empowerment. Their educational attainment and the consequent assertion could not be tolerated by the caste Hindus who for centuries denied them social, political and spiritual space within the rubric of Hinduism¹. The orthodox elements among the Hindus saw the recalcitrant *panas* as a threat to their hegemony and hence directed their ire against the Church which made the *panas* conscious of their citizenship and rights. The entrepreneurial aspirations of the *panas* were also unpalatable to the business class among the caste Hindus. The Hindus in general are annoyed over the activities of some over enthusiastic missionaries, but it was the Hindutva groups that instigated the Hindus chauvinists.

The assortment of militant Hindu groups led by Lakshmananda Saraswati set themselves on a reconversion mission. They found the tribes, the major social block in the district, to be acquiescing to their ideology and started indoctrinating them. Meanwhile some Christian *pana* leaders urged the government to make them eligible for the reservation facility (positive discrimination policy) enjoyed by the local Tribes as both the groups speak the same *Kui* language. This demand enraged the tribes as they found in it an evil design to usurp their privilege. Since then the animosity between the Tribes and the Christian *panas* grew. The Hindu groups fuelled the fire and ensured that the differences are transformed into strong anti-Christian

¹ Refugee Watch, 33, June 2009

sentiments. Thus communalization of the peaceful and picturesque Khandamal district was complete.

The Pogrom

The murder of Lakshmananda, in August 2008, allegedly by the Maoists (a Communist guerilla group) sparked off unprecedented violence against the Christians- both tribes and *panas*. The VHP called it the handiwork of the Church. In the ensuing riots nearly two hundred people were killed and more than fifty thousand were rendered homeless. The Hindu mobs mostly comprising the tribes led the attacks against the unsuspecting Christians who were outnumbered and defenseless. Fearing for their lives hundreds of families hid in the dense forests for days together. According to conservative estimates at least 200 churches were razed to ground. Houses belonging to Christians were blasted by lighting off the cooking gas cylinders and the valuables were looted. Scores of fleeing people were killed and burnt or thrown into the ponds and rivulets. The district that was never known for organized violence witnessed new killing methods and hate campaign that reflected meticulous planning and supervision. Guns, crude bombs along with the conventional swords and bows and arrows were used in a big way and vehicles carrying liquor barrels followed the perpetrators.

The ill trained state police and the inept the local administration could do little to contain the violence as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) the political face of the Hindu revivalist movement was a partner in the coalition government ruling the state of Orissa. The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) had to be rushed in to salvage the situation. It thwarted an attempt by thousands of aggressive women cadres of the Hindu groups to attack a relief camp at Raikia. The rioters at several places publicly ordered the Christians either to accept Hindu faith or leave the place. Even those benefited by the church joined the killing hordes. The VHP and the Bajrang Dal activists succeeded in creating an ethnic divide which almost resulted in ethnic cleansing as well as a full-scale war against church.

The Relief Camps in Andhra Pradesh

The riot victims fled Orissa to far-flung places. A group of 132 people comprising 44 women including girls, belonging to Balliguda, Tikabali and Raikia blocks of the district walked for three days and hundred miles through thick forests to reach a tribal hamlet 'Savara Koligaon' in Srikakulam district in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh. The authors visited the camp to get first hand information about their travails. The local pastor who was an acquaintance of these people accommodated them in a small church hall. These IDPs who arrived at the village in October 2008 were apprehensive of fresh outbreak of violence and hence gave up the idea to return. Ranjit Nayak lamented that the coexistence of the

panas and the *Khandas* and *Kuis* (Tribes) was destroyed in no time by the obscurantist forces. Though the relief camp has given the victims some succor, the situation is unlikely to be encouraging as neither the local administration nor NGOS were extending their help.

A few miles away in another camp at Kudumasingi tribal village 104 people including 37 women took shelter in a church. The local pastor who was organizing the camp was skeptic about running it in view of resource crunch. Jisai Digal, a pastor from Barakhama village from where the trouble started, foresaw a grim future for the Christians in Kandhamal and a protracted displacement.

The most horrifying tales were told by children accommodated in another local church at *Palasa*. The parents of some children at a relief camp in Kandhamal requested a humanitarian worker to take away their children to a safer place. He brought 45 children, all aged 8 to 13 years to the church at Chinabadam. Eleven year old Titus Digal who saw his uncle slain did not want to return. The uncle of Akshaya Nayak was also killed. Their family hiding in a hillock watched their house being burnt. Nine year old Roshlina Nayak too was unwilling to return to her native village. The young children bore the scars of worst kind of violence.

A total of 278 people including women and children are living in three relief camps in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh. The organizers of these camps were awaiting help from the local authorities. The well-meaning pastors were not trained in relief work. Since the camps are located in remote places the government agencies as well as civil society organizations were unable to know about them.

References

1. Kanungo Pralay (2008) : “ Hindutva fury against Christians in Orissa”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, September,13. pp- 16-19.
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