

Next Stop Orissa

With Modi triumphant, an emboldened Sangh is set upon doing a repeat of Gujarat, reports S. ANAND

“You are just burning tyres. How many Isai houses and churches have you burnt? Without kranti (revolution) there can be no shanti (peace). Narendra Modi has done kranti in Gujarat, the reason why shanti’s there.”

Lakhanananda Saraswati, 82-year-old Sangh leader inciting his followers on his cell phone on December 25, from a medical centre in Daringbadi, Kandhamal district, in the presence of police and journalists

FIRE, AGNI, is the most favoured element in Hindutva’s next laboratory Orissa. It is the acrid smell from the burnt-down churches, vehicles and homes that remains with you after a three-day visit to Kandhamal district even a week after the worst instance of anti- Christian violence in independent India.

On December 23, 2007, the day Narendra Modi had led the BJP to a massive victory in Gujarat, Hindutva activists in a faraway village in Kandhamal district pulled out pastor Junas Digal from a bus. He was beaten, tonsured and paraded naked. On December 24, around 11am, a mob of the RSS, Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and allied Sangh Parivar groups descended on Bamunigan village and began to burn the Christmas pandal and the crib that had been erected on the road with the due permission of the police and the sub-collector.



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The mob, about 3,000-strong, was armed with tridents, axes, crude bombs and kerosene. Some even had guns. They opened fire. Two young boys Sillu (12) and Avinash Nayak (15) sustained bullet injuries. They did not aim too well — they were not Maoists or Naxals (funded by Christian NGOs) as the police would have us believe — and the boys survived. Eyewitnesses say the mob was led by local RSS leaders Bikram Raut, Dhanu Pradhani and others. Within minutes, the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes in Bamunigan was attacked. The palm oil in the lamps was used to burn the Christmas decorations, furniture, musical instruments and the altar. The presbytery was looted and then set on fire. Police personnel, just three unarmed constables, watched. The rioters looted and burnt as the Dalit Christians, mostly of the Pana community, fled the village into the nearby forests and hills. They remained huddled there for three days as night temperatures plummeted to 4 degrees.

Within the next 72 hours, across the Adivasidominated Kandhamal district, five parish churches, 48 village churches, five convents, seven hostels and several church-run institutions bore the brunt of a Hindutva onslaught. The Kandhas, neo-converts to the Hindutva cause, zealously felled trees all along the National Highway 217 that snakes its way through the hilly Kandhamal. The entire district was cut off. More than 500 homes, of mostly Pana Christians, were targeted. Unofficially the toll is 11 deaths (including four in police firing). Hundreds went missing, perhaps hiding in forests.

Like the violence in Gujarat 2002, it appears that the attack was executed with meticulous planning. The simultaneity of the strikes across the hilly inaccessible terrain indicates this. The Christmas-week campaign was planned to coincide with Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik’s bash in capital Bhubaneswar to celebrate the 10th anniversary of his party Biju Janata Dal’s existence. By December 24, a majority of the state’s police force had been moved out of the districts — including Kandhamal to oversee the farmers’ rally and the Mahasamavesh held on December 26-27. Added to this, the Kui Samaj, an organisation of Adivasi Kandhas, had called for a Kandhamal bandh on December 25 and 26. The Kui-speaking Kandha Adivasis have been at loggerheads for over a decade with the Pana Dalit Christians over the latter’s demand for Scheduled Tribe status. This combination of factors created a powder keg to which octogenarian RSS leader Swami Lakhanananda Saraswati lit the fuse. He announced a yagna on Christmas day in Bamunigan right where the Pana-based Ambedkar Banika Sangh had erected the Christmas pandal. He had recently concluded a Ram Dhanu rath yatra to mobilise opinion on the Ram Setu issue among the Adivasis.

On December 25, while moving in his vehicle towards Bamunigan, Lakhanananda’s supporters and security staff got into a scuffle, objecting to Christmas songs being played from a church at the Christian-dominated Dasingbadi village. Outnumbered by the Christians, the self-styled godman’s supporters beat a retreat. Reaching the Daringbadi block, Lakhanananda got himself admitted to a medical centre and claimed to have been grievously hurt by a Christian mob. The news that the “Swami had been brutally attacked” was flashed by ETV’s Oriya news channel. There were no visuals to support Lakhanananda’s claims of injury. Soon, the Sangh outfits across the district attacked churches and Christian homes. Having called a bandh, more than 3,000 Kandha adivasis had gathered for a rally at Tikabali near the police station. They torched the poorly staffed Tikabali police station and went on a rampage.



STRANGELY, THROUGHOUT Kandhamal, the administration has not bothered cleaning up the mess of arson. Even the tattered pandal in Bamunigan — where it all began — clung to the poles when TEHELKA visited on January 5. All that the administration has done is hastily repair and paint the two police stations that had been attacked. A few inspectors have been shunted, the SP and collector been changed. Poorly managed relief camps are being run where officials are more keen to mete out relief to “Hindu victims” Hindus who feared reprisals in Christian-dominated villages and moved to relief camps as a precaution. Again, an “action” — the fictitious assault on Lakhanananda — was used to justify the “reaction”. “Whatever happened was because of the spontaneous reaction of the public against the attack on Lakhanananda Saraswati,”

says Orissa VHP general secretary GP Rath.

There were stray incidents of violence on Hindu streets, such as in Bamunigan, with burnt homes bearing testimony. The Sangh blames Christians and Naxalites. The strategy of ensuring a significant presence of Hindus in relief camps has also been orchestrated by the Sangh groups. In the “Hindu relief camp” in Karadavadi village in the neighbouring Ganjam district, 588 Hindus from Daringbadi, Kattingia and Tierigaon villages gather around a television as police refuse us permission to enter. However, there’s unrestricted entry into relief camps for Christians in Balliguda or Barakhama even as curfew is on.

At Balliguda’s Mount Carmel Convent, a desecrated statue of Mary welcomes us. Sister Sujata, a frail woman from Chhattisgarh posted here in June 2007, would rather not have us photograph Mary thus. Sister Christa of the convent told TEHELKA, “They showed no mercy. Shouting Jai Shri Ram and Jai Bajrang Bali, they raised nasty anti-Christians slogans.” She had not expected that the public institutions run by the convent such as the hospital, the vocational training centres and the computer centre would be attacked. A gas cylinder was used to set the ambulance on fire. A Jersey cow in the convent’s pen was charred to death. Perhaps for the Sangh workers the cow did not count as sacred because it was not a swadeshi one. The sisters recall disbelievingly that several local non-Christians, who had been beneficiaries at Mount Carmel’s vocational courses, had been part of the 1,000-strong mob that attacked them.

Christians constitute 2.4 percent of Orissa’s population, less than the all-India population of 2.6 percent. Of Kandhamal’s 6.48 lakh population, 52 percent are Adivasis and 16 percent Christians. Angana Chatterji, associate professor of social and cultural anthropology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, has tracked the communal upsurge in Orissa and says the RSS has over a few decades worked towards making Orissa a Hindutva laboratory. The RSS’s Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan, national network, directs 391 Saraswati Shishu Mandir schools with 1,11,000 students in the state. In Adivasi areas, the Sangh administers 730 Ekal Vidyalayas, Vanvasi Kalyan Parishads, Vivekananda Kendras, Sewa Bharatis and other groups that seek to Hinduise and Sanskritise the Adivasis. This has been the real conversion agenda here. The RSS operates 6,000 shakhas in Orissa with more than 1.5 lakh cadre.

Some of the precedents of violence against Christians are well known — the burning alive of Australian leprosy mission worker Graham Stuart Staines and his sons Philip and Timothy in January 1999 and the murder of Mayurbhanj Catholic priest Arul Das the same year. On March 16, 2002 around 500 trident-wielding activists of the VHP, Bajrang Dal and Durga Vahini, sporting saffron headbands, stormed and ransacked the Orissa Assembly.

The RSS has been preparing the ground for a major strike for several years. The Sangh outfits have successfully divided the Adivasis and the Dalits with a sizeable Christian proportion. Besides, Lakhanananda has been backing the KuiSamaj’s demand for refusal of ST status to Pana Christians — Dalits who have lost the right to reservation owing to their conversion. A Presidential Order of 2002 identified “Kuis” as ST. Whether the state government would interpret “Kuis” as Kui speakers and thus include Panas was not clear. In September 2007, the Kui Samaj had warned that the possibility of granting ST certificates to Panas could lead to communal tensions. The resignation of Padmanav Behera, a prominent Pana Christian and minister of steel and mines in the Patnaik government, was one of the key Kui Samaj demands.

IN THEWAVE of violence that was unleashed over the Christmas week, Behera was targeted. On December 26, a mob of 1,500 people comprising Kui Samaj Kandhas and Sangh goons burnt his home in Phiringa and then the police station 150 metres from the minister’s home. Behind a layer of soot, the graffiti on the wall of Behera’s home is ironic: “I have taken a promise to save the Hindus. If the Hindu prospers, the nation prospers. To save Hindu religion is my first and foremost duty.” On December 28, Patnaik got Behera to resign yielding to the Kui Samaj’s demands.

The Kui Samaj and RSS outfits seem to have naturally overlapping agendas. In Daringbadi block, the office of the Christian NGOWorld Vision was attacked. Their vehicles, computers, stationery, furniture were burnt in a bonfire. The Hindu Jagaran Shamukhya (HJS) alleges that Radhakant Nayak, a former civil servant and currently Congress MP in the Rajya Sabha, backs World Vision which is perceived to be a “proselytising NGO”. They also see him as backing the demand for ST status by Pana Christians. Nayak happens to be the author of several books on Adivasi and Dalit issues and is the founder of the National Institute of Social Work & Social Sciences (NISSWAS) in Bhubaneswar. The NISSWAS School of Social Work in Phulbani was targeted both by the Hindutva brigade and Kui Samaj activists. HJS

leader Basudev Barik subsequently addressed the media demanding the arrest of Nayak for fomenting “communal violence”. One of the Samaj’s demands, as part of the bandh call, was the resignation of Nayak, who has been away in Delhi all along.

The Hindutva strategy in Kandhamal to polarise the Pana Dalits and the Kandha Adivasis has begun to pay dividends. Since the formation of Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams in 1987, the Sangh has sought to co-opt Adivasis. As RSS spokesperson Ram Madhav sees it, “Vanvasis (forest dwellers) are very much part of our wide cultural canopy.”

The BJD-BJP government seems to have little issue with the manner in which Sangh outfits have vitiated the public sphere in Orissa. In fact, the state has actively colluded with the Sangh Parivar. As reported in the local media, the state administration supplies Dara Singh — Staines’ convicted murderer — with special diet on festival days. Having appointed a judicial commission headed by retired judge Basudev Panigrahi, Patnaik claims normality has been restored. This is, after all, a government that condoned a Sangh attack on the Assembly. The Christians in Kandhamal have been given an eviction notice and the government has done little to reassure them or restore their faith. Many of them fear that violence will not be limited to burning and looting the next time.

A charred ambulance at the Balliguda convent, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the jeep in which Staines was burnt, carries this message: “Go in peace, the journey on which you go is under the eye of the Lord.” Jude 18: 6. The message is lost in Orissa.

Divide To Rule

A lower caste swami and an Adivasi leader directed the carefully built up anger against the Christians

THERE ARE TWO PROTAGONISTS who orchestrated and provided the manpower for the communal violence that was unleashed in Kandhamal district — the RSS-backed leader Swami Lakhanananda Saraswati and the general secretary of the Kui Samaj, Lambodar Kanhar. In 1965, when the RSS unveiled its Goraksha Andolan as a national campaign, they deployed a man called Lakhan to oversee the implementation of the Orissa Prevention of Cow Slaughter Act, 1960. Orissa had also passed the Freedom of Religion Act (OFRA) in 1967, prohibiting “conversion by the use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means.”

Born into the dhobi caste, Lakhan transformed into Swami Lakhanananda Saraswati after establishing the Chakapada ashram in 1969. Guided initially by swayamsevak Raghunath Sethi, he believed pastors were trying to convert the Phulbhani- Kandhamal tract into a “Christ Sthan”.

The RSS mouthpiece Organiser reported on April 23, 2006 that Lakhanananda through his “four-decade-long sadhana at Chakapad has successfully awakened the spirit of Hindutva among the Vanvasis and drawn them away from the clutches of missionaries.” In April 2006, the centenary celebrations of the second RSS sarsanghachalak MS Golwalkar had been kicked off in Chakapad by Lakhanananda. Thousands of Kandha members of the Kui Samaj, led by their leader Lambodar Kanhar, had attended the meeting. Though Kui Samaj does not directly associate itself with the Sangh outfits, its Kandha members have often been mobilised by the RSS and its affiliates.

Kanhar, 43, is a lawyer by profession. He claims he is keen to protect the Kandhas from both Christianity and the Sangh outfits, but says, “How can we get along with Christians? It’s like cat and mouse. We don’t like the ways of even those who are Christians among the Kandhas. We keep them apart from places of worship.”

Chief Minister Patnaik acceding to most of the Kui Samaj’s demands has given him more leverage. He told TEHELKA he is likely to contest the 2009 elections and is not averse to the tacit support of the RSS and the BJP.

With inputs from Bibhuti Pati

From Tehelka Magazine, Vol 5, Issue 2, Dated Jan 19, 2008