

Hindutva's Fury against Christians in Orissa

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The anti-Christian violence in Orissa, orchestrated by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and its allies, has unleashed the fury of Hindu kandhas against dalit pana Christians. The former is resentful of the latter's attempts to get scheduled tribe status. The new-found assertiveness of the previously untouchable panas has added to the tension. The Hindutva organisations, engaged in converting tribals to Hinduism, accuse Christian missionaries of "forcing" the dalits to convert. They conveniently ignore the continuing oppressive casteist order that forces the dalits to do so.

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The last week of August scripted a horror story for the Christian minorities in Orissa. They experienced the fury of the worst-ever communal rage – churches were set on fire, Christian institutions, orphanages and hamlets were destroyed, pastors were attacked, one nun was burnt alive and there were reports of the gangrape of another. Fearing this fury, thousands of Christians fled their homes to take shelter in the forest. The violence was not confined to Kandhamal district alone; it shook other districts as well, killing, injuring and terrorising Christians and rendering thousands homeless. All this barbaric violence followed the night of August 23 when a controversial Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader Laxmanananda Saraswati and his four associates, while celebrating Janmashtami at Jalespata Ashram, were killed by a group of armed assassins.

Who killed Laxmanananda? Various theories are doing the rounds. While the Maoists claim that they did so, because the sadhu has been "mixing religion with politics" and pursuing a "fascist" and divisive communal agenda, the Sangh parivar, blamed a "Christian conspiracy", and legitimised their reign of terror as a befitting revenge. Some others believe that this murder has been engineered by a section of the parivar itself in order to reap

an electoral advantage for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the forthcoming elections.

Laxmanananda and His Mission

Who was Laxmanananda and what was his mission? More than five decades ago he left his family home in Dhenkanal district to become a sadhu. After spending some years in the ashrams of north India, he participated in the 1966 gau (cow) raksha andolan and then joined the newly formed VHP as a Hindu missionary. As part of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-VHP strategy he came to Phulbani (now Kandhamal) in 1969 and set up base at Chakapada with a twofold objective: Hinduising the adivasis and countering the proselytising activities of the Christian missionaries. Saraswati concentrated on the adivasis, primarily the kandhas, constituting more than half of Kandhamal's population, in order to bring them closer to Hindutva. Claiming that "vanavasis are Hindus" he systematically introduced sat-sangs and yagyas, Hindu gods and goddesses, Hindu religious scriptures and mode of worship, and organised mega-religious congregations ('ashtaprahara namayagyas') attracting and mobilising the kandhas in a big way. Laxmanananda opened schools, colleges, hostels for the adivasi boys and girls; the Sangh parivar trained them ideologically and created a pool of permanent cadre. Though Hinduisation did not offer any substantive socio-economic empowerment to the poor adivasis, the VHP's "packaged Hinduism" gave them a sort of religious and cultural gratification; in an otherwise hopeless existential world, it perhaps generated some hopes under a larger Hindu identity.

Besides, Laxmanananda's demonisation of the Christian panas, the traditional rivals of "Hindu" kandhas, as the "other" provided them with a purpose to be part of Hindutva. Once the process of Hinduisation picked up momentum, Laxmanananda took up reconversion ('ghar wapsi') of the Christian converts back to Hinduism.

Laxmanananda's agenda had various implications: firstly, by throwing up an alternate welfare system it challenged Christian missionaries who had earlier monopolised education and healthcare services in the non-state sectors, compelling them to be more competitive in order to retain their influence. Secondly, aggressive Hinduisation and militant "reconversion" propelled them to reorient their proselytisation discourse and strategy. New Christian denominations entered, more churches were opened; energetic evangelical groups mushroomed leaving the "laid back" Catholic church behind. Thus a quiet Kandhamal became a site of competing religiosity. Thirdly, militant Hinduisation deeply divided adivasis and dalits on communal lines. Laxmanananda successfully pitched "Hindu" kandhas against Christian panas.

Kandha-Pana Ethnic Divide

The kandha-pana ethnic divide is not of recent origins. Historically, kandhas, the original inhabitants of Kandhamal, due to their control over land, perceived themselves as 'rajās' (kings) and the migrant landless panas from the plains as their 'prajas' (subjects). This sense of superiority was extended to the social and cultural spheres as well. However, colonial intervention changed this scenario by introducing new land relations and depriving the kandhas of their traditional rights over the forest land. Moreover, refusal by kandhas to directly deal with the outside world, gave an opportunity to the panas, both material and political. Though the kandhas used the panas as "middle men", they nonetheless despised this role and their literature depicted panas as "liars", "cheats" and "hypocrites". Perhaps, this resentment was partly due to the relative success of some panas, who made gains in getting petty jobs, undertaking small trade, and even acquiring land under the colonial

rule. Thus, for the kandhas, the panas became exploiters and land snatchers.

In the post-independence period this got further crystallised with the perception that the panas, with the help of the state as well as the church, have been cornering the maximum benefits of constitutional reservation due to their educational and economic advantage. This perception is a little misplaced as a large majority of the panas are poor and moreover, being dalit Christians, they are constitutionally deprived of the benefits of reservation. The kandhas, however, allege that the panas hide their Christian identity and even claim to be scheduled tribes (st) or Hindu scheduled castes (sc) by producing forged certificates. The panas, they fear, are out to dominate them economically, politically and culturally.

True, a small section of the panas, benefiting from the education imparted by the state and the church has entered into the bureaucracy and politics thereby acquiring visibility and prominence in an otherwise poor district. Moreover, this elite, though primarily self-serving, occasionally takes up the issues of the community and does not shy away from showing off its clout. In the process, it has become a kind of role model for the poor panas – arousing their consciousness, enhancing their aspirations, and giving them a sense of empowerment. The emergence of the panas as an assertive community has become an eyesore to the upper caste Hindus, not only in Kandhamal but also in other parts of Orissa. Thus, stereotypes of the pana as "betrayer", "cunning", "deceitful", "exploiter", etc, has entered into the caste discourses in Orissa.

Upper caste Hindus find it hard to digest the growing assertion of the panas, who were once untouchable and at the bottom of the social ladder. The upper and middle caste Hindus and the Sangh parivar leaders, both being outsiders in the district, enjoy a symbiotic relationship. While most of the caste Hindus like brahmins and kumutis have migrated from the neighbouring districts of Ganjam and Gajapati as government servants and traders, Laxmanananda and many of his close associates came from outside as well. Both see the assertive panas as a threat to their hegemony; they would prefer a "docile"

kandha to a "defiant" pana any day; it is not really the latter's religion so much, as his informed consciousness. However, religion here becomes an additional stick to beat the dalit panas. Hence, the Sangh parivar, in collaboration with the upper caste elite and middle caste petty bourgeoisie, has been mobilising kandhas as Hindus against panas who are dalit Christians by giving it a communal colour, thereby widening the ethnic cleavage further.

Communal Confrontation

Thus, the kandha-pana ethnic divide has been conveniently converted into a Hindu-Christian communal confrontation. There have been periodic eruptions of ethno-communal violence in Kandhamal particularly since the early 1990s. During the Ramjanmabhoomi agitation when yatras were undertaken by the vhp, churches were vandalised though Christians had nothing to do with the Babri masjid. While the mobilisation was anti-Muslim everywhere else, it was anti-Christian in Kandhamal, understandably because of the negligible Muslim presence. The Ramjanmabhoomi agitation brought many kandhas to the Hindutva fold. In 1992, the kandha-pana violence continued for a long spell. In 2004, the Catholic church was vandalised in Raikia. In 2006, Laxmanananda organised a massive congregation of four to five lakhs of people at Chakapada to commemorate M S Golwalkar's birth centenary; the entire parivar and the state machinery were present. The fallout was expected sooner or later. In 2007, the situation further worsened when panas demanded st status because like the kandhas they also spoke the same "Kui" language. This infuriated the kandhas as their rivals would not only snatch away their economic resources but also their sacred cultural resources by claiming an equal status. The Sangh parivar soon started a campaign against this demand and mobilised kandhas under the kandhamal Kui Samaj. Thus started a violent Hindu-Christian confrontation on Christmas eve in 2007. Christians retaliated for the first time; some Hindu houses were burnt in Brahmanigaon. However, the recent riots surpassed all the previous ones in their ferocity.

The Biju Janata Dal (BJD)-BJP coalition government in Orissa miserably failed to protect the lives and properties of the Christian minorities. The BJD chief minister, despite his secular conviction, gave in to political compulsion. The district police chief was suspended under BJP pressure and the parivar was given a free hand to kill and terrorise the Christian minorities. The VHP's Pravin Togadia was permitted to lead the funeral procession spewing hatred and inciting communal violence. Unlike the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, the violence in Orissa may not have been state-sponsored, but the state government silently witnessed this macabre dance of death and terror which took 40 lives and made thousands homeless.

The central government's role was not above board either. It is unbelievable that the home minister of India could not enter Kandhamal. Surprisingly, he later issued an irresponsible and outrageous statement almost sharing the version of the Sangh parivar. The centre may conveniently take refuge under the so-called federal constraint as if protection of life and properties of the citizens is less sacrosanct; Orissa was a fit case for invoking Article 355. In the light of the 2002 Gujarat genocide, the United Progressive Alliance's (UPA) promise to bring a stringent law to deal with the culprits of communal riots has remained hollow. Moreover, the Congress Party, the bankrupt political opposition in Orissa, instead of coming to the rescue of the minorities, thought it wise to move a no-confidence motion against the government which in fact united the ruling coalition. Some progressive secular individuals, civil society groups, communist/socialist organisations came forward protesting against the Sangh parivar's violence and the silence of the state; but this was more feeble, and less effective. Orissa's civil society was more or less silent.

Communalisation of Civil Society

This silence is the symptom of a serious malaise – Hindutva's expansion and ideological penetration in Orissa. The growth of the RSS over the years has been spectacular. It runs about 2,500 shakhas and has about 25 active affiliates like the VHP, the Bajrang Dal, the Durga Vahini, the BJP, Akhila Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad

(ABVP), Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), Saraswati Shishu Mandir (SSM) and the Budakattu Krishna Sangh (BKS) working among students, youth, women, farmers, workers, tribals, intellectuals, journalists, etc, covering every sphere of civil society. These organisations have spread their network in both urban and rural Orissa, continuously disseminating communal propaganda under the pretext of 'seva', 'sangathan', and 'dharm raksha'. Saraswati Sishu Mandirs are popular among the middle and lower middle class Oriya parents. The print media, which was once secular, has by and large internalised the Sangh discourse. Moreover, the RSS, with the support of the BJP, a partner in the state government since 2000, has got access to the state power and resources. The parivar's deep entrenchment and continuous anti-Christian campaign, harping on the large-scale conversion in tribal areas, has created a communal divide in the state. Oriyas must not forget that Christians played an important role in the formation of modern Orissa and Madhusudan Das, one of the founding fathers, was a Christian. Besides, the Christian missionaries brought the first printing press, prepared Oriya dictionaries, opened schools, hospitals and orphanages and worked tirelessly in the most inhospitable terrain serving the poor and destitute for more than a century. True, conversion happened in the process; however, if it were the only agenda, then the number of Christians should not have remained a meagre 2.4 per cent. Strangely, the benign role of Christianity, once part of Orissa's popular discourse, has been systematically erased by the RSS.

Despite having an overwhelming Hindu population (94.35 per cent: 2001), Orissa did not have any communal riots until 1964, when the first communal riots occurred at Rourkela. Incidentally, with this, the RSS came into the public gaze and communal riots soon became a recurrent feature; Cuttack: 1968 and 1992, Bhadrak: 1986 and 1991, Soro: 1991. While all these riots have targeted Muslims, the Kandhamal riots have been anti-Christian. Thus, the Sangh parivar targets both the "enemies" of the Hindu rashtra: Muslims (2.07 per cent) as well as Christians (2.43

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per cent). The anti-Christian campaign led to the barbaric killing of Graham Staines and his two sons at Manoharpur, Keonjhar, and also of pastor Arul Doss at Jamuboni, Mayurbhanj, in 1999. The Orissa government has passed the Orissa Prevention of Cow Slaughter Act, 1960 and the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1967; both these Acts have helped the Sangh parivar to fan out its anti-Christian agenda.

Conversion Controversy

Orissa has remained under the hegemony of Jagannath culture for centuries; despite its celebration of universalism and syncretism, it still retains a brahminical core. First, when the parivar accuses Christian missionaries of converting Hindus, it knows well enough that caste prejudices are still rampant and dalits are not allowed to enter a Hindu temple despite the fact that the Orissa government has passed the

Temple Entry Act way back in 1947. The panas of Kandhamal demanded entry into the Shiva temple in the early 1950s which was fiercely resisted; 50 years later the position remains the same. Hence, neither “lure” nor “force” is really needed for conversion; it is the Hindu hierarchical oppressive social order that forces the poor dalits to change their god. Second, the parivar raises the role of foreign money in proselytisation. However, the VHP and the Vanavasi Kalayan Ashram are in the list of recipients of the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF), the Sangh parivar’s American funding agency. Third, the parivar accuses missionaries of forcing the converts to discard their age-old traditions. Ironically, Laxmanananda systematically attacked all those tribal social and cultural practices which did not conform to “Hindu” traditions; for instance, ‘dhangda dhangdi’, a tribal practice of choosing life partners

was denounced as ‘kusanskar’ (uncivilised) and was forcibly replaced with the Hindu marriage institution. Thus, Hindutva wants an exclusive proselytising right over the adivasis as they are “Hindus” without allowing them to exercise their freedom to choose their god.

Conclusions

The Kandhamal riots have exposed Hindutva’s brahminical agenda which has no space for the poor dalits. When the panas demanded entry into the Shiva temple in the 1950s, Hindutva did not recognise their legal right; if at all Hindutva permits, it has to be under the consent and patronage of the ‘savarnas’. Dalits in Kandhamal have consciously rejected Hinduism and embraced Christianity and hence, face the fury of Hindu communalism. In Kandhamal, the parivar’s anti-Christian and anti-dalit discourses run together.