

Religion, Politics and Reservation led Violence and Vulnerability in Kandhmal, Odisha

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Abstract: India as a nation state is well known for its diversity in the form of multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi lingual characteristics. The religious conflict among the people in India is not a new incident. In the communal history of India, lot of riots and violence has caused huge loss of life and property. Majority of the communal violence had occurred among the conflict between Hindu and Muslim communities. The Christians and Hindu community very rarely engage in communal violence because unlike Muslims Christians do not claim Indian Territory to form a separate nation state. The Kandhmal district of Orissa was became laboratory of communal violence. In the 1st decade of twentieth century the conversion of Hindus to Christians in Kandhmal District of Odisha, politicizing the issues of religion conversion, and availing the government facility in the form of reservation have led to communal violence causing loss of life and property in Kandhmal district of Odisha in the year 2008. The several years long cumulative anger and conflict between the Hindu and Christians led to communal violence with the killing of a Hindu Monk Swami Lakhana Nanda Saraswati along with his four disciple on August 23, 2008 in Kandhmal district of Odisha. With the assassination of Swami Lakhana Nanda, various political parties and civil society groups were politicizing the issues and dividing poor tribes along the line of caste, tribe, ethnicity, and religious communities.

Key Words: communalism, religion, reservation, violence, politics.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Religion plays a dominant role in social life among the Indians. India is well known for its diversity in the field of region, language, caste, religion and culture. India also witnessed a heart breaking division of its territory on communal basis during the British rule in the year 1905 with the division of Bengal into East Bengal and West Bengal and in the year 1947 as India and Pakistan. The communal conflict in India between Hindu and Muslim is more intensive than the Christians and Hindus. Generally the communal conflict takes place based on very small and petty issues reflecting fierce business, economic competitions, and power struggle between the rival communities. This paper attempts to seek the causes of communal conflict between Hindus and converted Christians. The Hindus were the local aborigine people called Kandha and the converted Christians are the Panos the scheduled caste community. Thus this violence can be termed as the both the combination of communal and ethnic conflict. Even after more than one decade of assassination of Swami Lakhana Nanda Saraswati, the fear of violence and vulnerability in the Kandhamal has not been disappeared from the minds of the people.

Phulbani district got its new name as Kandhamal in 1990s after SC/ST communal violence, which was a long demand for the tribal people of the district. Now in the name of charity and social services people are becoming villain of needy and innocent people. Their key point is to motivate illiterate and needy tribals, by giving cash and in kind and at the end converting them towards Christianity. Daringbadi a Christian dominated Block became a bone of content for communal violence, which took place on the evening 24th of December. Swami Lakhana Nanda was brutally attacked by Christians, which influenced the emotion among the orthodox Hindu tribes, Kui Samaj, RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal. On December 24th the kui (local tribal language) speaking people and Orissa Adavasi Janajati Samaj of Phulbani branch called a 48 hour Bandh. The entire district was cut off from the rest of the world for a week. Their reaction was "Christian people have beaten our God father Lakhana Nanda and we will take its revenge". More than 500 homes of Christians were targeted, the official toll is 3 deaths and hundreds of families ran away from home and took shelter in nearby forest and hilly areas. In some Christian dominated areas Hindus were also targeted. Hindus being the majority community intended to cause huge damage to the Christian community. Kandhmal has a history of more than 500 years of Christian missionary presence. From late nineteenth century, through the setting up of educational institutions both Catholic and Protestant mission groups started their work here. [1]

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The district of Kandhamal has its Headquarters at Phulbani which is 211 km distance from its state capital Bhubaneswar consisting of 8021 sq km area and shares 5.15 percent of total state geographical area. The district, total population is 648,201 (in 2001) of which 52 percent are Scheduled Tribes (Adivasi) more than 80 percent people are Hindus and only 16 percent are Christians. [2] The district of Phulbani got its new name as Kandhamal in 1990s after SC/ST communal violence during the regime of former Chief Minister Late Biju Pattnaik, which was a long demand for the tribal people of the district. The word *kandha* means *adivasi* or tribes, and *mal* means inhabitant in Oriya language. In single word *kandhamal* means the area of *adivasi* (tribe). In the district more than 50 percent people are tribes including *kui*, *kutia*, *dangria*, and *adivasi* (tribe). In past the kandhas under the leadership of Janak Kanhar and Chakra Bisoi fought against British to restore the tribal territory of undivided Phulbani Boudh and Bhanjnar (kingdom). The tribals whose attachment with forest, nature, land hills and stone gods and goddess with orthodox religious belief was there in past and still it is there in remote areas. Life is not stagnant; change is the laws of nature and the traditional system of life style have been changing slow and steadily. But it is a matter of great regret in rural areas; still people are staying in forest and hilly areas without basic amenities and infrastructure, even when India has celebrated its 60 years of Independence. Pull and push factors always are there in every society and the community in Kandhamal also not escaped from that. In the name of SCs and STs Government plans and programme and schemes are wrongly implemented through different unofficial via-media. Social development is done in pen and paper only, which is a fact without evidence. These all happen in reality due to lack of education, information, awareness, communication and transportation. On the other side in the name of charity, social services the religious people are becoming villain of needy and innocent people.

3. Materials and Method:

This study is done with the field based observation and the collection of material from both primary as well as the secondary sources of information. Field level data has been collected from violence affected areas and theoretical information has been compiled from various sources like news paper, magazine, internet websites, and periodicals.

4. Results:

4.1 Pre –Assassination Attack on Swami Lakhana Nanda Saraswati and Reasons for Violence

Phulbani the city of flowers victimized with sentimental communal violence for more than a fortnight, and was news in national dailies in last week of December, 2007. It is indeed painful and panic situation of Christmas and the New Year was a dark day for the people of the district of Kandhamal irrespective of religion, caste, colour and sex. Daringbadi is one of the CD block out of a total of 12 in Kandhamal district. It is known as a well educated block and Darjeeling (or Kashmir) of Orissa is 85 km distance from district Headquarters. It is also a Christian dominated Block and became a bone of content for communal violence, which took place on the evening 24th of December. And it spread as fast as wild fire in the entire District and then in state within an hour. The incidence (news) that Swami Lakhana Nanda (82 year old) is brutally attacked was flashed by ETV's Oriya news channel, which influenced the emotion among the orthodox Hindu tribes, Kui Samaj, RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal. The Kui Sama, which unites members of the native Kondh tribe in Kandhamal, was found to be very much on the side of the VHP and ruling alliance. [3]

Swami Lakhana Nanda is a well known figure in the district and regarded as Baba. Being a RSS activist, he is also regarded as Praveen Tagodia and K. Sudarshan of the Kandhamal district. He used to stay at Chakapadu Math in the district and travel throughout the district for performing yagna, puja and deliver religious speeches to Hindu gathering. Wherever he is and whenever he reaches a place a kind of religious procession and grand welcome is taken by the Hindu Community including men women, youth and children. It is not surprising but true fact that people touch and wash his feet and drink its water as holy water and get blessings from him. He speaks about Hindutva, Ram Rajya, Hindu Rashtra and directly or indirectly blames Christian priest, missionaries, nuns and other activists for converting people Hindu to Christian, killing cow and eating beef. Of course in reality Christian people do it. Still cow dung is used at every household in rural areas for its holiness and Hindu respect cow as Gomata. On the other hand entire Christian community is angry with him for creating communal tension, conspiring to attack churches and priests. It has been a cold war between RSS, VHP activists and Christians which become the reality on 24th of December.

As a routine Lakhana Nanda on his way back to Daringbadi after performing a *yagna* and delivering his religious speech at a Hindu gathering at Bamunigaon was beaten up at Dasingbadi as a reaction to his hand in several attacks against missionaries and churches in the past days. Dasingbadi village located between Daringbadi and Bamunigaon, where a majority of people are Christians and the villagers were in great mood and busy to decorate pandals and church on account of December 25, as it is big day for the Christians. He sustained a head injury and rushed to Berhampur Medical College. But Lakhana Nanda refuses the allegation and points an accusing finger at R.K. Nayak for engineering the attack on him. What is interesting is that both seating MPs, Mr. Sugrib Singh (Lok Sabha) and Mr. R.K. Nayak (Rajya Sabha) belong to that village only and both are Christians. Mr. Singh is from Biju Janata Dal which is the present government of Orissa and Mr. Nayak is from Congress, from where Lakhana Nanda was attacked. When the

news spread and reacting to the Lakhana Nanda attack, the RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal, Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram and other associated Hindu communities began to burn Christian pandals and churches and targeted Christian people wherever they met.

Coincidentally on December 24th the *kui* (local tribal language) speaking people and Orissa Adivasi Janajati Samaj of Phulbani branch were ready to call a 48 hour Bandh led by tribal leader Lambodhar Kanhar w.e.f. December 25th morning regarding reservation issues i.e. SC Christians are getting ST reservation benefits and other facilities by producing fake documents even if they are getting services from the Christian institutions. Their demand is to make ST reservation for the Lok Sabha and MLA constituency which is now reserved for SC. Eyeing all the circumstances VHP, RSS and Bajrang Dal supported Bandh and encouraged the tribal people for stronger agitation. Some vested interests of ruling parties BJP, BJD, and congress have played a very dangerous role in dividing the poor on caste, tribe, communal, religion and ethnic lines for their vote bank politics. [4]

4.2 The Ground Reality – the Bone of Content

VHP, RSS activists supported Kui Samaj or adivasi sangathana to agitate and instigate them to attack churches. Their main motive is to preach Ramayana and Hindutwa which is not acceptable by the Christian and educated people. So tribals are their main arms for agitation. On the other hand most of the Christian priests and nuns are non-oriya speaking people who are doing their services in the name of humanity, brotherhood, religion and charity through their churches and parish theoretically only but in ground reality it is not. It is an open secret their key point is to motivate people, those who are illiterate and needy tribals, by giving cash and in kind terms of wheat, rice, cloth and polythene sheet for hut. In form of social services they are creating an atmosphere for attracting people and at the end converting towards Christianity. Their base is remote rural areas. The main aim is to open small church buildings in mud or wood houses for their purposes and appoint unemployed people as their preacher. They also give training to the preacher who can easily identify the “soft targets” especially in tribal communities. These examples can be seen in Tumudi Band, Kotagarh, Baliguda and Phiringia blocks. It is also a well known factor that the priests lead a comfortable life. Through this channel they are increasing their numbers. The secrecy of Christian priest’s activists and their evil doing is common knowledge to the RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal. But both religious activists are blaming each other. Seeing all the circumstances the RSS people also open up their centre in the name of math, small ashram spread their voices throughout the district where Christian are already living. It is a true fact that to become Christian from Hindu is easy but difficult to be back to their previous religion and nobody becomes a Hindu from Christian. These allegations are denying by Christian priests.

The important factor is that about marriage, i.e. if the Hindu family wants a Christian girl for their son, the first and foremost criteria is that the groom must be converted into Christian and accept the “paap swikar” (religious acceptance) and then marriage can take place. This kind of decision and system is taken by the priests and mandalies (Parish) head in compulsory manner, even if bride’s parents agree to marriage. But no Hindu parent follows such rule of Hindu while marrying their girl. It hurts and creates family disturbances in both ends if the groom and bride knew each other. Until and unless the groom and his family are converted Christian marriage cannot take place. In some cases needy and young SC & ST girls are appointed as chore workers in different trades in the churches or missionary run schools and sexually exploited, supposed to provide free health services but they are discriminating people in the community and in case of Hindu patients they charge them high price which is an also additional problem in rural areas. We met a group of Adivasi labour class who were carrying axes, bows and arrows and other iron weapon moving around Katgarh bazar saying Jai Sriram, Jai Bajrang Bali. Christian ko maro and shouting. We wanted to know what is their reaction about the bandh, their response was in a single voice Christian people have beaten our God father Lakhana Nanda and we will take its revenge. Their sentiment could be understandable. And who can be blamed! Due to illiteracy, ignorance and poverty people are blindly jumping into fire depending on who helped in past.

5. DISCUSSIONS:

Impact of the Incident

More than 3000 mob and activist armed with axes, bow-arrows, lathis, kerosene and iron weapons attacked Tikabali police post, and other places. The major affected areas are Balliguda, Barkhama, Bamunigoan, and Phiringia. They also cut trees and blocked the road; big stones were put all along the national highway 217. The entire district was cut off from the rest of the world for a week. More than 500 homes of Christians were targeted, the official toll is 3 deaths and hundreds of families ran away from home and took shelter in nearby forest and hilly areas. In some Christian dominated areas Hindus also targeted especially in Daringbadi Block. The district administration is remaining silent until and unless there is a strong protest or violence like this. When the mob attacked police station of Tikabali, Phiringia then only administration woke up. The district administration Collector and SP rushed to some sensitive areas with police force and imposed 144 (IPC) but the situation was beyond control. The Collector asked for the additional police forces including CRPF, Rapid Action Force and deployed police in the more sensitive areas like Baliguda, Barakhama,

Bamunigaon, Tikabali, but the security forces faced difficulties to reach the area because of road blocks. The situation however, did not show any improvement, and then curfew was imposed in five places for more than 3 days for four to five hours alternatively. The chief minister Mr. Nabin Patnaik found time to reach district headquarter (Phulbani) for half an hour after two days and held review meetings attended by top officials of state the administration including DG and IG of Police and Revenue Divisional Commissioner (RDC). On his return to the state capital Mr. Patnaik told reporter that situation is under control and Special Forces have been deployed. He also appealed to the people to keep peace and harmony. As the situation was critical the opposition party and other organization criticized the government for its administration failure and for not protecting the minorities. The chief minister ordered a judicial inquiry into the violence in Kandhamal incidence. He also ordered to provide houses under Indira Awas scheme to those houses were burnt and 1 lakh to those who were killed and 20 thousand for injure sustained. Mr. Padmanav Behera, Steel and Mines Minister of cabinet rank and top confidant of Mr. Patnaik resigned who represents Phulbani assembly constituency (SC). His house at Phiringia was also attacked. Mr. Behera belongs to harijan community (SC). After wards the central team led by home minister Mr. Patil visited the most sensitive areas and later Chairman, National Minority Commission also visited but the situation is yet to be normalised.

6. CONCLUSION:

Amid the tension and based on previous religious conflict Swami Lakshana Nanda Saraswati was murdered on the day of Janmashtami in 23 August 2008 at Tumudibandh, Kandhamal. Four of his disciples including a boy were also killed on the same day. [5] Swami Lakhana Nanda Saraswati a native of Gurujanga village in Talcher was a Hindu monk and highly revered social leader dedicated his life for the welfare of the tribes.

In October 2013, seven people all of them belonging to Christians and a Maoist leader name Pulari Rama Rao were sentenced to life imprisonment for their role in killing of Swami Lakhana Nanda Saraswati. Two of the Maoist leader Dunna Keshav Rao alias Azad who killed in an encounter in Andhra Pradesh and Sbyasachi Panda who is in the jail now are also accused in the case of Swamiji's Murder. [6] Various fact finding committee found that the mostly Christian people are still living in an atmosphere of fear.

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