

HINDUTVA-SPONSORED VIOLENCE IN TRIBAL ORISSA

Report of an AIDWA delegation to Kandhamal

December 2008

Introduction

Orissa has long been a site of Hindutva violence against minority groups. From anti-Christian violence in Rourkela in 1964, to the brutal murder of the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons in 1999, the Sangh Parivar has raised the bogey of forced conversions by Christian missionaries to terrorise Christians in Orissa. In Kandhamal district, as part of its programme of 'Hinduisation' initiated in 1969 by Lakshmananda Saraswati and his followers, the Sangh's socio-economic boycotts and forced conversions over the last two decades – and particularly since the Bharatiya Janata Party's coalition government with the Biju Janata Dal assumed power in the year 2000 – have consistently been accompanied by violence against the Christian minorities.

The present round of violence against the Christians in Kandhamal district was preceded by the incidents in December 2007, following the attack and destruction of a *pandal* put up on the main road of the town to hold Christmas celebrations in Brahamanigaon on 24 December (see Annexure 1). Two Christians were injured in the clashes, and a wave of anti-Christian violence swept through the district. At least 65 churches and prayer houses in rural areas were torched in the violence that ensued, and hundreds of Christians were forced to flee their homes.

Although tension persisted in the district in the months that followed, the next orchestrated and vicious assault on Christian minorities in the district followed the murder of Lakshmananda Saraswati, and four of his followers on Aug 23 2008, in his ashram. Although the Maoists owned up responsibility for the murder, it was the Christians residing in ten blocks of Kandhamal district that were attacked by the Sangh, and their houses and prayer halls set ablaze. Most gruesome was the sexual assault on a nun, Sister Meena, in K Nuagaon on 25 August 2008. 32 people were killed in group clashes, 3600 houses were partially or fully damaged and even at the end of the October, 10,895 Christians were still in the nine relief camps run by the State Government in six blocks of the district.

AIDWA has always stood firmly with the right of religious minorities to practice their faith. In August and September 2008, it held a number of protest actions across the country, demanding protection and justice for the Christian minorities in Orissa

and stern action against the Sangh Parivar for its politics of pogroms (see Annexure 2). This report is an outcome of the visit undertaken by a central delegation of the All India Democratic Women's association (AIDWA) to Kandhamal district of Orissa on 1 and 2 November 2008. The delegation comprised of Subhashini Ali (President), Shyamali Gupta (Working President) Sudha Sundararaman (General Secretary), Tapasi Praharaj (Orissa State President), Pushpa Dash (Orissa General Secretary) of AIDWA.

The delegation visited the Tikabali and Balliguda sub-divisions of Kandhamal district, and the relief camps instituted by the State Government. It also spoke to some of the Christians who had been ousted from their villages and had subsequently returned. On the third day of the visit, the delegation met Shri Naveen Patnaik, the Chief Minister of Orissa.

Tikabali, Kandhamal District, 1 November 2008

The AIDWA delegation visited the relief camp in Tikabali, housed in the Government High School. The local administration was quite cooperative and did not interfere with the interaction between the delegation and the camp inmates. Tikabali was one of ten blocks that had been affected by the violence. At the peak of the violence, relief camps had been set up in Tikabali, G. Udayagiri, Raikia, K. Nuagaon, Balliguda, Phiringia, Tumudibandh, Daringibadi, Phulbani, and Kotagarh, and about 25,000 victims had taken shelter there. Others had taken shelter in camps run by Christian organisations in the district and Bhubaneshwar, and many also sought shelter with kin elsewhere in Orissa and other States. A number of these camps had been wound up by the time the AIDWA delegation made its visit, with the affected families have returned to their villages. The only government relief camps in operation now were the ones in Tikabali, G. Udayagiri, Raikia, N. Nuagaon, Phulbani, and Daringibadi.

In Tikabali, the number of people in the camp has come down by half to about 750. Many of those affected by the violence had gone back to their villages or to other places in search of work. The families still in the camp told the delegation that they could visit their villages at least a few times every week in the daytime. Some inmates that have fields just outside their villages have been able to tend to them; however, others who have land inside the village proper have found it more difficult. When asked about the degree of risk they perceived in returning to their homes, the response was mixed in response. While some inmates felt that it was not their old neighbours but 'outside forces' that were preventing their neighbours from

allowing them to return to their homes, others said that they could not go home because conversion to Hinduism had been made a prerequisite for their return. Many were apprehensive of renewed violence on the return to their homes.

The AIDWA delegation also met the camp secretary, Bikram Pradhan, from Kottadi village of Gardingia Block, one of the badly affected regions. He told the delegation that the Christians of the villages had registered group FIRs against those who had burnt their homes, as the attackers were all people known to them. They were now in the process of registering individual FIRs as well. At the same time, he was also careful to point out that not all the members of the majority community should be considered at fault, as many of their Hindu neighbours had helped them by storing their possessions, safeguarding their cattle, and even by trying to douse the flames that engulfed their houses. These good deeds did not, he told us, go unpunished by the hindutva forces. For instance, Siddheshwar Pradhan, who tried to help the Christians in his village, was burnt to death (a fact corroborated by the district administration). Others, too, had reported being intimidated.

Living in camps for so long and not knowing when they will be able to return to a normal life has created many problems. Priya Kumari Digal, from Behra village, is a young girl from the twelfth standard. She said that in her village, the entire majority community of about 300 people turned against the 45 Christian families and forced them to flee. She said that while younger children were being taught within the camp, older students like herself could not pursue their studies without books and teachers. She was worried about how she would prepare for the exams, which were due in December. Another young blind girl, Jhunjhunrani, who was studying in the second year, was also anxious – all her books, including those in Braille, had been burnt.

Priyotima Digal, also from Behra village and a member of an SHG group named Jeevan Jyoti, said that the grain meant for mid-day meals prepared by her group was stored in her home and had been destroyed by the attacking mobs. Other SHG members said that money that they had withdrawn from the banks or collected from their members had also been lost and they were worried that the banks would initiate recovery proceedings. The inmates also complained about the fact that they had received only one set of clothing and also had no soap, oil etc. They responded very positively to our suggestion that NREGA works could be started near the camp

Later, our delegation members also met the Pradhanacharya, Jagabandhu Das, of Lakshmananda Saraswati's ashram at Chhakapad. Very young boys live and study here and we saw men in khaki shorts ordering many of them to perform menial

tasks like sweeping, swabbing, washing clothes, cutting vegetables etc. The Pradhanacharya was told that AIDWA was deeply concerned about the terrible attacks that had taken place and about the restoration of peace. He was quite cold-blooded in his response, justifying the attacks as a 'natural reaction' to the murders of August 23, 2008 and alleged that the Christians had been involved in this one way or the other. The Christians who had been driven away would be allowed back only if they 'changed their ways', accepted 'certain conditions' regarding their conduct, and withdrew all the cases they had filed against the attackers. (We found his comments on the "notoriety" of the whole community echoed by some of the area level officials whom we conversed with later, showing how this prejudice is in the process of getting dangerously institutionalized.)

The delegation put forward several demands to the Collector, and the SDM, such as provision of books to students, and other necessities, ensuring security in the village, and implementation of NREGA scheme in every village irrespective of whether they had job cards or not. The Collector agreed to the demands. He also agreed to consider the demand for smaller camps nearer the villages of the inmates so that they could look after their fields and also be near their homes and former neighbours.

Balliguda, Kandhamal District, 2 November 2008

The delegation went to the Balliguda sub-division the next morning. On the way we passed many villages and small market places, where the evidence of terrible destruction was there for all to see. Many of the buildings were ravaged by fire, and in front of many of the homes, one could see the ashes and remains of burnt books and burnt clothes. In K Nuagaon, the large mission building as well as smaller school buildings stood desolate and desecrated. This was the place where the public assault on Sister Meena had taken place and now houses a camp with more than 2000 victims.

The camp in Balliguda had been wound up and, according to the Sub-Collector, all the inmates had gone back to their villages. The delegation visited one of these villages, Mediakia to which 27 families had returned and spoke to most of them. We noticed that an NREGA worksite had been started and most of the families were employed there. Poor people belonging to the majority community were also employees, but they were working at another part of the site. All the Christians in the villages had suffered tremendous damage during the attacks. Many had also lost their animals, although some said that their neighbours had managed to save a few. All of them had started receiving compensation for rebuilding their homes. The

delegation was able to talk to them at length and they stated that they were not feeling threatened at the moment.

The AIDWA delegation also met some of the non-Christian tribal men who were working at another part of the work-site. They were not very forthcoming with information about the attacks but did say that they were sure that they would not be repeated. They said many peace-meetings were being held. They were also very happy that the NREGA work had started and said that if this was continued throughout the year, it would have a very positive impact, as because of the lack of work, many of them had been forced to go as far away as Kerala to find work. None of them voiced any anger against their Christian neighbours. This led the delegation to the conclusion that any mistrust created between the Christian and Hindu neighbours was primarily a result of the polarization that had been effected by the VHP and other Sangh Parivar organizations through years of their work and false propaganda. However, we were deeply concerned that the poor people working on a REGA site had been divided by bigots and they were working on opposite sides of the site.

The meetings with displaced victims and conversations with local people clearly indicate that the violence unleashed on the Christian minorities is a deliberate plan with an agenda. All the people the delegation met were apprehensive that the current fragile peace was in fact a temporary affair, and were worried that in December, the violence would flare up again.

The AIDWA finds that the Orissa Government utterly failed to protect the minorities in the face of large-scale violence. It was the writ of the Sangh parivar which was in evidence, not that of the local administration. Shamefully, the police remained spectators, and in some instances, connived with the criminals. It is only much later that the local administration showed some improvement. However, the situation is far from being under control, as the Sangh Parivar in the State and the District are still proactive. The delegation felt that the State government must not only intensify its efforts towards relief and rehabilitation of the affected Christians in Kandhamal district, it must also determinedly confront the Sangh Parivar's vitiation of communal harmony and its violation of the Indian Constitution.

Furthermore, the Central Government did not take any action to protect the minorities. It did not utilize the powers that it had under the Constitution to force some accountability from the State Government. It seems that the Central Government did not want to act for politically opportunist reasons. Otherwise, was it not shameful that a delegation of Ministers from the Centre waited for 6 weeks

before visiting Kandhamal?

Bhubaneshwar, 3 November 2008

The AIDWA delegation met the Chief Minister of Orissa in the afternoon and gave him a memorandum (see Annexure 3) demanding a CBI Enquiry into the rape of Sister Meena, and relief and rehabilitation measures from the State government. In particular, the following points were made with regard to living conditions in the camps, security, employment, and cases of violence against women.

1. With regards to the NREGA scheme, the AIDWA delegation urged the government to ensure that NREGA work continues in the entire district without any stoppages. The delegation talked to members of the majority community in the villages also. It also demanded that the inmates of relief camps and others displaced from their homes also be given work through NREGA, as they do not know when they will be able to return to their villages. Lost ration cards should be re-issued as well. Furthermore, easy loans for the repurchase of livestock and cattle should be made available, and the banks should be instructed to waive the repayment of the outstanding amounts on loans that SHGs of women whose homes had been attacked.
2. Specific recommendations were also made for the living conditions of camp inmates, such as the provision of more than the one set of clothes they have been given, warm clothes, soap, oil, women's need of cloth during menstruation. It was also pointed out that special provisions need to be made to serve the educational requirements of students of classes above the 8th standard, as well as colleges.
3. The AIDWA delegation also took up the demand made by Sister Meena for a CBI enquiry into the sexual assault upon her by a mob in K Nuagaon. AIDWA and other women's organisations have been involved in her case for some time, as Sister Meena had met with them and asked them to support her in her plea that the Court exempt her from returning to Kandhamal for her deposition and identification of the accused. The reason for her appeal was because of the initial inaction of the local police force on her earlier FIR, and her concern about their objectivity in conducting the investigation. She was also concerned about the possible intimidation by the Hindutva organizations in Kandhamal. AIDWA and other women's organizations intervened at the national level, and sent telegrams to the Orissa CM, demanding that the venue should be shifted from Kandhamal. AIDWA also sent her a letter expressing full support (Annexure 4), and

willingness to extend help as and when required. Subsequently, the case hearing was shifted to Bhubhaneshwar.

4. The delegation also apprised Chief Minister of another crime of the gang rape of a minor. The girl, whose father was a Hindu, and mother a Christian, had been staying with maternal grandparents, and was reportedly raped in reprisal for her brothers' refusal to convert to Hinduism. The police had initially refused to register the case as an outcome of communal targeting. The accused were arrested only after interventions by various organizations, including AIDWA. Given the seriousness of the crime, the team pointed out the need for an effective investigation, and provision of proper security, and relief for the victim.

As far as the problems of the victims in camps were concerned, the CM, on the basis of our demands, issued some orders (about text-books, clothes etc.) in the delegation's presence. We strongly demanded that the State Government should accept Sister Meena's demand for a CBI enquiry, refuting his plea that since the Supreme Court had rejected the demand, he was unable to do so. We felt it was extremely insensitive of the Chief Minister to take such a plea. He, however, said that he would not spare the communal elements responsible for the attacks.

The AIDWA unit in Orissa has been pro active in trying to get the cases of victims registered, and providing legal support where possible. A special attempt is being made to ensure that the widows of those who lost their lives in the violence, and whose bodies could not be recovered, are enabled to access justice.

Conclusion

The situation in Orissa is not only tragic but also alarming. The Sangh Parivar has been conducting a very aggressive campaign justifying the violence that it has instigated. The BJP leadership has associated itself with it openly. Most unfortunately, a section of the Oriya press has also resorted to very one-sided reporting and the way in which it has engaged in a scurrilous and abusive campaign against Sister Meena is truly shocking. The Bar Association in Kandhamal also attacked a lawyer who was representing her in the court premises. Communal polarization is becoming more and more widespread.

Another important aspect of the problem is that the Maoists are trying to pose as the protectors and supporters of the Christian community. At a time when Christians are feeling more and more vulnerable, this could have a dangerous fallout. It is therefore imperative that secular forces and individuals in the State intervene in the situation and ensure justice for an increasingly beleaguered minority.

ANNEXURE 1

FACT FINDING REPORT OF KANDHAMAL VIOLENCE BY WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS IN ORISSA, JANUARY 2008

Pramila Swain (Convenor, NAWO Orissa), Tapasi Praharaj (State President AIDWA), Bishakha Bhanja (NAWO), Swarupa (SAKAR), and Smita Pattnayak (Nari Surakshya Samiti)

A team of women from various women's organizations visited Bamunigaon on 5 Jan 2008. At Raiganda, which is, some 5 k.m to 6 k.m from Bamunigaon bazaar on the Adava Bamunigaon road police stopped the delegates and did not allowed them to enter Bamunigaon. However, the delegates entered Bamunigaon from a different route, as there was no police barricade. The team visited the three villages of Bamunigaon, Ulipadar, and Gadapur, and met women from both communities, a few community leaders, some NGO representatives.

At Bamunigaon the team visited both the Hindu community hamlet and the Christian hamlet, talked to the people and visited the relief camp as well. At Bamunigaon, the team was told that in the daytime on the 24th, a group of people who are from local Hindu community destroyed the gate erected for Christmas. Naturally there was opposition from the Christian community (mostly Dalits). This infuriated the group of Hindu attackers, so they burnt and destroyed most of the shops belonging to Christian people in the market place (typical of the majority attitude) and then entered Christian hamlet of the Bamunigaon village and burnt and destroyed houses. According to women they threatened the people at the gunpoint (*nail dekhei*). When people fled away to the forest, they burnt the houses. Their main targets were those houses from where youths were taking leadership in the Christmas celebration at the market and those who were participants in the play that was to be staged on 26th of December. They even beat up some Hindu boys because they were taking part in the drama along with the Christian boys. Around 15 houses were totally gutted down and rest were destroyed and looted.

In the meantime there was a rumour of an attack on one Swami Laxmananada Saraswati near Dasingbadi. There was an eerie silence on 25th and 26th at Bamunigaon. But on 27th December at Bamunigaon in retaliation some people burnt houses in the 'Oriya' (as Hindus are locally called) hamlet. However, the Christian people of Bamunigaon said that they didn't know who these people were. Around 60 to 70 houses were reportedly gutted in the Hindu area, although people said that the figure was around 153. The Church was also burnt and destroyed.

This news spread to other nearing villages. Although there had been violence at Bamunigaon I until 25 December 2007, now the attacks on Christian hamlets in various villages began. In Ulipadar, around 9:30 a.m., a group of youths entered the Christian hamlets, looted and destroyed all Christian houses. The church was also burnt and destroyed. Clemantha Uthansingh told us of how he was hiding, when he was hit by something and received a deep cut on his head. Since he was scared and fled to the forest, only to return by the team's visit on 5th January, he received no treatment. The Tahsildar visited the village on 5th Jan 2008, and hearing about his injury, advised him to go to a nearby private health centre run by

Banabadi Kalyan Samiti. When the team asked him why he is not going there, he said, "I am scared of going there, People who manage the centre also attacked us. How can I go there? I don't feel I would be treated there". (It seems RSS supporters run The Banabasi Kalyan Samiti.) This shows the insensitivity of the officials who are in charge of bringing normalcy and providing relief.

The villagers had come back to the village (some from the forest and some from their relatives' places) in the morning of 5 January. They had heard that on that day the S.P. and Collector would come to their village for damage assessment. But by the time the officials reached at 2 pm, the villagers were planning to again leave the village, as no guarantees had been given for their security. No police had been deployed in the village, and since it was surrounded by Hindu hamlets, the Christians did not feel secure in staying on.

The Christians said that they had hoped that the SP or the Collector came, they could have settled the matter. Instead the Tahsildar came and distributed two blankets, a sari, a dhoti, a frock, and a boy's pant and shirt. When the people asked for rice and dal they were told that since their houses had not been burnt, they were not entitled to get the relief rations, even though, as the team saw, all the food materials and household goods in their houses had been looted or destroyed.

The team also visited Gadarpur market. All the shops that had been gutted there were of the Oriya community. In the market near the shops there was a big Church and a convent. The debris of the burning shops was still lying there. The situation is still seems very tense. Yet there was no police deployment in the Gadarpur market place.

The team also visited the relief camp in the government school, located inside the Oriya hamlet. Orissa police are also camped in that school campus. Food was being prepared there for all the Oriya people whose houses had been destroyed by fire. However, the Christians families were given only dry relief items like rice and dal. They were also given 2 blankets and one sari and one dhoti per family, but no children's clothes were distributed. The quality of relief materials is extremely poor.

Our Observation and Demands

- At Bamunigaon the violence is purely communal, between high caste Hindu (Kumuti) and Christian (Dalit namely), and not Dalit versus tribal.
- Clearly, there are administrative lapses. Till date, in remote villages where tension still prevails, no police force has been deployed. We demand immediate police deployment.
- There is a need for some experienced and secular minded persons at the helm of the affairs to be at the district headquarter to monitor the relief and peace building process.
- The blankets and dresses are of extremely poor quality. Surely the quality of relief materials needs to be improved.
- Food materials (relief) should be extended to all affected families, as normalcy has not returned. The team was told that since the last two weeks *haats* (markets) are not set up, and people do not have any ration with them.
- Housing assistance should be given immediately under post-disaster rehabilitation scheme, and not under Indira Awas Yojana.
- Plastic sheets should be distributed among those families whose houses are burnt down.

- All children's needs should be taken care of immediately and learning materials, dress etc should be provided to them.
- Exemption of examination fee should be made for 10th class school certificate examination. Also special provision should be made for releasing certificate and study material to college going students.

ANNEXURE 2

AIDWA ON KANDHAMAL

Date: Aug 26 2008

The All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) strongly condemns the attacks on poor Christian tribals in Orissa villages in Kandhamal District. A young nun was burnt to death and many others, including women and children, have suffered grievous injuries. There is a report of one more death. It is truly shocking that the Sangh Parivar members involved in these attacks set fire to an orphanage along with churches, shops and huts. While the killing of VHP leader Lakshmananda Saraswati along with his colleagues was a heinous act, the attacks by his supporters on poor Christian tribals, women and children is most reprehensible. The Govt. of Orissa has blamed Maoists for the VHP killings so it is clear that no ordinary Christian citizens were in any way involved in that crime.

AIDWA appeals to the Govt. of Orissa and to the Chief Minister in particular to ensure protection to all those who have been rendered vulnerable to attacks from Sangh Parivar activists. These attacks have been periodically occurring for the last 6 months and there is a complete failure on the part of the State Government to intervene effectively. Now with increased tensions, the Govt. needs to take strong and effective action against those who are attacking Christians and their religious and social organizations with impunity. Equally, those responsible for the VHP leaders' murders must also be apprehended. The Government must also help to rebuild all damaged and destroyed structures and give all possible help for reconstruction and rehabilitation.

Date: September 30 2008

The AIDWA strongly condemns the failure of the Orissa police to arrest the Sangh Parivar cadres accused of brutally gang raping a young nun on August 25 at K. Nuagaon, in Kandhamal district of Orissa. Shockingly, the assault was carried out in full public view, right in front of a police outpost with 12 policemen from the Orissa State Armed Police present and watching the atrocity. The attackers also grievously injured a priest and doused him with kerosene when he courageously tried to resist them. It is outrageous that despite the fact that both victims filed FIRs on the same day, not a single arrest has been made in the case although it is now over a month since the incident took place. Equally shocking is the inaction on the part of the Chief Minister of Orissa who has been apprised of the facts.

The Sangh Parivar's attacks on the Christian and Muslim minorities are acts of terrorism that target the secular fabric of our nation. We express our deep concern about the vicious communal campaign of the Bajrang Dal-RSS-VHP-BJP combine all over the country. There

has been a huge escalation in the violence against minorities, and the targeting of women. The support extended by the state apparatus in Orissa and in Karnataka in the spread of this venom is an extremely disturbing development.

AIDWA calls on all democratic and secular forces to immediately join hands and prevent the spread of communal hatred and violence. AIDWA will hold demonstrations across the country in the first week of October to demand the arrest of the gang rape accused in Orissa, and to condemn the continuing attacks on Christian minorities by the Sangh Parivar.

ANNEXURE 3

AIDWA'S MEMORANDUM TO THE CHIEF MINISTER

Date: 3rd Nov.2008

Shri Naveen Patnaik
Chief Minister, Orissa
Bhubaneshwar

Dear Shri Patnaik,

The undersigned visited Kandhamal district of Orissa on 1st and 2nd November on behalf of our organization so that we could see for ourselves the situation of families of the minority community who had been attacked, rendered homeless and suffered in many ways from the third week of August onwards.

We visited some of the camps where those who had to leave their villages are staying and we also went to a village where some of those attacked have been able to return. We had detailed discussions with the Collector and Sub-Collector of the District.

The camp we visited was at Tikabali. Nearly half of the original inmates have left the camp. While many have returned to their village homes, we were told that many have also migrated to cities in Orissa and also to other States. The conditions in the camp were fairly satisfactory and we were happy to see that the local administrative officials are working just across the road from the camp and visit it often. The police presence at the camp itself is also not overbearing or threatening in any way. The officials were most co-operative and did not interfere with our interactions with the inmates.

However, there are certain issues that we would like to raise with you for your attention and intervention- we have brought them to the notice of the Collector also:

1. The inmates of this camp and the others do not know when they will be able to return to their villages. They are still under threat, some are being asked to convert to Hinduism etc. We would, therefore, request you to start NREGA worksites near the camps and also at the places where the administration is planning to re-locate some of the camps and also at the places where the administration is planning to re-locate some of the camps (nearer the villages from which the inmates hail). The MORD has already sanctioned such worksites for the flood hit in Bihar who are living in camps and therefore, there should not be a problem in their doing the same for Orissa. Providing livelihood opportunities to the able-bodied in the camps will not only allow them to earn some much-needed money but will also give them occupation that they badly need.

2. While students up to the 8th Standard have been provided with some books etc. and are also getting help from teachers in the camps and are also going to nearby schools, students of the higher classes and in colleges are unable to go back to their studies because they have no books and no writing materials. These should be provided immediately. In Tikabali, we met a young, blind girl, Jhunurani Digal, who is IInd year student. She has lost all her books, many of them in Braille and is in great need of being provided with what she needs to resume her studies.
3. The people in the camps have been given only one set of clothes each. After two months, you can imagine how great their need is for more3 clothing and also for warm clothes. The Collector told us that they are planning to remedy this situation and I am sure that you will ensure this is done. Women also need to be given extra cloth for their special needs. Please see that this is made available to them. Soap for bathing and washing clothes is also badly needed, as is oil.
4. A check needs to be made of filing of reports and FIRs. While a lot has been done in this regard there are certain areas in which a lot needs to be done. For example, many families have lost their ration cards, which should be re-issued. The same applies to NREGA job cards.
5. Some of the women at the camp and elsewhere told us that they belonged to SHGs and some of the money that had been withdrawn from the banks or had been collected by the group to be deposited in the bank had been lost when their homes wer4e destroyed. We suggest that the local banks be contacted and the repayment of the outstanding amounts that women whose homes were attacked had with them be waived. If this is not done, they will face tremendous problems in the near future when the banks start demanding re-payment.
6. Your Government has started paying compensation to those whose homes have been destroyed. It is now essential to see that all those who are returning to or ready to return to their homes are given all the help they need to re-build their homes. This is necessary because winter is setting in and the harvest season is drawing near. If they are to harvest their fields, they must be able to live in their villages.
7. In the villages to which those attacked have returned, NREGA work has been started. Every effort must be made to see that this work continues here and in the entire district without any stoppages. We talked to members of the majority community in the villages also. They all said that if the NREGA work was made available to them in their own villages not only would this improve their lot but also working together would bring all the villagers closer together.
8. Products of the villagers like turmeric, *tendu/kendupatta*, leaf plates, etc. should fetch them a better price than what they are being paid at the moment.
9. Those who have lost their cattle could be helped to get easy loans for re-purchase of the same.

Complete rehabilitation, of course, is going to be a long-drawn out process, which will need the co-operation of all sections of society with the administration. It is good that the administration is already concentrating on peace meetings I all the villages of the area and has started drawing in various social organizations into the process. The ensuring of security of person and goods, however, should not be compromised with at any cost. While the villagers in many areas are trying to renew their old bonds, there are forces at work that do not want communal peace and harmony to be restored. Your government must come down on these with a very heavy hand and not allow any group to feel that they can get away with

stoking hatred and violence.

While we appreciate the fact that your Government has proceeded in apprehending suspects and also by suspending the policemen who failed to protect Sister Meena, we would appeal to you to pass the case on to the CBI since this is what the victim has repeatedly requested. It is very difficult to even imagine the trauma of a rape victim has repeatedly requested. It is very difficult to even imagine the trauma of a rape victim and when the circumstances are as horrific as what Sister Meena has experienced, we feel that it is only just to accede to her request.

We assure you of our co-operation as far as the restoration of peace and harmony in Kandhamal is concerned, The Orissa State unit of our organization will do whatever it can towards this. We hope that the efforts of all those involved in this necessary work will bear fruit very soon.

We are, yours sincerely,

Subhashini Ali (National President), Sudha Sundararaman (National General Secretary), Shyamali Gupta (National Working President), Tapasi Praharaj (President, Orissa State Committee), Pushpa Dash (Secretary, Orissa State Committee)

ANNEXURE 4

AIDWA'S LETTER TO SISTER MEENA

27th October, 2008

Dear Sister Meena Lalita Barwa,

On behalf of the more than one crore members of our organisation, the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), we extend our heartfelt support and solidarity in this extremely difficult and traumatic time. We appreciate your courage and your brave struggle for justice and would like to assure you that you are not alone. We and many, many others are with you.

After December, 2007, when the attacks on Christians, their churches, their shops and their homes started in Kandhamal, AIDWA has been protesting against these and demanding stringent action against the perpetrators. Many of our units in different parts of the country have also organized strong protests. After your recent press conference at which you spoke so movingly and with such dignity about the horrors you had not only witnessed but also been subjected to, we have sent telegrams from every state in the country to the Chief Minister of Orissa demanding that the investigation into your complaint be transferred to the CBI. We are also planning to meet the Chief Justice of India after he returns to the country to make the same request to him

We know that you are going through an extremely difficult time. Whenever it is convenient for you, we would be privileged to meet with you personally. If there is anything you would like us to do, please do not hesitate to let us know.

An AIDWA delegation, of which both of us will be part, will be visiting Kandhamal on

the 1st and 2nd of November.

We are also extremely saddened by the tragic death of Father Digal. Our sincere condolences to all of you in this moment of great loss.

We are yours in solidarity,

Subhashini Ali, President

Sudha Sundararaman, General Secretary

APPENDIX

WOMEN AND THE FORMATION OF A COMMUNAL TRIBAL IDENTITY IN KANDHAMAL

Archana Prasad

The recent phase of anti-Christian violence in the Kandhamal district of Orissa has shown the extent to which right wing communal forces have penetrated the region. The killing of VHP leader Laxmananda Saraswati has only been used as a pretext for hastening the purging of Christians and reconversions of Dalits and tribals to Hinduism. This has not only engineered social tensions and distress in the area, but also resulted in the emergence of a patriarchal and hinduised communal tribal identity.

It is well known that accelerated communal violence leads to an increased intensity of violence against women. In the Kandhamal attacks, the rape of the Christian nun has come to symbolise this, but the full extent of this communal assault on women is yet to be ascertained. This task has become even more difficult with the apathy of the police and their active discouragement in registering cases against local VHP and Bajrang Dal organisations under whose leadership this attack has been orchestrated.ⁱ It is thus not surprising that even one month after the rape, the nun's case was not acted upon till the media highlighted the case.

However, quite apart from these high profile crimes, the displacement and dislocation associated with such acts of violence has an important bearing on the life of women. In Kandhamal, the Catholic Bishops Conference has alone put the figure of displaced people at 40,000 or more. After having visited several relief camps, the Concerned Citizen's Fact Finding Team found that "at least 20 births have occurred in camps without proper institutional care. In number of cases there were no adequate provisions for special food for pregnant women and the ailing. Nutritionally deficient food is being provided to the victims. Death is being reported from the camps."ⁱⁱ However the full import of this will only be evident when and if Christian families start returning to their homes with out the threat of being forcibly reconverted to Hinduism.

The reconversion programme of the Sangh Parivar organizations is as old as the career of Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati's career in Kandhamal. According to the Orissa VHP secretary, Gauri Prasad Rath, at least 50,000 tribals have been brought back into the Hindu society in the last 40 years. It follows from this that the Parivar organisations were converting about 1000 tribals a year into Hinduism. In contrast, Church reports 200-300 annual conversions under the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, proving the charge of forcible conversions wrong. Another exaggerated claim by the Sangh Parivar is that the number of churches in Kandhamal has increased to over 921, while church sources put this number at just over 500. The creation of an image of the crusading foreign funded Christian has been crucial to expansion of Hindutva project and the building of a communal consciousness in tribal people. This also forms the basis of the anti-Christian violence and polarisation that has surfaced in the decade following Naveen Patnaik's rule.

But quite apart from this immediate physical and mental stress, a more fundamental point needs to be raised about the process of the Hindutva of tribal society. What does it mean for tribal women to get reconverted into Hinduism? Hindutva leaders claim that tribals and Dalits were always Hindus, part of the original caste Hindu society. But what is it that made them convert to Christianity? The answer to these questions lies both in the conception and practice of Hindutva politics in the country as a whole and in Kandhamal in particular. The Sangh Parivar's opposition to women's rights and liberation is rooted in its critique of modern values and the sanctity it accords to Indian texts like the Manusmriti. Thus the BJP looks upon women as *matrishakti* or mother power. Similarly the organizations like the Rashtriya Swayam Sevika Samiti reaffirms that the role of women in family and society is primary and requires no fundamental change in social values. Thus women are not encouraged to do any thing that disturbs the "unity" and "sanctity" of the traditional family. Like other right wing conservative movements, hindutva also subscribes to a hierarchical notion of the family, where domesticity and unpaid household work are seen as the primary responsibility and duty of women.ⁱⁱⁱ

In tribal areas such an ideal type family is attributed through schools and ashrams run by the Sangh Parivar where tribal girl children taught how to be good mothers.^{iv} At the same time the interpretation of Hindu myths propagated in these ashrams also propagate symbolism where Hanuman and Shabri are promoted as ideals whose mission in life is to serve Lord Ram. It is significant that here Shabri, the powerless and poor outcaste woman, is projected as an 'adivasi'. By doing this, hindu ideologues try to show that tribal people are inferior to others and must unquestioningly serve the needs of upper castes, denoted by the symbolism of Lord Ram.^v Thus the schools and ashrams in tribal areas play an important role in socializing tribal men and women into oppressive relations within the caste Hindu society. At the same time the tribal women are indoctrinated in a doubly oppressive system where patriarchal family relationships form the basis of all social relations.

Laxamanananda Saraswati, who arrived in Kandhamal in 1969 made two such ashrams: one at Chakapad and another Kanya Ashram in Jalespeta where he was killed. These ashrams proved to be the flag bearers for the dissemination of Hindutva values and nerve centre for the expansion of the VHP and its allies. By 2003 the Parivar operated through at least 35 different organisations including political, ideological, service and charitable educational and health institutions. The RSS runs 2,273 *shakhas* in Orissa, with a membership of 100,000 while the VHP has a base of 60,000 in the state. The Bajrang Dal has 20,000 members who serve in 200 *akharas* and the Durga Vahini has 7000 centres working in close coordination with RSS, and VHP cadres.^{vi} This explains the aggressiveness by which the Sangh Parivar has increased its attacks on Christians since the BJD-BJP alliance came into governance. The VHP's demand for an inquiry into the process of conversions to Christianity and the foreign funding of the Churches is quite reminiscent of the time when the Niyogi Commission was set up in Madhya Pradesh in the 1960s for a similar purpose. The report of that commission was used by centrist and Hindutva forces to ban all missionary activities in Schedule V tribal areas. This in turn aided the expansion of the Sangh Parivar into these areas.

It is clear that the current spate of attacks on the Christians is engineered for precisely this purpose. The Catholic Bishops Conference of India describes the current genocide in the area as an 'attempt to annihilate the Christians'. They estimate the damage in the following way: 96 churches, 14 residential and training centres and 4009 houses of Christians have been

destroyed; 22236 people are in relief camps and more than 40000 people have displaced into forests. But more than this, the alarming aspect of this report is the use of the September attacks to hasten the process of Hindutva expansion. As the report states “The Christian Dalit and Tribals are forced to convert to Hinduism under threat. The fundamental group announces a date fixed for conversion in a selected village. Those Christian members belonging to the houses of that village are told to inform their family people to return from the relief camps or anywhere on that date. They will be asked to convert to Hinduism. They are asked to sign a document that it is done freely. If they do not accept, they are tortured and killed. If they become Hindus, they pay a fine of 1000 to 1500 Rupees.” Further if the Christians stay away “Hindu neighbours are told that the houses, the lands belong to the Hindus. All their belongings are looted, burnt and destroyed.”^{vii} Clearly the politics of communal Hindu transformation promoted by Laxmanananda Saraswati has reached its crescendo and requires the purging of all Christians from Kandhamal.

Why Hindutva feels threatened by Christian Missions

The growth of the Hindutva project has been influenced by the underdevelopment of the region, which has compelled tribal and Dalit families to depend on voluntary social welfare measures for their survival. Till the early 1970s when the first Ashram was set up at Chakapad by Laxmananada Saraswati, the Christian missionaries constituted one of the most influential forces that organised the Pano scheduled caste (forming approximately 16.6 percent in 2001) and the Kui and Kandh scheduled tribes (54.7 per cent as in census 2001). Since many of the converts belonged to the socially oppressed Dalit communities, Saraswati largely concentrated on building a Hindu consciousness amongst the Kui and Kandha who formed a majority of the population.

In this context the main motive for the growth of Hindutva is not merely social or cultural. During its from 1999 to 2004 the NDA opened up tribal areas for the benefit of the traders, big companies and foreign money who fund the activities of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and Saraswati Shiksha Sansthan (an umbrella organization of all Parivar educational institutions). It is no coincidence then that the Shishu Mandir Trust is headed by one of the largest Marwari traders of Calcutta and its local branches are patronized by influential landholders and traders. This nexus was seen in Kandhamal in the attack on the Raika church in 2004. RSS activists and the traders attacked the church because the pastors supported the government action against illegal evictions on encroached land in the surrounds of the Church and its neighbouring school.^{viii}

This nexus between the Sangh Parivar and the traders can only lead to the exploitation of tribals in general, and women forest produce collectors in particular. Many of the Kandhamal Dalits and tribals are marginal farmers and rural workers who also depend on the sale of forest produce as their supplementary income. Kandhamal is a natural resource exporting region: tamarind, ginger, sal resin, sal seeds and Kandhamal turmeric being the most important produce. The collectors of this produce get 1/3rd to 1/4th of the minimum support price offered by the government. As in the case of other tribal areas, there are at least four layers of traders between the government depot and the collectors. A majority of the big traders are outsiders (from Gajapati or Ganjam) who form the middle and upper castes that have traditionally supported the Hindutva agenda. But many of the petty traders are the Pano, an important SC group, a few of whom have come into the ownership of tribal lands. The

economic empowerment of a stratum of the Pano is attributed to their rejection of Brahminical Hinduism and conversion into Christianity many decades ago.^{ix} The limited state infrastructure and the consequent Kui, Kandh and Pano dependence on non-governmental social welfare measures have resulted in the aggravation of social and economic contradictions. It has also ensured that the Pano provide competition to other traders (supporting the Hindutva initiative) in the area. This has framed the Sangh Parivar's intervention and also made a communal project look like an ethnic strife. In this conflict the Kui Samaj Samanavaya Samiti, an apex organisation of Kandh's and Kui tribals, appears to have emerged as one of the main allies of the Sangh Parivar.

Communalising Tribal Identity, Choreographing Ethnic Strife

The current conflict between Christian Dalits and the Kui and Kandh Hinduised tribals began with the Christian Pano demanding ST status. They argued that they too speak the Kui language and should be thus given the same status as Kui and Kandhs who have been recognised as Scheduled Tribes under Schedule VIII of the Indian Constitution. But Kui Samaj opposed this and received full support from Saraswati. Inspired by this support the Samaj called for a *bandh* on Christmas day resulting in the riots of December 2007. The demand of the Pano assumes importance because Orissa VHP secretary, Gauri Prasad Rath stated that the Parivar organisations would ensure that those who converted to Christianity would not get the benefits of any reservation and would lose both their SC and ST status.

The perception that Kui and Kandh Christians are not tribals has been internalised by the leaders of the Kui and Kandh communities. The Kui Samaj and its leader Lambodar Kanhar has supported and agitated for the VHP demand even though he denies the links of the organisation with the RSS. The anti-Christian feeling amongst the ST leadership is more than palpable. As Kanhar states: "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."^x This segregation of the Christian Dalit and tribals from those who have been converted to Hinduism under the '*ghar vapasi*' or reconversion campaign started in the late 1980s. But the Hindu influence on the articulation of the tribal identity began much earlier. Sangh organisations, under the leadership of Laxmananda Saraswati, presented Jagannath as part of the indigenous tribal tradition, and held *dharma yatras* and *yagnas* to socialise the tribals into Hindu rituals and culture.^{xi}

In 2000 the victory of the BJD-BJP alliance covertly supported this process and emboldened the Sangh activists. Christians claimed that the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act was used selectively to implicate them in false offences.^{xii} By the end of its first tenure the VHP had successfully managed to mobilise the tribals into a mainstream Hindu agenda by building a tribal Hindu consciousness. In October 2005 Laxmananda Saraswati reportedly said: "How will we make India a completely Hindu country? The feeling of Hindutva should come within the hearts and minds of all the people." In April 2006, celebrating RSS architect Golwalkar's centenary, Saraswati conducted seven yagnas, and mobilised more than 30,000 tribals for the Hindutva cause. In September 2007, led by Saraswati, many Kui and Kandh tribals participated in the VHP's state-wide road-rail blockade on the 'Ram Setu' issue.^{xiii}

In this way the making and articulation of the patriarchal Hindu tribal identity has overtaken all other contradictions in Kandhamal. The ruling BJD - BJP combine calls this communal

divide as an “ethnic conflict with religious overtones”. This is clearly not true because the communalisation of the tribal consciousness has been a planned project since the early 1970s which in turn has structured the ethnic conflict. Thus this conflict is a communal polarisation with an ethnic dimension. The tribal identity that has emerged is aimed at the incorporation of tribal women into a traditional Hindu society whose values will bind them in socially, culturally and economically exploitative relations. Therefore the primary task is to de-communalise the tribal identity and reduce an ethnic divide through social, political and developmental action.

ⁱ Dharendra Panda, ‘Kandhamal: Under Whose Control,’ www.countercurrents.org 18 September 2008.

ⁱⁱ Press Release of the Concerned Citizens Fact Finding Team, 16 September 2008, Bhubaneswar.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Ram Puniyani, *Contours of Hindu Rashtra*, p. 263 and Tanika Sarkar *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*.

^{iv} Nandini Sundar, ‘Indiginise, Nationalise, Spiritualise’, UNESCO, 2002.

^v Ram Puniyani, ‘Shabri in Adivasi Areas’, *Issues in Secular Politics*, April 2006.

^{vi} Rupen Bannerjee, ‘Spread of Saffron’ *India Today* January 27, 2003.

^{vii} Report of the CBCI Fact Finding Mission in *Spirit Daily*.

^{viii} *Report of Communalism in Orissa*, Indian Peoples Tribunal, 2006, p.51.

^{ix} Pralay Kanungo, ‘Hindutva’s fury against Christians in Orissa’ *EPW* 13 September 2008.

^x *Tehelka*, 19 January 2008.

^{xi} Pralay Kanungo, ‘Hindu Entry into a Hindu Province’, *EPW*, 2001.

^{xii} *Rise of Fascism: Victims of Communal Violence Speak*, March 2008, Anhad, Delhi, pp. 227-229.

^{xiii} Angana Chatterji, ‘Hindutva’s Violent History’ *Tehelka* 13 September 2008.