

AGAINST THE FRENZY OF RELIGIONS: FOR JUSTICE, PEACE, LOVE AND HARMONY

SUSMITA PRADHAN*

Nine years after one of the worst communal violence India has witnessed, the victims in Kandhamal still wait for justice. Despite the mainstream Indian society and media trying hard to erase the memories of the gruesome inhuman violence, it remains fresh in the minds of those who were victimised due the communal frenzy in Kandhamal. Odisha has for long been witnessing a series of violent attacks on minority communities, particularly the Christians and more specifically those hailing from Adibasi and Dalit background.

Writing about Kandhamal is to write about my home and writing about the riot on Christians in Kandhamal is to write my story. I was victimised and I still am a victim. Yes! I am an Adibasi and I believe in Jesus Christ! Is that a crime or anti-Constitutional? The memories of the burned and broken remnants of my in-laws house in Godabisa village still haunt my mind every now and then. We could not enter the village for two years. That in fact has been my home for years since my marriage. Suddenly my own home turned to be an alien space, with an unwritten board – ‘No Entry.’ My in-laws spent two nights in the jungle before our house was burnt. All ran to the nearest forest to hide themselves. Still I am unable to understand how my in-laws climbed the hilly forest as they were too old and fat too. But it is also true that sometimes we get strength from fear also to save our life.

In my parental village, Kurmingia our home was not broken, but there were some who lost their houses. Demographically it is a small village. Roads were blocked, shops were raided and burnt, and all roads were completely disrupted. The fear we all lived that entire year, particularly when there was no clue where our mother was – as most of us feared her dead – is afresh without a scar. Interestingly our mother was protected by the Hindu families in the neighbourhood. When she ran for her life, my Maa hide herself in our paddy field and she threw off all her valuable gadget into the field to escape. In night she felt that life was very challenging.

While the entire Kandhamal witnessed the madness of hate, jealousy, revenge, enmity, terror, fear and violence these were manifested in the form of erased houses, looted and burnt shops, destroyed property and assets, and burned crops and food supplies. People left their home village and ran for their lives. Along with thousands of houses, my in-laws house was also razed. All my immediate family members had to run for their lives. Few hundreds of my extended family members and relatives also ran for their life, rushed to some

* The author is a social worker working with young adolescent girls. She has been a victim of Kandhamal riots against Christians in 2008. She could be reached at susmitapradhan71@gmail.com

hideouts and finally found themselves in relief camps. Fear, terror and anger blazed on every single human face. The only sign of relief was that none of them were killed.

The violence in 2008 came as a result of the long run hate campaign by Hindutva activists right from 1960s, with periodic attacks on Christian places of worship, priests and nuns and of late on believers and small fellowship. The violence, arson and killings in Kandhamal were not just a religious riot between two communities, but it is a pre-planned heinous strategy of discriminatory and atrocious violent attack on the Christian minority, particularly those from Dalit and Adibasi community background. Both the social groups have always tried to break the shackles of slavery of caste under the Hindu religion, which was not acceptable to the dominant caste sections. This I have seen within my own family settings. Therefore I would say that it was a political, social and economic attack on the minorities by the upper caste or dominant Hindus in Kandhamal.

It is in this context that on August 26, 2017 a mass peace march was organised in G. Udayagiri block headquarter of Kandhamal district. Since the riot people in different forms have been expressing their dissent and the cry for justice is growing every year. It was in 2015 that August 26 was announced as Kandhamal Day for justice, peace, love and harmony. People in large number participated from across the districts and other parts of the state in the peace rally. This included Muslims, Hindus and Christians, political leaders, religious leaders, activists of different organisations, young boys and girls, professors, school teachers, government employees, Angawadi workers, businessman, and common man and women. Organisational representations from other states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Delhi and Bihar also came in support of the peace march and public meeting that follow it. There were nearly 4000 people, who took part in the rally and public meeting that followed. Most of the members who attended were members of the peace committees from various villages of Kandhamal.

One should recollect that after the riot, peace committees were formed with members of different social groups and religious denominations in most of the affected villages. Here I would pause for a moment as a riot victim. In the public meeting held in G. Udayagiri, I was called to the stage. Midway the public meeting pouring rain began, however not a single of those sitting in the audience walked away. They opened their umbrellas and stood on their feet until the proceedings were over. I observe women patiently listening to the speakers. Yes it was an opportunity for them to listen to each other face to face than the stories they read in the newspaper or the visuals in any television channel. The real voice and thought of the victims and those who came to express their solidarity were still alive.

When the public meeting was over, I got down from the stage. I saw some women minutely watching the poster containing the pictures of their bellowed one. They all were dead in the communal violence. That scene took me back to

2008. I felt the pain of the survivors who lost their dear ones in communal frenzy. How does one feel when you see your dear ones photograph in a public poster, who is dead, is too difficult to narrate. But I knew what it meant to them. Maybe some of my relative's photographs would have also surfaced. I saw many men, women, boys, girls, old and young with tearful eyes. I was in pain too. I went to them, hugged them and cried with them.

The public meeting was a great opportunity for all to hear and know. Personally it was an educative process for me either. This was the first time I had participated in any such rally and public meeting in Kandhamal. Often I avoided any such public exposure, however then I thought why should I? Why should I hide myself? It is me and my story being retold over there. Thanks to my good friend Dr. Goldy M. George who inspired and challenged me to take part in this public meeting. I was not even aware of such a march. It was a grant festival where the victims were not just demanding for justice and rights, but also celebrating their faith journey. It was out of my imagination that this was such a grand festival, in which all of us must have attended to show our love and solidarity, and stand for our people, culture and land.

The public meeting and gathering was addressed by nationally well known people. The voice and thoughts expressed by Bishops, priests, pastors, social activists, political leaders and victim-survivors reflected one thing very categorically. Where is justice to the victims or survivors of the gruesome communal attack? I think raising the questions of justice is not just my human and citizenry right; rather it is my Christian responsibility. That day, I became part of history by participating in the historic Kandhamal day. People from different parts of India came to participate in it. This time it was organised in G. Udayagiri, which is famous for its love, affection and hospitality. And it happened to be my hometown too. After the rally by all the denomination, religion organisation and social movements people seemed very excited with the banners of various messages of love peace and justice.

During the communal violence in Kandhamal, the victim-survivors filed more than 3300 complaints, but only 820 (25%) odd FIRs were registered. The rest of the complaints were not even registered. Among these FIRs, only 518 (63% of FIRs and 16% of total complaints) were charge sheeted. The remaining cases were treated as false reports. And out of these 518 cases, 247 (48% of total charge sheeted and 7% of total complaints) cases were disposed off. The rest of the cases are pending before the sessions and magistrate's courts. And among those cases which have been disposed off, many are already acquitted. According to study conducted by Vrinda Grover Senior Counsel in the Supreme Court of India and Saumya Uma Professor of Law, it is reported that the conviction rate is as low as 5.13 percent of the charge sheeted cases. If you take complaints as a yardstick of justice process, it is just around 1 percent only.

Over 395 churches and worship places which belonged to the Adibasi and Dalit Christians were destroyed, around 6500 houses were destroyed, over 100

people were killed, over 40 women were subjected to rape, molestation and humiliation and several educational, social service and health institutions were destroyed and looted. More than 56000 people have been displaced. Several cases of forced conversion to Hinduism by the Sangh Parivar have been reported. This organised communal attack which was the biggest in the history of Christian community during the last three centuries, also spread to different parts of Odisha and other states as well. The compensation provided by the Government for the victims and survivors of Kandhamal has been minimal.

It is based on these that the gathering came up with a demand charter. The demand of the victims and survivors are the following:

- a) Reopen of 315 closed/acquitted cases of violence. Also one should look into the original 3300 complaints filed and re-probe the truth.
- b) Book both the state and non-state actors, perpetrators involved in the communal violence.
- c) Institute special inquiry into the district and police administration, who are in nexus with the communal forces.
- d) Announce special package for repair and reconstruction of houses as recommended in a study by former UN Special Rapporteur, Miloon Kothari upto 5 lakh and compensate those who lost their businesses. Enlist those who are missed or omitted by the commissions for swift compensation packages.
- e) Immediately establish Odisha Minority Commission.
- f) Facilitate Minority schemes and scholarship in time bound manner and hold the officials responsible for any lapses and delays in implementations.
- g) Ensure minority community presence in important administrative machinery towards unbiased decision as well as for harmonious and participatory decision making processes.
- h) Scrap Odisha anti-conversion law and Presidential Order 1950 para 3 to make religion neutral and delink it from affirmative action through reservations.
- i) Constitute Citizens and community interface with the administration for effectively combating the communal forces

Thus till date the soldiers of Christ are victimised and are yet to see the light of justice. Where are their fundamental rights? It's proved that Adibasi and Dalits could only be subjects of exploitation and nothing else. Therefore one needs to struggle for peace, justice and fuller humanity. I need to make a point that we are the inhabitants of this land and soil. Hence we do not fear to fight for our rights. One should not welcome those people who cause communal violence and create gap between two sections. We certainly need to raise voice against them. Which Constitution do we follow in India today? Does constitution has any meaning or validity? It is not just my story, rather it is the story of those countless hundred who are still living in this country with the hopes that one day they would have their freedom back.