

Another Black Christmas

Br James Kimpton sends a copy of the following report :

In just four days, 5 large parish churches, more than 50 village churches, 6 convents, 6 hostels, 3 presbyteries, 2 minor seminaries and a Vocational Training Centre and a Leprosy Centre have been destroyed. More than 400 houses have been burnt and five people murdered.

In a well-planned attack on the Christian minority community in Kandhamal district of Orissa, coinciding with Christmas, the Hindu extremists have managed to destroy so much so quickly. This would not have been possible without planning and the collusion of the police and politicians.

In a statement issued on 31 December '07 the CBCI¹ said, "There have been continuous on-slaughts on Christians by the fundamentalists in Orissa since Christmas and yet adequate protection has not been provided to the minority community which continues to live in fear and anxiety . . . Many years of hard work and the infrastructure for rendering service to the poor and the marginalized has been totally destroyed in five days. What is left now is fear and anxiety."

The CBCI has called for an immediate, unbiased enquiry by the CBI, adequate and immediate deployment of Central paramilitary forces and compensation for families of the dead and the injured.

¹The C.B.C.I. is permanent association of the Catholic Hierarchy of India. It was formally constituted in September 1944 at the Conference of Metropolitans held in Madras. Its objectives are to facilitate co-ordinated study and discussion of questions affecting the Church, and adoption of a common policy and effective action in all matters concerning the interests of the Church in India.

²Bandh, originally a Hindi word meaning 'closed', is a form of protest used by political activists in some countries in South Asia like India and Nepal. During a Bandh, a large chunk of a community declares a general strike, usually lasting one day.

Often Bandh means that the community or political party declaring a Bandh expect general public to stay in their homes and strike work. Also all the shopkeepers are expected to keep their shops closed and the transport operators like buses and cabs are supposed to stay off the road and not carry any passengers. All this is expected to be voluntary, but in many instances people are terrorized into participating in a Bandh. There have been instances of large metro cities coming to a standstill.

Bandhs are powerful means for civil disobedience. Because of the huge impact that a Bandh has on the local community, it is much feared as a tool of protest.

Observers point out the communalisation of tribals in the area and the growing rift between them and Dalits, majority of whom are Christians. The tribal organization Kui Samaj had called for a bandh² on Christmas to press its demands. How could the district administration allow a group to call for a bandh on a day when the world celebrates Christmas?

Violence has begun with the attack by a mob of 500 individuals on 24 December on an ecumenical Christmas tent with Christmas decorations, including the nativity scene. The tent has been put up after acquiring the approval of the administration and its assurance of police protection. Seeing the viciousness of the attack and the police inaction, Christians have tried to stop a local VHP leader, Swami Lakshmananda, notorious for inflammatory speeches and inciting violence, on his way to a function in the area.

This was projected as an attack on the VHP leader and used as further excuse for further attacks.

Reading all these, if you experience a sense of *deja vu*, the reason is we have had an exactly similar Black Christmas in Gujarat in 1998. Actually, the news of Narendra Modi's victory at the Gujarat polls that came on 23 December must have been the omen. One of those who have pointed out this ominous connection between Gujarat and Orissa is Mr Sitaram Yechury, senior CPM leader.

On 4 January 2008 he travelled to Orissa in order to visit Brahmanigaon, one of the worst affected villages in Kandhamal. However, the Chief Minister, Naveen Patnaik and top officials requested him not to go. The CPI (M) leader came down heavily on the Naveen Patnaik Government for its failure to deal with the situation in Kandhamal "The fact that we are being requested not to visit the affected areas more than 10 days after violence hit the district makes it amply clear that the situation was yet to turn normal," he said. (*The Hindu*, 5 January 2008)

Mr Yechury said the administration had not been able to work effectively as the Bharatiya Janata Party was a partner in the two-party coalition government in the State. The BJP need not rule the State for orchestrating communal violence. It is enough if it is a coalition partner. Karnataka is the latest example;

The communal violence in Kandhamal district in Orissa cannot be seen in isolation when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its affiliates have been saying that Orissa will be their next Hindutva laboratory after Gujarat, said Yechury. "It has implications for the whole country."

After the victory of the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party in Gujarat, RSS and Vishwa Hindu Parishad had started the process of consolidating the Hindu vote bank, he said. According to him, the very fact that the communal violence in Kandhamal started a day after the announcement of the Gujarat election results made it clear that it was premeditated.

Mr. Yechury, who talked to some victims of the violence from Kandhamal and saw photographs and other visuals depicting the damage, observed that the pattern was exactly like what happened in Dangs district of Gujarat 10 years ago.

Apart from what it has revealed about the Gujarati psyche, Modi's victory has dangerous implications for the democratic, secular soul of India. It is in such situations it is essential not to lose hope. Needed are hope, unity, faith, prayer, vigilance and mobilising support within the country and outside for justice and peace.