

## **Kandhamal Dairy during communal violence, 15-16 Sept 2008**

### **by Chitta Behera**

#### **Introduction:**

The purpose of the visit was to collect eye-witness accounts from various sources on the incidents of vandalism that took place throughout the district of Kandhamal by mobs led by miscreants directed against the Christians a minority community, their Churches, welfare institutions run by them and their houses, valuables and cattle. These incidents as reported in both print and electronic media were triggered off in the immediate aftermath of the killing of Swami Laxmananand Saraswati and four of his colleagues by an unidentified group of armed persons in the premises of his Ashram at Jalespeta in the night of 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2008 the day of Janmashami. The acts of arson and loot along with the dastardly physical attack on the Christians continued apace pushing the fear stricken men, women and children fleeing to the forests to save their bare life. As reported in the media the role played by the personnel of police and administration was on the whole a dubious one; except a few upright ones most of them remained mute spectators to the acts of vandalism being perpetrated before their eyes. Only after the news of Kandhamal violence spread far and wide drawing condemnation from all quarters except the Hindutva lobby, the State Government started acting, hesitantly though, to take some measures apparently in defense of the minority community such as opening of relief camps in various places for accommodating the people who had escaped into forests and for arresting miscreants involved in the acts of violence against the life and property of minority community. Meanwhile on the requisition by the State Government platoons of CRPF and BSF were rushed to Kandhamal and deployed in various places to quell the disturbances by the miscreants. Despite all this the situation as existing throughout Kandhamal is far from normalcy; sporadic acts of violence in the form of burning of houses and looting of valuables of minority community along with forcing them to reconvert to Hinduism are still continuing in interior villages where there is no police deployed to deter the miscreants. Curfew and Section 144 that bans the holding of any meeting or rally are being clamped in town areas for varying durations. In the night of 15<sup>th</sup> Sept. a large mob consisting of hundreds of armed people attacked and burned down the Police Station and an Outpost at Gochhapada, located about 30 km away from Phulbani. A policeman was also gunned down by the mob while other police personnel escaped to save their life. This mob violence was allegedly designed in retaliation to the death of about 4 miscreants resulting from police firing on 13<sup>th</sup> instant at Kurtumgarh in Tumudibandh area. Kandhamal is still tense all over. Despite the police presence here and there, the common people belonging to all communities are still undergoing a feeling of fear psychosis and therefore hesitant to discuss any matter related to the communal tension in public.

#### **Visit on 15<sup>th</sup> Sept.**

**On Tikabali Camp-** On arrival at Phulbani at around 2 pm I hastily proceeded towards Tikabali where another fact finding team was surveying the relief camp. By the time I arrived there the team had already left the place for Nuagaon, another important place where the miscreants had wrought destruction on a vast scale to the Christian populace and their religious and social institutions. Eager to join in with the team I had to hastily take an overview of the Tikabali camp from outside before leaving the place for Nuagaon. However inside the vehicle I could discuss at length about the camp situation and matters related to communal flare-up with a youth inmate of the camp Mr. Dhiendra and his auntie who joined in with us later on the way. Mr. Dhirendra reported that his father was missing for several days, and his dead body along with that of two other Christians have been recovered from a forest with the help of the police only a few days back. All of them were killed and thrown thereafter into the forests by the anti-Christian miscreants. As regards the camp life, he reported that several thousands of homeless persons including newborns, kids, aged, handicapped and patients were sheltered in Tikabali camp. Tents

have been installed for their accommodation and a polythene sheet for each tent for covering the ground, which has turned swampy following incessant rains. People are doing their ablutions in the open fields adjoining the camps taking water from the stand-by all-purpose tanker provided by the authorities. Only one-time lunch at midday is being provided to the camp members. Baby food in the form of biscuits is being provided, but there is no provision for milk. Dhirendra also informed that in one of camps the miscreants stealthily mixed poison with water stored in the tanker with an intention to kill all the inhabitants of the camp. But luckily some camp mates detected the poisonous substance in the drinking water before anybody could drink it. As regards the role played by the police personnel during the tragic happenings, Mr.Dhirendra informed that except one or two police officers in each police station most of them remained mute spectators when the armed miscreants were looting and burning their houses and desecrating the places of worship. In the initial days of vandalism by the hordes of miscreants led by the workers of RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal and BJP the police personnel didn't take any deterrent step on the spot against the acts of arson and loot by the latter. Such complicity on the part of the police encouraged the violent mob to go on an all-out rampage against the Christian community in a systematic and organized manner. When some brave persons wanted to file FIR in the police station, the concerned police officers refused to accept the FIRs, as a result of which the fear-stricken and homeless persons felt further depressed and helpless. As regards the mental condition of the camp residents Mr.Dhirendra, who was himself in a bruised and agonizing state due to murder of his father, told with a clear mark of despondence in his voice that they didn't know whether at all they could return to and get back their home and whether, much as they might desire, they could be able to live in an atmosphere of amity and fellow-feeling with the rest of the co-villagers. The auntie of Dhirendra who was accompanying us in the car described with a sense of gratitude as to how a few Police Officers being Hindus themselves were quite sympathetic and cooperative to her and other Christians who wanted the recovery of dead bodies including the one belonging to her brother (father of Dhirendra) from the forests and hand-over to them for burial in tune with their religious rites. Asked about the present MLA and former Industries Minister Mr.Padmanav Behera who had resigned from his cabinet portfolio in the wake of communal flare-up that rocked Kandhamal in December 2007 last, the lady informed that he was nice to people of all religions and communities except of course the Hindutva fanatics, under whose pressure the Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik asked him to resign from Ministership. In the current imbroglio Mr.Behera has played no role favouring or opposing any particular group.

**At Nuagaon-** I arrived at Nuagaon, an important site of vandalisation by the miscreants at around 4 pm. There I could meet Mr.Prafulla Samantara, a civil society activist and Editor of an Oriya fortnightly 'Swabhimani' and his group surveying the extensive damage done to the Christian community. We surveyed the pastoral center, a two storied building where multiple social welfare activities were being carried on prior to the communal flare-up following the Laxmananand murder. We found the statue of Jesus Christ broken and burnt and lying in shambles in front of the building. A four-wheeler vehicle was also lying half burnt and completely damaged. Inside the building we found the big hall used for teaching and training, which was wrecked and then set on fire by the miscreants. The semi-burnt piles of Oriya Bibles and other reading materials were lying scattered on the floor. The vocational training equipments like sewing machines and black board and dormitory gadgets like cots and beddings were all burnt down. The small, small statues of Jesus and other Christian saints were broken and burnt. We could well guess that the band of miscreants in their reckless frenzy tried to demolish the whole building first by ransacking it with the help of weapons they carried with them and then setting it on fire. But somehow the mainframe of the building remains in tact, though the doors, window panes, staircases and all furniture have been badly damaged and burnt. Besides the pastoral center, the church, office of Jana Bikash (a Christian charitable NGO) and several houses of Christian families located at Nuagaon were ransacked and burnt. The concerned people

have abandoned these structures since the attack was made on them and are taking shelter in the Nuagaon Relief Camp operated by the Government.

As to how such a tragedy took place, we got a vivid description of the style in which the mob of miscreants wrought havoc to the religious and social welfare institutions run by the Christians and to their houses. A big funeral procession carrying the dead body of Swami Laxmananand, which started off from Jalespeta Ashram was passing on 24<sup>th</sup> of August through Nuagaon. Suddenly a large group of armed persons emerged from among the processionists and perpetrated their acts of vandalism. They were shouting Hindutva slogans like Jay Sree Ram, Bajrang Bali Ki Jay and Hindu-Hindu Bhai Bhai. The persons who were inside the above buildings or their homes including Pastor and other staff escaped through the back door just to save their life. The hoodlums first of all broke the gates and doors to enter the premises and buildings and then ransacked by weapons whatever they could lay their hands on and then put everything on fire. All this happened in the presence of the policemen themselves, who in fact preferred to remain silent spectators to such acts of vandalism by the hordes of miscreants.

### **Visit on 16<sup>th</sup> Sept.**

**At Phulbani Town-** I heard from local people that there occurred grievous acts of communal violence with all its ugly dimensions in and around Phulbani Town but were somehow underreported in the media and accounts of fact finding teams. So I decided to survey some sample cases from the town itself. I visited first the ransacked house of a Christian youth Srujan Kumar Nayak at **Aurobindo Nagar**. His house was singled out from the colony and targeted for destruction by the hoodlums on 24<sup>th</sup> Aug. The main gate along with front and rear doors of his house were broken into pieces and the inside rooms along with the beds, dresses and furniture were badly burnt. An iron chest was found to have been broken open and all money, jewelry and other valuables kept inside were looted away. Srujan has submitted an FIR to the local police station showing the damage to his building and properties amounting to a total of Rs.3,16,000/-. The local RI (Revenue Inspector) came subsequently and took an estimate of the loss so made. Then I visited the next Christian house located in the same colony, which was vandalized by the Hindutva hoodlums on the same day. It belonged to Mr.Suresh Chandra Nayak, elder brother of Srujan. After setting Srujan's house on fire the miscreants conducted a similar type of dastardly attack on the house of his elder brother. They looted the money and valuables and then broke and burnt the household gadgets and furniture. Before leaving the place they made a bonfire of the broken materials. In both cases the mob were shouting slogans like 'Jay Sreeram', 'Jay Bajrang Bali', 'Bharat Mata Ki Jay' and 'Hindu-Hindu Bhai Bhai'. And in both cases, the inmates of the house fled through the backdoor to the nearby jungle to save their life just as the frenzied band of armed hoodlums started breaking open the gates and doors. After a few days they returned from the jungle to see their houses devastated and unfit for habitation. FIRs have been lodged by the family members of the above two houses to the local police station, but no receipt of the same has been issued to them by the concerned police officers. It is worth noting that the persons heading the band of hoodlums had made an homework foolproof on the location of Christian houses, otherwise how could they single out and target only the Christian houses for their acts of rampage leaving the non-Christian houses unharmed? It was further learnt that while miscreants were destroying and burning the Christian houses the neighbours being terrified at the approach of the mob kept indoors without playing any role.

To study another sample of the damaged house in the town of Phulbani I proceeded to the house of a Christian Mr.Sitaram Digal located at **Amlapada**. He is serving as an officer in the DIC (District Industries Centre) Phulbani and has been living in Amalapada since 2000 AD in cordial relation with the rest of the inhabitants of the area. On stepping into his house, I found Mr.Digal alone in his house and busy in repairing the ransacked and half burnt house. As narrated by him, on 25<sup>th</sup> Aug. at about 10 AM a group of incensed people suddenly came and started pelting

stones at his door. Hearing the noise created by them Mr.Digal, his wife and their son who were present at that time in the house started shivering in fear. To save their life they had no choice but to escape through the backdoor into a place called Sagadiasahi on the nearby hilltop. They hid themselves there until 12 noon, and returned home only when curfew was imposed. Back home they found all their properties and belongings gutted in fire, amounting to about Rupees two lakh and twenty five thousand, the income from his service career. The doors and windows were burnt and walls were stained with strong marks of fire and smoke. The steel almirah was broken and many valuables including a cash of Rupees four thousand and five hundred were stolen from it. Mr.Digal lodged an FIR to the local police station on 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept. but has not received an acknowledgement of the same. From Mr.Digal it was learnt that the Phulbani Oriya Baptist Church was also badly damaged by the above group of hoodlums. With a sense of gratitude Mr.Digal recounted how a Hindu man Mr.Ram Nayak in Sagadiasahi gave them initial shelter seeing their helpless condition and how another Hindu man Mr.Bijay Nayak also offered them both food and shelter until they returned home.

### **Situation in interior villages of Phulbani Block-**

I met a Christian young man Mr.Haridas Nayak of village Srasananda under Minian GP in Phulbani Block who was both a victim and eye-witness of communal violence that flared up in and around his village in the wake of murder of Swami Laxmananand. The miscreants set ablaze a number of Churches along with Leprosy and TB Treatment Centre in the night of 24<sup>th</sup> Aug. Next day they set on fire all the houses belonging to Christians. Though a group of 8 policemen were posted there to guard the Christian community from the acts of violence, they preferred to remain mute spectators to the scenes of desecration and vandalization. Terrified by the sudden and dastardly attacks by the slogan shouting hoodlums the Christian residents of the area fled to the nearby jungles just to protect their life.

As learnt from Mr.Haridas Nayak, besides Srasananda, other villages of Phulbani Block, which experienced systematic and organized pillage and rampage of Christian Churches and houses included Gandapadar, Adikhar, Bhandarpadar, Minian, Soberibata, Gumagarh, Badisuma, Kenabaju, Madanmendi, Dangulu, Rasimendi and Kambaguda, Lahabadi. Mr.Nayak also informed that villages Ladapadar and Kasinipadar also witnessed large-scale communal violence against Christian community in very many forms. It is worth noting that the Hindutva hoodlums while rampaging the Christian houses didn't spare the Hindu Harijan families from their attack in some villages, such as Minian, Kasinipadar, Gumagarh, Badisuma, Rasimendi, Kenabaju and Lahabadi. In village Minian the miscreants after setting the Christian houses on fire took away their cattle and poultry, but three oxen were burnt down to death in the fire. In village Badisuma three oxen were also killed in the fire. In Lahabadi village an orphanage run by Christians was completely destroyed. In village Sadanmendi of Keradi GP under Phulbani Block three Christians were intimidated to give in writing that they would reconvert to Hinduism. Again, in village Ladapadar of Dindira GP under Phiringia Block three Christians including two pastors had under duress given an undertaking for reconverting themselves into Hinduism. In all the villages, the miscreants in their acts of vandalisation followed a uniform pattern. They would suddenly emerge shouting Hindutva slogans and then start destroying the buildings and infrastructures of prayer halls, orphanages, educational and vocational centers and above all private houses of Christians. After this they would loot the portable valuables including money and jewelry, and segregate the milch and drought cattle to be carried away with them, and then make a bonfire of all the wooden or metal objects, which were difficult to be transported. While carrying out such overtly outrageous operations against the Christian community they seldom discriminate whether they were burning houses belonging to Hindus or whether they were burning the 'holy cow' in the process.