

TRISHOOL AGAINST TRINITY

As Hindutva goons unleash unspeakable violence against Christians in Orissa, the Indian nation state is largely silent and the civil society protests too muted

India's shame has returned. Nine years ago, Bajrang Dal mob led by Dara Singh burnt alive Australian missionary Graham Stuart Staines and his sons Philip and Timothy in a Keonjhar village in Orissa. It was also the year that Dangs district in Gujarat witnessed attacks on Christian chapels and houses. Since then, India has seen worst communal riots in Gujarat. Now, Christians are again the target. Saffron bodies are leading the frontal attack on minorities, and the Indian nation state swings between passive collusion and active silence

Sach Kanwal Singh

Distance here is measured in violence, and burnt churches are used as landmarks. Welcome to Orissa, India's shame and a symbol of its policy towards minorities.

Anti-minorityism is the ruling ditty of India currently. Kill Christians in Orissa, and then say this is because they indulge in conversions. Kill Muslims in Kashmir and then claim they like Pakistan more than us. Shower respect on men like Ajit Singh Poohla by sending top serving police officials to his funeral, and then claim he was helping the cause of the Indian establishment.

The world watched India's ugly face in Orissa, and that ugliness is not going anywhere soon. Anti-Christian violence fanned and was perpetrated by goons of saffron RSS-BJP affiliated bodies like Vishav Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal. Reports trickling from the ground said sporadic violence was still on.

Kandhamal district in Orissa was Ground Zero in communal maelstrom, and burnt for the second time in eight months in violence sparked by the August 23 murder of saffron leader Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati. It is clear that the underlying cause is the battle between Hindus and Christian converts over reservations in educa-

tional institutions and government jobs.

Even by the shameless standards of definitions of poverty in India, the 8,021 sq km Kandhamal is poor. Of the 6.48 lakh people in the district, 3.36 lakh (52 per cent) belong to scheduled tribes (STs), while another 1.05 lakh (17 per cent) are scheduled castes (SCs).

Of the 1 lakh Christians, 60 per cent are converts from SCs, locally known as 'Pana Christians'. This group's demand for ST status, and the ensuing reservations in jobs and educational institutes, is what has fuelled tensions between the local Kondh community and the Pana Christians. Under the rules, STs who convert to Christianity continue to enjoy reservations, but not SCs who convert.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), opposed to reservations for Pana Christians, exploited this explosive mix and its state chief Gouri Prasad Rath issues inflammatory statements at the drop of a hat.

As Father Alexander of the church at Sankarakhol explained, the administration was well aware of the riot potential if Swami Saraswati's body was to be allowed in a procession from Tumudibandha to Chakapada, a distance of over 200 km, but it let the passions to be ignited.

Kandhamal's per capita income is Rs 4,743 (\$106 approximately), it has no industrial investment, entire district has just 15 police stations and merely 647 personnel looking after



6.48 lakh people. Habitations are scattered and most roads run

Ten years later, she is still full of love

A decade later, things are exactly where they were. On Jan 22, 1999, they burnt her husband Graham Staines and two sons while they were sleeping in their vehicle in Orissa. They are still burning Christians alive.

Gladys Staines, the widow of Australian missionary Graham Staines, says she is "deeply saddened" by the anti-Christian violence in the state.

"Hopefully, people will learn to respect each other and live in communal harmony across the religious divide," she said.

Gladys Staines now lives with her daughter in North Queensland.

This time, VHP goons burnt alive a woman when they set fire to an orphanage and torched a paralytic patient.

Gladys spent over 20 years of her life in Orissa, working for the poor at the Mayurbhanj Leprosy Home and the Graham Staines Memorial Hospital in Orissa. She still keeps in active touch and was in India even during the summer of 2008. "We need to learn to love and respect



one another even if some are different to what we are...God has helped me to forgive. He has created each one of us and he doesn't want us to be killing each other. Unless we give up the bitterness and prejudices, the cycle of violence will never end," she was quoted as saying.



Some Christians returned from the forests where they had taken shelter in Kandhamal in Orissa