

**Report on the Visit of the Vice Chairperson, NCM to Orissa
21-24th April 2008**

The report of the NCM delegation that visited Orissa from 6-8 January, 2008 begins with the statement that the reasons behind the riots in Orissa are far more varied than was apparent from reports in the media. A further visit by the Vice Chairman NCM from 21-24th April, 2008 only served to under score the validity of this observation. Christians in Kandhmal district and particularly Bamunigaon village suffered untold damage in the riots and things are only now beginning to return to normal. The scars have yet to heal fully although the process of reconciliation, however, halting has started. But it is clear that we still have a great deal to learn about what lies behind communal riots in general and this riot in particular. Unless greater care is taken to study and analyse the underlying currents, policy makers will find it difficult to adopt measures that will eradicate this virus.

Over a period of three days, the Vice Chairman NCM visited all the affected areas in the district of Kandhmal starting with the headquarters Phulbani and covering the worst affected areas like Bamunigaon, Daringbadi, Baliguda, Barakhamba, Tikabali, Kajuripada and Srasananda. In general, it would be fair to say that the pace of relief work has been commendable. Although the riots took place less than 4 months ago, most affected persons have availed of the relief offered by the State Government. New houses in place of those burnt or otherwise damaged in the riots are coming up. Many have already reached plinth level and some are even up to lintel level. In a remote area where it is not easy to get competent masons and other technicians and where building materials are not readily available locally, this is no mean feat. Peace Committees have also been established and, while not all of them meet with the desired regularity, this is a commendable attempt to establish an institutional mechanism which allows people to communicate across boundaries. Revenue officers are posted in affected villages with a clear brief about the tasks they must perform.

A good deal of the credit for this must go to the State Government and especially to the new team of young officers in the district. The latter have been given a reasonably free hand to get relief moving and to create an atmosphere of trust. They have performed extremely well, showing both enthusiasm and dedication and must be given every encouragement to continue with the good work.

Some unusual points about the riots emerged during the course of the visit and the interaction that the Vice Chairman had with civil groups in Bamunigaon. There is no doubt that the rioting was directed by individual religious groups at other groups, i.e. Hindus attacked Christians and the latter retaliated although in much smaller measure. But the underlying causes for this go well beyond the Kui Pana conflict so ably highlighted in the report of the last team. In Bamunigaon, for instance, the Christian sahi (locality) was attacked and this was followed by an attack on the Hindu sahi. But the village itself has more than one Christian and Hindu sahi. Yet only two sahis were vandalised. On closer questioning, it turned out that the Christian sahi that was attacked was far more prosperous than the one at Battapally that was not attacked. Although both are inhabited mostly by Dalits Christians, the attack was concentrated in the sahi whose members were prosperous and had organised themselves under the banner of the Ambedkar Vanik Sangh. These people are shop owners or are in service. The inhabitants of the Battapally sahi are much poorer and provide no competition to the inhabitants of the Hindu sahi. The economic motif behind the rioting becomes apparent.

As mentioned above, this has important implications for any policy initiatives that will be taken in the future to address the question of communal harmony. While the riots were undoubtedly communal in nature and people were attacked on the basis of their religion, it is also true, as it is in the case of riots in other parts of the country that several other factors were at play as well. If we are to set at rest the scourge of communal violence and build a healthy pluralistic society in which different cultures, religions and life styles co-exist in harmony, policy makers will have to address questions relating to the uneven access to the fruits of development that globalisation and integration with the larger economy bring in their wake. How exactly this is to be done must be studied carefully by social workers, representatives of civil society and of course government officers but unless this exercise is put in place, we are likely to see repeated bouts of unrest whose root causes may well be economic but which will be given the garb of communal unrest.

Another unusual feature was that some NGOs were selectively targeted by the rioters. At least 3 of them, Solidarity for Developing Communities (SFDC), World Vision and CHARM were singled out for rough treatment. The reasoning given by some interlocutors to the Vice Chairman that they were seen to be assisting only Christians and not others, does not seem to be valid. It is clear that at least two of them were working among the

people at large without any reference to caste or creed and both the beneficiaries as well as society in general were well aware of this. (I did not get an opportunity to visit World Vision and so cannot comment on their performance). This selective targeting has some disturbing implications and the administration would do well to probe this question more deeply.

On the law and order side, as many as 187 persons have been arrested and 127 cases registered. Yet the overwhelming impression given by the people was that many of the ring leaders are still at large. It is impossible to comment on how valid this impression is in a visit lasting just 3 days but the fact that it exists is disturbing. If people do not have confidence that the law is being implemented without fear or favour and that no-one is above the law, their faith in the efficacy of administration will be eroded. They will then be encouraged more and more to take the law into their own hands. Those who burnt police stations, churches and even government offices must face the consequences of their actions and must be seen by all as having done so. One can hardly over emphasise the folly of allowing feelings of helplessness and frustration to creep in to an area like this which is so vulnerable to Naxalite influence.

One disquieting aspect of the whole matter is the extent to which traditional ties between Hindus and Christians seem to have broken down. In Bamunigaon, for instance, there seemed to be little communication between the Hindu sahi and the Christian sahi even though the two are within 50 metres of each other. In fact, inhabitants of the two sahis met separately with the Vice Chairman. Unless urgent steps are taken to break down these artificial barriers, the gulf will only widen. The security implications of such a scenario in an area which, as mentioned above, is already Naxalite prone are frightening. To begin with simple measures like holding street plays, drama and painting competitions and other confidence building measures which involve the whole community and especially children on both sides of the divide should speedily be organised by the administration. Traditional people to people links must be re-established and all should feel part of the same community again.

Throughout the visit what stood out was the savagery with which places of worship were attacked and destroyed. It was as if the miscreants were determined to inflict the deepest possible wounds on the religious psyche of the people. In Bamunigaon, for instance, the rioters went about their task with meticulous care, desecrating the Church, vandalising the cross and breaking statues and other religious items. They systematically destroyed the records pertaining to Baptism, births and deaths, marriages

etc. maintained in the Church and then burnt the edifice down after making away with all items of value. The desire to trample on the rights of other citizens and to cause as much pain as possible to their religious sentiments is only too apparent. The same picture emerges when one sees the burnt-out shells of churches and other religious structures in different parts of the district.

In view of the horrendous damage suffered by places of worship and the clear intention behind such vandalism to hurt the religious sentiments of a group of people, the policy of the State Government to deny compensation for the destruction of religious places is not easy to understand. The Vice Chairman was informed that the government had fixed an amount of Rs 2 lakhs as compensation for institutions like schools and hospitals but not for churches, presbyteries and other religious places. The logic is not easy to understand. Compensation is given to innocent victims of mob violence in recognition of the fact that they have suffered owing to lapses on the part of the state in not providing them with adequate protection and owing to the fact that sections of society breached the law of the land. There is a clear recognition in this that they have been denied the protection they are entitled to expect from the state for no fault of their own. Surely the same applies across the board to religious places damaged and vandalised during riots? The argument that compensation for damage to religious places has not been given in other riots is not valid. There have not been many instances where places of religious worship have suffered the extensive, inhuman and brutal damage seen in Khandmal district. The Vice Chairman was unable to obtain figures from Government on the damage suffered by religious places but non official estimates put the damage to churches, presbyteries and seminaries at about Rs 2 crores. Monetary value aside, it is the hurt inflicted to the psyche of the people through the destruction of places of worship that must be cured and one important way in which it can be done is by assisting through monetary compensation in the work of re-construction.

One point made with some force by the administration is that a good system of communication is vital especially in a remote tribal area like Khandmal district. The importance of this cannot be over emphasised. One reason why controlling riots in such areas is so difficult is the virtual impossibility of reaching remote outposts and villages in quick time. The only way to tackle this is to ease the current dispensation which insists that in order to be connected by good roads built under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, villages must have a minimum population. In tribal areas where villages are invariably small and populations rarely

rise above 500 or so, this condition should be relaxed. It is the only way in which remote villages in this region can be connected with all weather roads.

Similarly it was pointed out that the amount available to minority students under a scholarship scheme sanctioned by the Ministry of Minority Affairs is higher than that given to other tribal students in the same class under a different scheme of the Ministry of Social Justice. Normally there should be no objection to paying a higher amount by way of scholarship assistance but when the beneficiaries of the two schemes belong to two separate religious groups, discrepancies of this nature tend to magnify differences instead of emphasising the point that both groups are poor and both should have equal access to state assistance. Unwittingly perhaps we tend, through such differences, to communalise poverty. There is a case for bringing a measure of uniformity in these amounts. A feeling of resentment should not arise because some children get more than others particularly when both study in the same class of the same school and live in the same village. The last thing needed in the present context is something that further divides society.

It is a matter of some regret that although Orissa has a fairly large minority population it does not as yet have a Minority Commission. It is vital that such a Commission is established as early as possible because this is one important way in which problems can be addressed before they spill over into violence. People need a forum to express their differences, their grievances, their difficulties and even perhaps their grouses against the state. A pluralistic, democratic society encourages such open expression.

One last point needs to be emphasised. Wherever the Vice Chairman went, the question of who was responsible for the riots that cast such a huge shadow on the most important Christian festival in the religious calendar and forced the cancellation of all celebrations connected with it was repeatedly raised. In the absence of definitive answers conspiracy theories gain ground. This does nothing to restore peace, goodwill and trust between the two communities. Some answers are needed if the matter is finally to be buried and the people are to live once more in peace and harmony. We must not delay in seeking out the truth and broadcasting it.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The State Government should immediately extend the policy of giving relief and assistance for rebuilding damaged properties to religious establishments that have suffered untold damage in the riots. This needs to be done on a war footing.
2. Confidence building measures like street plays, poetry and drama, competitions etc. should be quickly organised and people, especially children, from both sides of the divide should be encouraged to participate.
3. The recommendation made by the NCM team that visited Orissa in January, 2008 that the State Government must look into the speeches of Swami Lakshmananda to determine whether they amount to incitement to violence does not appear to have been acted upon. This, and the recommendation that a White Paper be prepared on the conversion issue, should be implemented early.
4. Amendments to the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana that will allow roads to be built even in small villages should be made.
5. Some uniformity in the amounts given by way of scholarship under different schemes of the Government of India in this tribal area is needed.
6. A Minority Commission armed with suitable powers and responsibilities must be established early in the State.
7. The confidence of the people in the impartiality of the law enforcing administration and the sanctity of the rule of law must be re-established through speedy and concrete measures to bring the guilty in the riots to book. They should be identified and named as early as possible.
8. Policy makers should try to address the question of the uneven access to the fruits of development so that economic issues are not allowed to degenerate into communal violence.

This report deliberately does not touch on the issues of Pana Kui conflict or the role of the State Administration following the outbreak of violence

because this has already been covered at some length in the report of the last group that visited Orissa. However, it should be emphasised that answers are urgently needed.
