



## Re-build civil society in Kandhamal of Orissa

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From **John Dayal** in Kandhamal: Of the 12 murder cases tried in the Fast Track courts in Phulbani, Kandhamal district of Odisha, the accused have been let off in 11 murders and convicted in just one. A member of the State Legislative assembly on the Bharatiya Janata party ticket, Manoj Pradhan, has been let off in the four cases in which he has been tried so far. He and his henchmen have been accused by the witnesses of terrorising them, or seeking to bribe them.

A belated effort is now being made to revive civil society and the process of justice and reconciliation towards a lasting peace in Kandhamal, which remains the worst single case of persecution of Christians in South Asia. Most of the over 5,000 houses destroyed in the December 2007 and August 24-October, 2008 mayhem remain un-built, and several thousand of the 50,000 Christian refugees are still to return home. Many cannot as they have been told they have to convert to Hinduism before they will be accepted in the villages. The threats and coercion continue till today.

The police and administration, as usual, look on. The one change is the Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's acceptance, in an answer in the State legislature, that it was the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and its sister organisations of the Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) which were responsible in the anti Christian violence, the first time the government has accepted this reality. Two judicial commissions of enquiry, plodding on in Cuttack and Bhubaneswar, are yet to admit this fact.

The following is an update:

### I. The Harsh Reality of Odisha and especially of Kandhamal is:

1. No one raised a voice when violence hit the Christians in December 2007 and August 2008, not even the governments.
2. Civil Society in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack, if it existed, played dead, and nation was not moved.
3. Barring a few Left parties who could protest, the Political Apparatus remained silent and invisible, including so called friendly parties and groups
4. The Media was violently biased, specially the Odia Media
5. Fact Finding groups either misunderstood the causes, or just blamed either Conversions or Dalit-Tribal conflicts as the cause of the violence, and even people's enquiry commissions including a Judge and Teesta Setalvad have yet to give their reports on the 2007 violence.
6. Post violence, civil society and peace institutions have yet to be revived.
7. Church was shattered, deeply wounded and overwhelmed by the magnitude of the violence. Barring the PILs in the Supreme Court, no real pressure on Government to construct all houses fully, pay sustenance allowances etc, and government jobs.

### II. Post Violence;

1. Church is focussed on helping complete houses instead of using the law to let government complete the houses. As a result, though the Catholic Church says it will help complete 1,200 houses, Believers Church 900 Houses, Eficor about 300 houses, and CNI a similar number, another 2,500 houses remain without help. Also, without help are the 250 or so victims of the 2007 violence, especially in Barakhama, who

have been left to their own devices.

2. Although there has been much work by religious groups in distributing Holy Bibles and clothes, and in counseling victims, there has not been commensurate work in enhancing the sense of security.
3. The result is that complainants and witnesses to violence feel very insecure and are susceptible to coercion, blackmail and perhaps allurement.
4. The result has been that despite the effort of well meaning young lawyers, especially of the CLA and HRLN, not much progress has been made in getting convictions especially in the murder cases involving BJP political leaders.
5. In many villages, refugees have not been able to return because the threat of forcible conversion to Hinduism remains.
6. The government peace committees remain on paper, or are loaded against Christians
7. Not much headway has been made in getting the Collector to secure land for non Tribals so they can construct their houses.
8. No headway has been made at village level towards reconciliation

### III. Reviews:

1. Civil Society groups have met sporadically to assess the situation, including those coming from Delhi, but there has not been much sharing of info and concepts.
2. The first major initiative was taken by Father Ajay and Dharendra Panda to call a meeting on 3rd November, 2009 in Bhubaneswar to assess the situation. Almost the entire political spectrum, excluding the BJP, BJD and Congress, were present, including women groups, tribal and Dalit groups and specialists. Several victims were also present. The author (Dr Dayal) and Advocate Sr Mary Scaria, Lansinglu Rongmei, Tehmina Ram Arora and Vrinda Grover met several times in New Delhi to discuss the legal issues.
3. As part of the follow up of the decisions and recommendations of those meetings, some activists held meetings. It was also decided to get senior advocates and observers to be present for some time in the Fast Track courts so that grounds could be prepared for intervention in superior courts.
4. As a follow-up of those meetings and after consultations with senior Bishops of Odisha of various denominations, it was felt that the Church had a major role to play at the grassroots level to reconstruct social and civil society structures to give courage and strength to the victims. This can be done only at the homeland village level and not by outsiders from Bhubaneswar or elsewhere in the country.
5. It was therefore decided to call a meeting in Berhampur, the nearest big town, of all religious workers – Priests, pastors, catholic religious, NGO workers, catechists and others – on 7th December 2007 for a full day discussion cum workshop to discuss the issue and to encourage the religious groups to begin grassroots work apart from the religious work and relief they have been doing.
6. It was decided to bring experts to brief the religious people on these issues.

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