

## Caste and Cosmic War: Violence Erupts in Kandhamal

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On August 24, 2008, a nightmare reverberated throughout the district of Kandhamal in Orissa, India. Alerted by policemen of an impending attack by Hindus incensed by the assassination of Swamiji Laxmanananda Saraswati by the Christians the day before, Christian families began a panicked exodus into the dense jungle surrounding their small villages with nothing more than clothes and children on their backs. Some caught glimpses of an angry Hindu mob rushing through the streets brandishing axes, swords, and clubs and shouting *Bajrangbali ki jai* (“strength, unity, loyalty”), burning houses, and accosting anyone who hadn’t reached the safety of the trees. Many Christians hid in the jungle for days without food or water before reaching a safe village. Others had climbed to the tops of the trees in hopes that they could return to the remnants of their homes after the mob dissipated. Some watched as their brethren fell prey to Hindu attackers. After the first night of rioting, the charred remains of Christians who refused to renounce Christianity lay on a street in Baliguda. A week after the flight from her village, one mother nursed the axe wounds on her 8 year-old son’s head while another wept for her teenage daughter, whose body lay wrapped in bandages after being dragged out of their house, drenched in kerosene, and lit on fire (PUCL 7-8). Weeks after the initial riots, a nun revealed to the media that she watched her abbot be beaten to death. She herself was dragged into a corner, torn out of her sari, raped, and then paraded through the market while policemen silently

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watched. These stories are the testaments to two months of rioting throughout Kandhamal that resulted in the deaths of 81 Christians, the destruction of 4,500 houses and properties, the vandalizing, burning, and destruction of 236 churches, and the removal of 50,000 Christians from Kandhamal into relief camps.

These acts of violence were not just the result of one assassination, but rather the culmination of an ethnic and religious conflict that traces its roots to pre-colonial Kandhamal. After analyzing the history of this conflict I will provide a theoretical model of the way in which dichotomous identities have been constructed by Hindus and Christians through the use of ethnic, religious, and caste distinctions. The construction of these identities helped produce a vision of “cosmic warfare” that resulted in the Kandhamal Riots of 2008. By looking at this struggle in terms of cosmic warfare, it will become clear that these two ethnic and religious dichotomous forces are locked in an uncompromising symbolic struggle for dominance.

Located in a terrain of hills and forest with little cultivatable land, the district of Kandhamal was historically inhabited by two tribal populations. The majority of the population was made of up Kandhas, but during the 10<sup>th</sup> century the other tribal group, known as Panas, were pushed out of the lands they had cleared and cultivated and into the present district of Kandhamal. Viewed as outcastes by the Kandhas, a feudal system of master and serf developed between the two groups. The Kandha majority became landowners, and elevated themselves to the status of nobility, while the Panas were forced to become their artisans, farm laborers, and servants (PUCL 29). Despite the small amount of cultivatable land in the region, through the machinations of this class hierarchy a system of gift-giving arose. This system ensured that labor and resources were distributed equally throughout the district. Land-owning Kandhas would send large gifts of clothing, food, and Pana serfs to landowners in another area in the knowledge that such gifts would be reciprocated out of a need to demonstrate power and wealth. This feudal structure differed from the traditional Indian caste system. In fact, a reified caste system was not present during these pre-colonial centuries, and this is true throughout the rest of India as well.

The tribes of Kandhamal retained their feudal system up until

they were officially annexed into the British Raj in 1855. By this time, British colonialists and ethnographers had codified Sanskrit texts with the help of Brahmins. These texts, such as the *Laws of Manu*, provided British colonial officials with a trans-regional and meta-historical mode of understanding Indian society (Dirks 59); the British misunderstood these texts, and the concept of caste, as a “hegemonic text undergirding all of Hindu society” (Raheja 498), became an organized representation of Indian identity that encompassed ritual practices, occupation, and kinship systems. This delineation of caste assisted British officials in governing the population. Through the institution of a census, the British colonial administration reified caste as a measurable entity that divided people into the discrete units of Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra, a biological and cultural inheritance synonymous with specific customs, occupations, and rules for living.

In Kandhamal, the imposition of a strict caste system complicated the relations between the Kandhas and Panas. Despite both tribal populations being placed in the caste of sudras because of their tribal status, their ethnic differences and previous feudal system prompted the Kandhas to maintain ethnic superiority. As Kandhas struggled to retain their land from the encroaching British, Panas became relegated to the status of Dalits, or untouchables, an unofficial addition to the Varna system. Considered polluting because of their occupations of farm work, leatherworking, and other unsavory jobs, Dalits were socially and physically isolated from the rest of society and constantly suffered high levels of deprivation and poverty. However, as a way to supplement their farm work and earn extra money, Panas began to pick up government-sponsored work as daily laborers. This proved to be economically successful for them, and situated them in British favor over the Kandhas because of their willingness to adhere to colonial policy, learn the language, and eventually convert to Christianity (PUCL 29).

Unsurprisingly, the Kandhas, displaced from the feudal patronage, viewed this usurpation of inherited power and superiority as a threat to what the colonial period had established as traditional hegemony (Kanungo 17). In his theory on group identity, Amartya Sen provides a frame through which to better understand the subsequent history of interaction between the Kandhas and Panas. Sen theorizes that

each person constructs a plurality of identities, such as religious, ethnic, linguistic, and geographic identities. Each of these provides individuals with a sense of belonging within a community. However, while this communal loyalty enforces intra-group solidarity, it can potentially promote inter-group discord because it results in competing communities stereotyping and misrepresenting each other as simply singular aspects of their pluralistic identities (Sen 2). This organized misrepresentation solidifies over the course of numerous generations.

We can see Sen's theory in action in Kandhamal, where tension intensifies as the Kandha and Pana tribes increasingly employ singular identities based on caste and ethnic distinctions. Due to Panas' hierarchical rise under British colonial rule, during the colonial and post-colonial eras, the overthrown Kandhas circulated the stereotype of Panas being an exploitative, foreign-minded, Dalit that threatens traditional structures. For this same reason, Kandhas began associating their tribe as truly indigenous to the Kandhamal region (unlike the Panas), the ones equipped to restore traditional caste order. I cannot overstate the role of selective memory in this development. Under British colonization, the caste system became reified such that it constituted the key to Indian identity. This was so thoroughly done that both Indians and the British came to see the rigid caste system as part of traditional Indian society (Dirks 59). Therefore, when the Kandhas lost their superior position over the Panas, they convinced themselves that the traditional and just order of society had been subverted. Humiliated by their loss of power, the Kandhas could not appreciate that the Panas had simply pursued their economic and social self-interest.

As the post-colonial era dawned and Hindu nationalism began to consolidate its power, the tensions between these two tribes began to expand from an ethnic and caste conflict into a religious one. Sudhir Kakar describes Hindu nationalism, as expressed through the Hindutva movement, as being "born out of a resistance to European cultural domination and the Christian missionary offensive" (Kakar, Sudhir and Katharina 135). It is not surprising that Hindus perceived Western values and religious institutions as ideological tools used by the British to weaken India by uprooting its traditions. Hindu nationalists thought the best way to combat such cultural pollution was to build a united front based

on devotion to the family, the nation, and indigenous culture (Kakar, Sudhir and Katharina 136). They attempted to do this by establishing Hinduism, or Hindutva, as the cultural norm for Indians. In response to their ethnic clash with Dalit Panas, the Kandhas readily accepted this ideology, thus placing themselves in direct religious contention with Christian Panas. Through their rejection of the caste system, Panas upset what Kandhas and Hindutva believe to be biologically innate, and through their rejection of Hinduism they directly threatened the cultural homogeneity and singular religious identity that Hindutva was trying to cultivate for all Indians. This inevitably made Panas into social and religious pariahs.

Directed by Stalin Krup and produced by DRISHTI, a media and arts organization devoted to human rights advocacy, the documentary “*India Untouched: Stories of a People Apart*” exposes the way in which Dalit Christian Indians are purposely segregated from other Indians of different castes and religious affiliation. In India, Dalits are the modern form of “untouchables,” a position applying to those Indians that perform the most polluting jobs, such as burying the dead and making leather from sacred cow hides. This category was supposedly erased from the caste system by the Indian government in order to provide equal opportunity for those people that used to fall under that caste category. However, the documentary shows that these Dalits, especially those that are Christians, are continuously persecuted and treated unfairly. In the documentary a Hindu priest comments on how the caste system goes back to the Vedas, where each caste was created from the Lord’s essence, and in which the *Laws of Manu* prescribed jobs for everyone in response to their accumulated karma (Kurup, *India Untouched*). According to this priest, caste is a divinely ordained and innate condition that is immutable. He continues by saying that Christian doctrine goes directly against colonial caste assumptions by promoting a message of equality, and missionaries are pulling Hindus away from their cultural identity in a conspiracy to make Hindus a minority (Kurup, *India Untouched*). This sentiment is voiced by numerous parties who also attempt to discredit Christian Panas through legal means. For instance, Hindutva and Kandha tribe members claim that Christian Panas operate illegally without repercussion from the secular Indian government. According to the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act of 1989,

Each District Magistrate shall maintain a list of religious institutions or organizations propagating religious faith in his district and that of person directly or indirectly engaged for propagation of religious faith in the district,” and “Any person intending to convert his religions, shall give a declaration before a Magistrate, 1<sup>st</sup> Class, having jurisdiction prior to such conversion that he intends to convert his religion on his own will.

In the post-independence period, Dalit Panas were accused of hiding their Christian identity, improperly registering their religious affiliation, and then forging documents saying they were part of the same Kui tribe as the Kandhas, which would give them government protection and benefits as a Scheduled Caste or Tribe (Kanungo 17). For example, Dr. Vasishtan of the Sangh Parivar, the umbrella group of the Hindutva movement, remarked, “many Panas converted to Christians, so even after they converted over to Christianity they tried to enjoy the same benefits, the same presents that they were getting earlier” (*Truth About Kandhamal*). Even Manoj Kumar Naik, a Pana Christian advocate, admitted that in hiding their faith they are able to get better benefits from the government (*Truth About Kandhamal*). In addition, Christians were viewed as forcing Hindus to convert through financial allurements and death threats, which is illegal according to the above act. All of these concerns pushed Kandha Hindus to consider Dalit Christian Panas as part of a global Christian colonialist movement that sought to take over Hindu culture and make all people Christian.

However, for Panas, conversion to Christianity gave them an identity, a sense of belonging, and “a strong support system, including skills of literacy and an ideology of justice and equality that helps counteract exploitation” (PUCL 32). Through the help of Western Christian missionaries, Pana Dalits created economic, political and religious competition with Hindu Brahminism, which attempts to safeguard upper-class privileges, status, and power (Lobo 149), and the Hindu nationalism that promotes it. For example, Pana Christians implemented health and education institutions in tribal areas that competed with segregated Hindu establishments and headed relief and reconstruction efforts in areas hit by natural disasters, which all ultimately contributed to their financial successes.

Due to these factors, most particularly the Panas’ religious

conversion and the Kandhas' increasing affiliations with the ideologies of Hindutva, Kandhamal became a microcosm of the religious tensions between Hindu nationalists and Christian converts. However, because of the particular regional ethnic and caste problems found there, this area experienced particularly complex forms of identity construction and "othering." Rather than viewing each other as having religious, ethnic, and caste identities that are separate from each other, members of the two opposed factions tended to conflate multiple categories of identity. In other words, the labels of a "Christian," "Dalit," or "Pana" all became analogous. Similarly, there was no other way to describe a Kandha other than as a tribal Indian and Hindu nationalist. Within his theoretical framework, Amartya Sen notes that the choice to conflate all of these associations into a singular identity leads to an organized misrepresentation of identity. He further notes that this organized misrepresentation results in violence, especially when a group is classified in any religious way (Sen 8). In other words, when a particular group is tagged with a specific global religious affiliation and deemed as the "other," the religious affiliation functions to demonize the group in the minds of those belonging to an opposing group.

In Kandhamal, certainly, the conflation of identities led to violence. On July 7, 2008, the Indian committee "Justice on Trial," a team headed by a Supreme or High Court judge that collects oral and documentary evidence of human rights violations and then reports their conclusions directly to the Indian government, released an interim report containing descriptions of the Kandhamal riots by both Christians and Hindus present at the onset of physical violence. Hindus claimed that they were attacked after a Hindu rally protesting Panas becoming a Scheduled Tribe, which would legally allow Dalits access to Kandha land and government subsidies as a form of protection against tribal persecution, and the amassing number of Christian conversions. They maintain that these numerous attacks reached their conclusion with the assassination of their Swami, Laxmanananda Saraswati, on August 23, 2008. However, Christians deny their involvement with the assassination, and argue that after the protest, even before the Swami's assassination, Hindus brandished sophisticated weapons, attacked them, and set their houses on fire. However, there is no clear evidence for the purported burning of homes, and no one was apparently injured

in this supposed attack. While it is still unclear whether Christian Panas are guilty of Laxmanananda's murder, most government officials and committee members believe that the key impetus for the violence beginning on August 24<sup>th</sup> was the assassination of the popular Hindu Swami (Justice on Trial 45-46), which devastated the Hindu community throughout the region of Orissa.

A religious-political demagogue, as defined by Sudhir Kakar, utilizes rhetoric to promote communalism and group narcissism. Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati did exactly that. A stalwart Hindu leader, he used both the influence of his political and religious reputation to further delineate Dalit Christians and Hindu Kandhas into dichotomous singular identities defined solely by religion, caste, and ethnicity. His actions and rhetoric pointedly played on Hindu anger and fear, and were essential in placing Christians most firmly in the category of "demonic other." Widely known for his efforts on behalf of Hindus throughout Orissa, with concerns for the education of rural children, developing a sustainable economy, and promoting Hinduism as the Indian national religion, Laxmanananda Saraswati joined the newly-formed Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization under the umbrella Hindutva group, Sangh Parivar, as a Hindu missionary in 1969 and set up his base in what is now Kandhamal. As Pralay Kanungo explains, "Saraswati concentrated on...primarily the Kandhas, constituting more than half of Kandhamal's population, in order to bring them closer to Hindutva...He opened schools, colleges, and hostels for the boys and girls; the Sangh Parivar trained them ideologically and created a pool of permanent cadre" (16). Swami Saraswati was also involved in promoting self-reliance in the form of agriculture for the people in Kandhamal. He believed that only through a revolution in agriculture would there be prosperity. *The Truth about Kandhamal*, a documentary produced by a private group known as the India Foundation, provides an unbiased account of the Swami and the subsequent riots following his assassination. Within this documentary, Hindu agriculturalists reveal the extent to which Swami Saraswati labored for their survival:

There was only jungle here. Because of that there used to be no farming. Now we started working as the water is flowing. We grow cauliflower, potato and peas. All the water is channelized to 60-70 acres of land approximately. Most of the people...

cultivate land here for their livelihood. The government never helped us. We have built the canal by our own efforts. Swami Laxmanananda himself guided us. It is because of his plan that we have managed to water the farms.

In addition to his effort to support Hindu farmers, “*Truth about Kandhamal*” reveals how Saraswati attempted to reconvert Christian Panas. When he was unsuccessful in defeating them economically and educationally he proceeded to further demonize the Christians as the “other” in direct contention with the sacred Hindutva mission (Kanungo 17). “There was no problem when Christians were not here,” he is recorded in saying, but

With their numbers increasing, they forcefully took away Hindu girls and forced the neo-converts to eat beef. They set several temples on fire. Be it Birupakhya Mahadev’s temple or temple at Malarimaha or my Ashram at Rupagoan, the Christians conspired to set them on fire. They threw mortal remains of cows on mandirs. Kondh tribal’s Goddess Dharani Mata’s places of worship in several villages were dishonoured. The sacred sword at a temple at Bramhanigaon was forcibly taken away by the converts who melted the sword in public and prepared their weapons with that looted material. What was the need to do so? (Janamejayan Weblog)

Here Saraswati characterizes the demonic Christians as bringing violence and chaos. They destroy sacred monuments and objects, use those destroyed objects to perpetuate their evil, violate innocent girls, and eat beef. He brings home the idea that a Western Christian enemy has encroached so much on society that Indians (neo-converts) are now aligning themselves with it. His concluding question suggests a victim complex. All of these terrible events are happening to innocent Hindus, he indicates; they are victims of violence and chaos perpetuated by Christians. Hindus suffer the injustice of their sacred world being violated.

This rhetoric promotes a feeling of humiliation among Hindu followers, which he propounds further in the next section of his interview:

This is what foreign money being pumped into churches in India is doing to society — erect insolent symbols of the church which offend the eye, the heart and the mind of Hindus — towering Jesus Christ statues obstructing the skyline, towering steeples with a cross atop, which is visible from a long distance, new and big churches close to old and popular temples, Christians of all denominations are using foreign money to increasingly put up their religious symbols in what can only be termed offensive and even obscene acts. (Janamejayan Weblog)

The image of Western dominance pervading the Indian landscape, including the towering steeples and huge statues of crucified Jesus, are from this perspective testaments to Hindu shame. Saraswati comments on how these monuments “offend the eye, the heart and the mind of Hindus.” With this method of humiliation, Hindus are depicted as victims and weaklings. Saraswati thus taps into what Sudhir Kakar identifies as a common psychological issue among Hindus: the legacy of strict adherence to colonial policies. Hindus, according to Kakar, are plagued by the question of whether they have historically been tolerant or simply weak (Kakar 164). To combat fear of the latter, and provide a hope for renewal, Saraswati asserted,

It is time for the country and Hindu organizations in particular to consider that religious freedom enshrined in the constitution has to be matched by a constitutional provision that unequivocally bans religious conversion of Hindus to Abrahamic faiths. Christians have to earn the good will of the Hindus instead of demanding special protection and special rights. (Janamejayan Weblog)

After humiliating and bringing out their fears of weakness, Saraswati urges Hindu followers to be strong and stand up for what India ought to be: a Hindu nation. Such rhetoric places Laxmanananda Saraswati clearly in the role of a religious-political demagogue. By replacing feelings of loss and shame with feelings of love and solidarity, Saraswati became the ideal perpetuator of a Hindu nationalist cultural identity.

Saraswati’s brutal assassination by Christian Panas indicated that the struggle with the demonic “other” was no longer metaphoric.

Rather, the fight between Dalit Christian Panas and Hindu Khandas became quite literal. In fact, it became cosmic. The violent acts of August 24, 2008 began with a procession of Swami Laxmanananda's body through Christian and Hindu sectors of Kandhamal on August 24, 2008. Already there had been national media coverage on his assassination, and speculation on who had performed such an act. Sangh Parivar, the organization leading the Hindutva movement, and the Kandhas of Kandhamal naturally accused extremist Pana Christians. As the procession moved through Kandhamal, Hindu followers became more and more agitated until a mob had formed along the roads Laxmanananda's body had traveled. The riots were allowed to continue without government interference for two months, while relief camps filled with refugees, children died of unsanitary conditions, and fears of terrorist bombs or poisoned water supplies ran rampant. Just as no security officers had tried to protect Swami Saraswati on the day he and four of his disciples were shot, there was no protection for Christians unless they converted to Hinduism.

The violence and injustice committed by Hindu Kandhas suggest that they perceived themselves in a desperate situation in a world gone awry, engaging in a cosmic war that allowed no mercy because the opponent would remain a threat until crushed. Victims in relief camps recount the terrible threats of their attackers: "We will do to your young women what you have done to our mataji; wherever you see Christians, kill them; even if you return after 20 years, we will kill you; we will kill all children of Christians so that they will not be there to take revenge" (PUCL 6-7). According to victims in relief camps, such threats were common. Such language exemplifies the all-or-nothing struggle that characterizes a cosmic war. According to Mark Juergensmeyer, one of the leading theorists of religious violence, cosmic wars are not necessarily undergone to achieve harmony. The purpose of this one was to maintain traditional social and religious structures in the face of Western encroachment and, more broadly, to regain an illusion of power (Juergensmeyer 157). This illusion of power is based on conflating pluralistic identities for self and the "other" – particularly religious, ethnic, and social affiliations – into a single identity that is defined in absolutist terms.

The implications of narrowing identity into a set of absolute terms

are varied. In the situation of Kandhamal, the use of caste has been ironically reinterpreted. Contemporary Hindu nationalists struggle to maintain a caste system that they associate with ancient tradition, but the aspects they particularly favor represent a legacy of colonial British rule. Such aspects include a strict system of social hierarchy based on innate, and immutable, forms of occupation, rules for living, and consequent biological states of impurity. Ironically, in order to maintain this colonial institution, and the Hindu cultural/religious identity that it has been utilized to promote, Hindus in Kandhamal depict themselves as fighting against the return of colonialist foreign powers into India. But can this war, in its form of the Kandhamal riots, be justified on such absolutist terms? Are not the implications of such absolute identities much more terrible than differences in social status, ethnicity, or religion? When a terrified Hindu rioter pulled his Christian cousin from a burning house, his leader threatened him with a machete until he beat his Christian cousin nearly to death. A week later, in another town, a young Hindu man refused to participate in the onslaught against Christians, so he was hung by his limbs, gagged, and hacked to death for disloyalty. And each night, when the violence ceased temporarily, Christians hiding within the jungle listened as those same rioters feasted and celebrated until morning, when they would make their way to the next village.

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