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Kandhamal's wonder women fight hate

WFS

By Eliza Parija, Kandhamal, Thu, 23 Apr 2009

"One morning, I heard a knock on the door. When I opened it I saw a group of men holding swords behind them. They started threatening me. They asked me why, despite being the daughter of a Hindu, I was not 'participating' in the attack against Christians," recalls Laxmi Priya Parida, 34, from Bramunigaon, a village located in Orissa's strife-torn Kandhamal district.



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"They also accused my family members of supporting Christians and imposed a fine of Rs 20,000 for our 'offence.'" The attackers didn't stop at that. They threatened to kill Laxmi and burn the house.

Instead of panicking, a composed Laxmi explained to the agitators that her family had exercised a personal choice and that no one could force them to take part in the riots. She also appealed to the men not to spread any more violence. "I knew I was appealing to a group of people who had lost all sense of humanity and rationality. I was scared and so was my family, but my conscience just didn't allow me to bow before a brutal mob," she says, while remembering the time the riots had first broken out in December 2007 in the district. A social worker by profession, Laxmi not only challenged the fundamentalists in her village but also encouraged people from all communities to work towards maintaining peace. Recalling the atmosphere of intense terror at that point, she reveals, "Frightened people fled to the nearby forests where they had nothing to eat and drink for days."

Laxmi is married to a Christian. This sometimes works in her favour and sometimes doesn't. "When I approach people, both the Hindu and Christian community welcome me, but at times the fundamentalists think I am a traitor," she says.

The activist works for an Orissa-based NGO, CPSW (Council of Professional Social Workers) that focuses on securing livelihood for tribals, Dalits and the rural poor. However, ever since the ethno-religious conflict in Kandhamal, she along with her colleagues has been spreading the message of peace through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) covering eight panchayats in the district. The group was also instrumental in averting violence in their village soon after the death of the Hindu religious leader Lakshmananda Saraswati in August 2008 - an incident that sparked the most recent riots. "We knew that some people in the

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village (of a population of nearly 8,000) had been given arms, which if used could have led to a volatile situation. However, we were successful in convincing members from both communities not to indulge in any form of hatred and violence."

Like Laxmi, several women in Kandhamal are making efforts to spread the message of peace and harmony between the different communities. Ratnamala Kanhara, 20, from Pubingia village is one such woman. Although she is very young and has been personally affected in these riots, she has vowed to bring people together. Ratnamala's father was murdered by fundamentalists for protesting the killing of a person during the earlier bout of riots. Her family had to flee to the forests fearing more attacks. But says Laxmi, "I do not harbour any animosity towards any religion even though my father was killed in the name of religion. My mother, two sisters and I want to make the people aware that people shouldn't kill each other in the name of religion."

While participating in a training camp on peace organised by a coalition of NGOs in Kandhamal in December 2008, Ratnamala spoke about her experiences. She was one of the nearly 150 young girls who participated in the peace building measure at Tumudibandha and G Udaygiri blocks in the district.

Despite such initiatives involving both young and old women, and regardless of the heartening stories of individual courage, the involvement of women in peace building measures in Kandhamal has remained largely at the informal level.

The team of Women's International League for Peace & Freedom (WILPF) and Women in Security, Conflict Mitigation and Peace (WISCOMP), which recently visited the district has noted in its report the low priority women are given in conflict resolution. It states that although the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 stresses "the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building" and the need to increase women's "role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution", there are no women on the peace committees in Kandhamal.

"Women peacekeepers are not at the negotiating and decision-making table but mostly at the level of overseeing relief camps. It should be remembered that building peace is not just welfare work, it is educating, cleansing mindsets and protesting whenever there is violence," says Vasantha Kannabiran of the women's resource centre, Asmita. She recently participated in a conference on Women and Peace in Bhubaneswar.

State government sources argue that their peace-keeping efforts take the entire community into account and not just women. According to senior officials, the government supports women SHGs and NGOs that encourage women to participate in the peace process but so far it hasn't considered any special role for women as peacekeepers in the district.

Experts, however, underline the significance of women as peacemakers - not just because of the specific problems they face as the result of conflict but also because they are uniquely placed to educate their community on the values of social harmony. "Several women have been victims of violence during the riots but their suffering has hardly been reported," says Ludhia Diggall, an Anganwadi Worker (AWW) from Tikabali village. She narrates an incident where a women health worker was murdered and her body mutilated. Although women like Ludhia do want to get involved in the peace process, they barely have a platform.

According to Professor Asha Hans, former head of the School of Women's Studies, Utkal University, "Rather than integrating women in the peace building process, they are often used as pawns in conflict situations, as was illustrated

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in Kandhamal." Defying a ban on the gathering of five or more people during the riots, hundreds of women in Kandhamal had demonstrated at a police station and a government office demanding the release of those arrested on charges of rioting.

Nevertheless, in the Kandhamal context, another reason why women have not come out openly is the distrust among them. They remain divided along religious and political lines. The levels of fear, apprehension and mistrust are so high that very few want to speak up voluntarily. Many apprehend that the fragile peace in the area could break down, especially in the context of vote-bank politics.

However, the Independent Tribunal on Kandhamal Violence consisting of eminent jurists and activists has recently noted that there is tremendous potential for peace-building in this area. The Tribunal's report pointed out that in 1994, for instance, during the riots between Dalit Christians and Tribal Adivasis mainly as a result of conflict over economic resources like land, women from different tribes and groups played a leadership role in bringing about social harmony.

This time, unfortunately, things are different. They have largely been kept out of peace-building initiatives.

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