

Religious Conversion and Kandhamal Riots: Examining the Gap between Media Portrayal and Local Realities

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Abstract: *This paper examines the role of mass media in reporting the Kandhamal riots, analysing how narratives frequently prioritised sensationalised violence and the politics of conversion over the actual, localised context of religious transformation. By investigating news articles, electronic media clippings, online reports, and fact-finding missions, this study critiques the dominant media framing. Furthermore, based on the findings of intensive fieldwork and interviews with converts (conducted by the author during his PhD days), this paper, using content analysis as a method of data collection and interpretation, re-examines the position of the Sangh Parivar regarding religious conversion in Kandhamal, offering a critical analysis of the dichotomy between media representation and ground realities.*

Keywords: Christian Missionaries, Conversion, Kandhamal, Media, Riots, Sangha Parivar

On 23 August 2008 in the Kandhamal district of Odisha, Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati, a prominent leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was murdered by unidentified gunmen. While initial investigations and police reports suggested the involvement of Maoist insurgents, several Hindu organisations implicated local Christian missionaries and members of the Pana caste in the killings. This accusation triggered widespread, intense riots, primarily between the indigenous Kandha tribe (largely Hindu) and the Christian minority within the Pana caste group. The underlying causes of the conflict are multifaceted, encompassing deep-seated sociopolitical, religious, and ethnic tensions. Key factors included disputes over land ownership, competition for socioeconomic resources, and disagreements regarding the status of converted Christians within the tribal community. Violence was further exacerbated by a history of religious tensions and, in some cases, the role of local political dynamics. Without fully addressing these complex, underlying issues, media reports at the time using headlines such as ‘Kandhamal is Burning’, ‘Church Torched in Kandhamal’, and ‘Kandhamal is Simmering Again’ often simplified the conflict into a straightforward communal clash, ignoring the broader socio-economic dimensions and underlying tensions within the region. This paper critiques mass media’s role in reporting the Kandhamal riots, arguing that narratives often favored sensationalized violence and the politics of conversion over the localized context of religious transformation. By analysing news articles, electronic media, and fact-finding reports, this study exposes the flaws in dominant media framing. It further bridges the gap between representation and reality by integrating content analysis of news and articles on Kandhamal riot clippings of electronic media on the Internet and reports of fact-finding groups with the author’s intensive fieldwork and interviews with converts. Ultimately, this paper re-examines the Sangh Parivar’s stance on conversion to highlight the sharp dichotomy between media portrayals and ground-level truths.

Mainstream media reports regarding the Kandhamal riots during 2007-08 predominantly characterize the events as overtly communal, stemming from a rise in religious intolerance. Despite attempts to distinguish between international, national, and local media both print and electronic regarding the nature and cause of the riots, all outlets established a consistent narrative. (Mishra, 2008) This consensus was contested by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which sought to provide an alternative interpretation within the national and local media spheres. According to a report issued by the Sangh Parivar on January 3, 2008.

“Many media outlets, mostly national and international, without a reality check, went overdrive to paint a wrong picture about the entire sequence of events. Very few investigated the reasons for the violence, putting the blame squarely on Hindus. Only the burning of churches and prayer houses was reported, not the lethal attack on the Hindu seer Laxmanananda Saraswati, which was found in the newspapers. The death of a Hindu, which was the immediate provocation for the communal clash, was not properly highlighted. Even Maoists joining hands with Christians in attacking tribals was ignored by the international and national media”.

The report mentioned above contended that vernacular media provided a more accurate representation of the regional situation by identifying Christian communities as the conflict’s primary instigators. This perspective asserts that Christian groups spearheaded the violence, targeting Hindu settlements and law enforcement agencies, while allegedly collaborating with Maoist factions against the Kandha tribes. Conversely, these claims primarily propagated by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have been dismissed as ideologically motivated and unsubstantiated. Despite attempts to characterize local media outlets as partisan supporters of the Sangh Parivar, the consensus among regional newspapers and television networks indicated that Christians were the primary victims of the unrest, suffering disproportionately as a result of RSS-driven identity politics. The following excerpts from local newspapers substantiate this perspective. (ibid.)

The Samaj on December 30, 2007, says that

‘Brahmanigaon and Daringbadi remain gripped by tension, characterised by profound mutual distrust. The escalation of hostilities has resulted in violent clashes and widespread arson; however, culpability cannot be attributed to any one community. Reports indicate that minority communities bear the brunt of violence perpetrated by the majority. Despite receiving prior intelligence reports, the administration failed to implement the necessary preventive measures, facilitating the spread of riots to adjacent regions. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) reportedly played a significant role in Brahmanigaon, the most severely affected village, while Christian majorities were similarly involved in the disturbances in Daringbadi. Following a preliminary investigation, The Samaj reported that both the VHP and the district’s controversial Collector, Bhabagrahi Mohapatra, were primarily responsible for the communal riots. While the VHP maintains that the violence was a reaction to an alleged attack on their leader, Swami Laxmananda, these claims have been disputed by various sources. Evidence suggests that the VHP initiated hostilities in Brahmanigaon’ (ibid.).

An analysis of media coverage from prominent Odia television channels (ETV, OTV, and Doordarshan) and local dailies suggests that the underlying causes of the Kandhamal riots were not subjected to rigorous and in-depth analysis. While the reports implicated the Sangh Parivar, they simultaneously accused the Christian community of inciting conflict through conversions, revealing a profound dissonance in the journalists’ perspectives. A critical examination of the ‘Postmortem’ series published by The Samaj (December 30, 31, 2007,

and January 1, 2008) regarding the 2007 Kandhamal riot highlights significant contradictions and misleading narratives. The publication shifted culpability across its reports, blaming the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) in the first, Christians in the second, and Naxals in the third, indicating a lack of a definitive position. Notably, these extensive articles, exceeding 1,500 words, lacked testimonies from affected individuals and failed to incorporate the perspectives or reactions of the minority community. (ibid.)

Although the mass media have the tools to expose the conspiracy behind communal violence and hold the responsibility to mitigate it, journalists often rely on imaginative narratives to describe the plight of the victims. This reliance allowed the media to focus on conversions attributed to Christian missionaries while conveniently ignoring the reconversion efforts (Ghar Wapsi) driven by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Furthermore, if media outlets deemed religious conversion a pertinent issue, their long-term silence regarding the demographic growth of Christianity in Kandhamal—increasing from approximately 19,000 in 1961 to 90,000 in 1992, and reaching 117,000 in 2001—appears paradoxical. Consequently, reliance on conjecture rather than investigation prevented the media from uncovering the actual reasons behind the specific, formal cases of conversion to Christianity in the region. (Bauman, 2020)

Based on media reports and academic analyses of the 2007–2008 Kandhamal violence, the media narrative often emphasises the assassination of Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati and the underlying land disputes between Kandhas and Panas as primary drivers, frequently overshadowing broader sociological issues. Here are some excerpts from media reports and local newspapers:

Following the alleged attack in 2007, eighty-two-year-old Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati made a statement from the Daringbari Health Centre, in the presence of police and journalists, questioning, “There is no use burning tires on the road. Tell me, how many Christian houses have you burned? There will be no peace without a revolution. Narendra Modi brought about revolution in Gujarat. That is why peace is there.” Surprisingly, this statement received more prominence in national media than in the local press. The reason for this is evident: local media outlets aimed to avoid displeasing the Swami and the Hindu majority readership. The proprietors of Odia dailies, prioritizing profit over ethical journalism, preferred indifference to neutrality in this sensitive situation. While Kandhamal was experiencing unrest, The Samaj published a report based on an interview with Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, identifying religious conversion as the root of the turmoil. This report suggests that both the government and missionaries involved in conversions were responsible for the situation. As a leading figure of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati stated that Hindus were merely defending themselves. The tone and content of this report likely resonated with Hindu fundamentalists. Local media outlets reportedly made efforts to portray Laxmanananda Saraswati as a significant figure in Hinduism. A publication identified as the mouthpiece of the Sangh Parivar, The Organiser, lauded him, stating that his long period of religious practice at Chakapad had fostered a sense of Hindutva among the

Adivasi people and distanced them from Christian missionary influence. Media coverage at the time did not feature questioning of Laxmanananda; instead, he was shown respect. While showing respect to a religious figure is not inherently an issue, this approach raises considerations regarding critical and impartial journalism during the events. (Mishra, 2008) But Laxmanananda's interventionist approach to prevent conversion through 'gharwapsi' (reconversion) processes served to polarise the social fabric of Kandhamal. His activities, while intended to restore traditional belief systems, contributed to intensifying religious intolerance and increasing inter-community tensions in the region.

On 10 January 2008 Sambad published an editorial by Banabihari Panda, the former Director General of Police. While editorial essays are typically expected to provide evidence-based analyses, this piece functioned primarily as a compilation of unverified reports and rumors. Panda wrote:

'The subsequent event was the assault on Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati. Newspaper reports indicated that approximately 200 individuals armed with sticks and spears intercepted his vehicle and attacked him. This incident is regarded as the primary catalyst for the Kandhamal riots; many observers believe the violence would not have escalated so rapidly had this attack not occurred. Consequently, perpetrators must be prosecuted. While the burning of churches sacred spaces dedicated to worship is a condemnable act for which the guilty must be punished, five temples were also destroyed. Such acts of desecration against any religious structure are unpardonable, and all miscreants involved should face equal legal consequences.' (ibid.)

An investigative piece by Tehelka in January 2008 identified Swami Laxmanananda as a member of the Dhobi (washerman) caste, a background typically kept private under the Hindu tradition of sanyasa. After establishing the Chakapad ashram in 1969, he dedicated his life to curbing Christian expansion in Kandhamal. (Kanungo, 2008) While observers noted that his rhetoric often intensified local communal friction, he remained a highly influential and widely praised figure within the regional press.

According to a report in Dharitri on 10 July 2008 communal tension resurfaced in the Kandhamal district's Tumudibandha Block following the reported slaughter of a cow, with further volatility surrounding an attack on a local Baba in Jalespeta who opposed the incident. The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) subsequently initiated a, at the time, peaceful district-wide bandh (strike) to protest these developments.

In its article, 'Behind the Unrest of the Kandhamal' on 11 July 2008 The Sambad wrote:

'The appropriation of Adivasi land is a major, long-standing cause of conflict in Kandhamal. For years, deceptive methods have been used to seize Adivasi lands, leading to their displacement and leaving them feeling like refugees in their own homeland. Although regulations specifically Regulation II of 1956 (The Odisha Scheduled Areas Transfer of Immovable Property (by Scheduled

Tribes) Regulation, 1956) stipulate that non-Adivasis cannot purchase land from Adivasis, and special courts under the Sub-Collectors of Phulbani and Baliguda were created to fast-track these cases, many instances of illegal land appropriation remain pending. Furthermore, even when Adivasis win their cases, they often struggle to regain possession of their land due to a lack of support from the administration and police. As there is a severe shortage of residential and cultivable land in Kandhamal, the inhabitants are facing immense hardship. Securing their rightful land for housing and cultivation would resolve many problems. Additionally, the issue of 'loss of caste' is another root cause of unrest in the region'. (Mishra, 2008)

Such reports have fostered the inaccurate perception that the conflict is solely caste-related, rather than rooted in communal sentiment, deliberately drawing a divisive line between the Paan and Kandha communities. In this district, 17% of the population belongs to Dalit communities, with 90% identifying as Christian and 80% being landless. Notably, most of the district's journalists belong to a third demographic section; they are not indigenous to the area but are settlers from other districts who have acquired land from the Adivasis. Furthermore, land ownership in Kandhamal is peculiar: the government controls 88% of the land (comprising 71% of the reserved forest and 17% of the unreserved forest), leaving only 12% under individual ownership. Those who migrated to and settled in Kandhamal disproportionately benefited from this 12%. Consequently, both Adivasis and Dalits are victims of exploitation, with their lands frequently expropriated. Local media, largely controlled by upper-caste and higher-class interests, have neglected this, failing to accurately portray the lives of tribals and Dalits. Instead, these media outlets have frequently been used by various political parties to advance their agendas.

The discourse surrounding the communal riots in Kandhamal has often failed to provide a comprehensive or objective analysis of the situation, particularly regarding the role of religious conversion. Mainstream media narratives have frequently linked conversion solely to the influence of Christian missionaries, interpreting it as the primary catalyst for Hindutva forces' actions without in-depth research into the local dynamics. Furthermore, media discourse has implicitly suggested that the conversion of Dalits and Tribals in Kandhamal lacks free will as if they were completely subjugated by the knowledge or persuasion of the propagators. In reality, some conversion experiences suggest that communalism itself has become a driver of conversion. Some conversions of Dalits (specifically the Pana community) in Kandhamal have been accelerated by the entrenched ethnic tensions between the Kandhas and the Panas. Communal violence between Hindus and Christians provided a pretext for the Kandha tribe to attack the Hindu Panas ethnically, operating under a false, simplified propaganda that equated Panas with Christianity and Kandhas with Hinduism. The silence of mainstream Hindu society during these attacks reportedly hurt the sentiments of Hindu Panas, forcing many to convert to Christianity. These individuals publicly declared their allegiance to Christianity, vowing never to return to Hinduism, thereby turning a social conflict into a religious one. On the other hand, regarding the conversion of tribals

(Kandhas) to Christianity, it is often the first generation that suffers significant social alienation and hardship before the second generation converts. In many instances, this acute suffering became the cause of conversion for the first generation, who retrospectively admitted that they felt compelled to convert rather than exercise free will. After joining the Christian faith, some Panas have indicated that they are content, citing that they are no longer being exploited by upper-caste Hindus who previously utilised them for vested interests. Overall, one might argue that the perceived injustices within Hinduism served as a primary catalyst for some Dalit conversions to Christianity in Kandhamal, while tribal conversions to Christianity have precipitated significant socio-political issues. First, the perceived inadequacy of traditional Hindu practices in providing moral or spiritual solace has driven conversion; in Kandhamal, traditional tantra and mantra rituals are often considered integral to local Hinduism, yet the commercialisation of these practices by fraudulent practitioners has led to widespread exploitation, prompting a shift away from the faith. Second, the pursuit of a better life, driven by the perceived inadequacy of government development initiatives compared to the success of missionary-led social and civilising missions, has facilitated conversion, with residents increasingly opting for Christianity over demanding state action. Finally, instances of inter-religious romance, specifically involving a non-Dalit Hindu boy and a Dalit Christian girl, often lead to the social ostracization of the couple, with subsequent conversion occurring as the boy adopts his wife's faith, illustrating how rigid caste-based structures within local Hindu or Kandha culture can ironically drive conversion. (Mishra, 2015)

Several underlying causes of religious conversion in Kandhamal were systematically overlooked by the mainstream media during the 2008 riots discourse. A significant failure of the media was its inability to provide a nuanced analysis of actual religious conversion trends, which inadvertently provided the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) with the opportunity to mischaracterize all conversions as coerced conversions. Furthermore, media reporting frequently romanticises violence, emphasising sensationalism over a profound analysis of the root causes. A glaring ethical lapse was the lack of prominence given to the voices of tortured, converted Christian victims. Conversely, the narratives and statements of Hindutva fundamentalist organisations were covered in great detail, while the testimonies of those directly affected by the violence were largely ignored. It is profoundly regrettable that the suffering of the victims failed to elicit a compassionate, empathetic, and factual presentation from many journalists, who often reported according to subjective whims rather than objective reality. Editorial oversight regarding these lapses was minimal in this study. (Mishra, 2008).

Another contentious aspect was the unsubstantiated narrative regarding the involvement of Naxalite elements in movements against industrialisation and globalisation. There is no concrete evidence linking Naxalites to religious or communal conflicts; however, the media frequently pursued this narrative to unjustly implicate voluntary organisations and secular intellectuals. Furthermore, much of the reportage was driven by political

compulsions rather than adherence to journalistic ethics, with many newspapers reflecting specific party ideologies or agendas. This approach favored political expediency over the imperative to uphold high standards of humanitarianism, creating a stigma upon the morality of the local press. Ultimately, the silence of the media regarding the socioeconomic context of the growth of Christianity in Kandhamal was a significant contributing factor to the communal tensions. This media apathy provided a licence to extremist forces to manipulate the public imagination, thereby weakening the foundations of Indian secularism and, arguably, rendering it crony.

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