

In memory of Kerala

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Stacey, my friend from Dayton, Ohio, in the United States, called me up on the night of 14 January. She was frantic. Somewhere in India, she said, her uncle had been stabbed. In my home city of Trivandrum, capital of the south Indian state of Kerala, I had just watched on TV the news of an American missionary [1] who was attacked by Hindu militants of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS). While I watched the news it did not occur to me that I could be connected directly, in any way, to the incident. As it turned out, Joseph Cooper, the Protestant missionary who was assaulted by Hindu fanatics was Stacey's uncle.

Cooper had come to Kerala to speak at the Koppam Protestant Convention organised by the Puliyaam Friends Bible Church, near Trivandrum. He and his fellow church members were waylaid by the armed gang while they were being escorted back to their vehicles from the convention venue at around 9.45 pm.

Seven other persons, including a preacher and his family accompanying Cooper, were also injured in the attack. Cooper sustained a deep cut on his right palm. The assailants first exploded a cracker to create panic, then attacked with short sticks, swords and crowbars.

It was my moment of shame. Stacey had asked me whether it would be safe for her uncle to travel in Kerala. She also had heard about the state-sponsored pogrom in Gujarat [2], where around 2000 Muslims were murdered by Hindu fanatics, in February 2002. I was proud of the secular tradition of my state, its hospitality and peace-loving people. I believed that nothing of the sort that happened in Gujarat [3] would ever happen in my state. In that moment of truth I was proved wrong. The Kerala I had looked on with wonderment as a child, and grew up into as a young man proud of its traditions, is no more.

The blindness of intellectuals

My shock deepened with the events of subsequent days. The public debate took a disturbing turn with the blame being put on the missionary himself. The Vishwa Hindu Parishat (VHP, the World Hindu Council) demanded Cooper's arrest for making 'communally inflammatory' speeches that were 'insulting to the practitioners of the Hindu faith'.

The chief minister of Kerala, A. K. Antony [4], himself a Christian and a member of the Indian National Congress, refused to name RSS as the assailants, even though the police had arrested several RSS functionaries [5]. Was he thinking of the votes he might lose in the next elections if he angered the Hindu fundamentalists?

In another move, in its way as shocking as the first attack, Cooper was asked by the Kerala government – a coalition led by the Congress party which proclaims to uphold secularism – to leave the country for violating his visa provisions. The allegation is that he preached on a tourist visa, even though this is how foreign religious leaders (including Hindus themselves) invariably

enter the country to do public and missionary work, and Hindu Godmen visit western countries. The police were not even prepared to check with the doctors of the Kerala Institute of Medical Sciences where Cooper was admitted whether he was in a proper condition to take the long flight back to the US. In the end, he had to leave the country with one of his hands still bandaged.

Condemnation of the attack on Joseph Cooper and his companions came from the usual quarters: namely, religious leaders of the minority communities, the (communist-party-led) Left Democratic Front coalition, and a few activists and intellectuals. But it was deeply shocking to see most intellectuals, as well as a majority of the Kerala general public, turning a blind eye to this shameful attack.

While talking to people belonging to the Hindu religion, many of them well educated, I found that most of them either echoed the propaganda of the Sangh Parivar (Hindu fundamentalist organisations [6], of which the ruling Bharatiya Janatiya Party in Delhi is the political wing). Or else they maintained a studied silence.

One thing I now know for sure: the social fabric of Kerala is torn forever.

The intolerance of fundamentalists

This pattern of blaming the victim and justifying the crime in the name of 'hurt sentiments' is repeating itself with a disturbing frequency in India.

In 1998, VHP activists, Australian missionary Graham Staines [7] and his two children, were burnt alive as they slept in their car by in the state of Orissa; this was explained as a reaction to Staines' attempts to convert local people to Christianity. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) lodged a deposition in the Supreme Court recently that they had no evidence that Staines was trying to convert the leprosy patients among whom he was working.

In October 2002, five Dalit (lower-caste Hindu) youths were hacked to death by VHP activists in a village in Haryana state [8] for skinning a dead cow; Giriraj Kishore, leader of the VHP, justified the killing by saying that the cow was more valuable than a human being, an animal sacred to Hindus.

It may seem surprising to see that the same strategy is working in Kerala, a state which has made giant strides in the field of literacy and with a strong tradition of social reforms. Kerala [9] has 90% literacy and the presence of media is very strong here. Newspapers reach almost 60% of homes, television 50% and radio 90%. Kerala boasts of electing the first-ever communist government in the world, and the communist party [10] is still a strong presence in its politics. Kerala also had social reformers such as Sree Narayana Guru [11], who said, 'One religion, One Caste and One God for humanity'.

Even Christianity is not a new entrant in Kerala history. The Kerala Syrian Christians pay allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch, Supreme Head of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church. The Christian tradition is that Apostle St Thomas came to Kerala in AD52 and established churches here. When the Portuguese, the first colonisers, arrived with evangelical zeal they were surprised to see Christians here. But the local Christians had not heard of the Pope! Later, a faction of the Syrian Christians, under the influence of the Portuguese, declared allegiance to the Pope and accepted Roman Catholicism.

During the course of history many people accepted Christianity. But most of these were from the Dalits who were at the margins of Hinduism. These 'untouchables' were not even allowed entry

into Hindu temples. Many Dalits in many parts of India still desert Hinduism to embrace Islam or Buddhism, which are more egalitarian in their relationship to fellow religionists. This is what angers Hindu fundamentalists. Instead of trying to redress the centuries-old evil of 'untouchability', and associated intolerance of people belonging to the lower castes, Hindu fundamentalists attack those religions to which the Dalits turn for self-respect and social acceptability.

Kerala also has a long tradition of welcoming foreign missionaries and allowing them to address religious gatherings. The families of the Dalit colony where Joseph Cooper was preaching had accepted Christianity decades ago. Indeed, the Indian constitution [12] gives every citizen the right to practise and propagate the religion they choose. What happened in the Puliyam colony was not anything illegal, but only a reflection of the religious intolerance that is spreading across India.

Darkness and silence

Hindu fundamentalism is slowly entrenching itself in Kerala society, one of the places worst hit by the onslaught of globalisation [13]. The economy is in a shambles. The state coffers are empty. The government is signing every piece of paper put forward by the Asian Development Bank [14], a subsidiary of the World Bank, to gain a paltry loan, knowing full well that it will surely destroy the already fragile social security system. Unemployment is three times the national average. Almost six million youths out of a population of 30 million are jobless.

Agriculture, the mainstay of the state's economy has collapsed. Prices have plummeted and farmers are committing suicides. Public sector industries are being sold off to private companies at low prices by the government. Traditional industries such as coir [15] and handloom weaving have collapsed. The government is trying to sell off natural resources such as river water to multinationals such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi, even in places where the population faces severe water shortages [16].

This is fertile ground for the growth of religious fundamentalism. The youths are captivated by the definition of the 'other' by the Sangh Parivar. Kerala has 3,500 RSS shakhas (military training centres, where youths are given training drills using crowbars and small weapons, and are also ideologically indoctrinated).

On the intellectual and cultural front too, the Sangh Parivar has won a foothold. They own two newspapers – of which one called loudly for the arrest of Joseph Cooper. They are presenting an alluring face towards intellectuals with a view to winning them over, while those who do not toe the line are threatened. Recently, writers Kamala Das [17] (now Kamala Suraiyya, as she recently converted to Islam), Paul Zacharia and educationalist and historian Professor K.N. Panikker were issued with death threats, while most of their fellow writers and intellectuals looked the other way.

What happened to Joseph Cooper is not an isolated incident. It is only the beginning of a well-orchestrated plan hatched by the Sangh Parivar. It is with sadness and fear that I am writing this article. Sadness for the death of my homeland as I knew it and wanted it to continue; fear for the darkness and silence that is increasing with each passing day.

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