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Outside Influences Transform Ethnic Rivalry into Religious Conflict

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As widely reported, India experienced waves of attacks on Christians by Hindu conservatives during August and September. The Catholic Bishops Conference of India estimates that 96 churches, 14 schools and more than 4,000 Christian family homes were destroyed; 40,000 Christians became refugees. Churches around the world prayed for their "persecuted brothers and sisters."

The violence began Aug. 23 in the Kandhamal region of Orissa province, following the assassination of the Hindu leader Swami Lakshamananda Sarswati. Kandhamal's Hindu population blamed the violent murder on the Christian community and went on the rampage, attacking Christians and their property, threatening murder and sometimes carrying it out. The western Christian world has reacted with outrage and indignation to what they see as unprovoked religious violence.

Matters are not so simple, however. Although couched in religious terms, this violence is only the most recent event in a centuries' old competition by two distinct groups, both extremely poor. The first, the Hindu Kandha tribe, constitutes 60 percent of Kandhamal's population. The second, the Panas, comprise 17 percent of the population, and historically have belonged to the Untouchable caste at the bottom of the Hindu social hierarchy. Both groups are farmer-gatherers, supplementing subsistence farming by collecting fruits, nuts and spices growing in the surrounding forest.

Such extreme poverty leaves these groups needing outside assistance for survival. And the outsiders providing that assistance have affected the rivalries between the Kandhas and the Panas.

In the 19th century, Great Britain ruled India. The English maintained their control over the country by pitting different social and religious groups against each other. In Kandhamal, they used the Panas to govern the Kandhas; they even appointed Panas as (hated) tax collectors. In return, the Panas gained economic resources, education, and opportunities from the British, and were exposed to the colonialists' Christian religion. Some converted.

After 1947, independent India outlawed the caste system. Recognizing the poverty of lower castes and tribes across India, the government gave some members of them access to free education and higher-paying jobs to help them escape from poverty. This national quota system helped some escape Kandhamal, but the majority of both groups remained impoverished.

The Panas' familiarity with Christianity allowed outside missionaries to come into the area and open hospitals,

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schools, vocational training centers and churches. Many Panas converted to Christianity.

Another outside provider entered the area in the 1960s, when Swami Lakshamananda came to Kandhamal as the leader of the national Hindu movement, the VHP. A religious leader, he promoted Hinduism among the Kandha tribe, and helped them build hospitals, schools, and other social welfare agencies. He became highly revered among the Kandhas for his work.

When the Hindu National Party (BJP) came to power in the 1990s, more resources began to flow into the province. Some were used for social agencies, but much of it was used to promote a Hindu allegiance which called for all Indians to return to and revitalize their own Hindu roots.

The pressure this put upon the Panas resulted in the opposite reaction. They converted to Christianity in greater numbers, so that by 2001 more than a million Panas were Christian, some 80 percent of them. In response, the Kandha promotion of Hindu values became more militant.

Yet another outside force entered the scene. By 2001, the Indian government's attempts to eradicate nearby Maoist rebels drove them into Orissa. Many Pana youths saw the Maoists as a way to gain an edge on the Kandhas, so they joined the rebels, receiving weapons and training. After a Christmas celebration resulted in a clash with Hindus last year, these Pana youths attacked a Kandha village and set fire to 120 houses, that is, Hindu houses.

When the Swami was murdered last August, the Maoist guerrillas claimed responsibility. But the involvement of Pana young men with the Maoists made it clear, to the Hindu leaders at least, that the Christians were responsible. Hence the Kandhas targeted the Christians, which is essentially the same as saying, they targeted the Pana.

So what had been local tribal-caste rivalries for centuries acquired the character of a religious conflict. The 19th-century British Christians used the Panas in their strategy for governing the region and opened the way for their conversion to Christianity. This was matched, starting in the 1960s, with an aggressive Hinduization campaign among the Kandhas, which they then attempted to spread to the Panas. When this campaign simply accelerated Pana conversions, the strident rhetoric on both sides led to open violence, destruction of property and even death.