

# Weeping Salandi

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A PUCL Report on Communal Violence in  
Bhadrak, Odisha

June, 2017

## Introduction

On 6<sup>th</sup> of April, 2017, a day after Ramnavmi celebrations, the evening bulletins of electronic media broke the news of communal tension in the municipal town of Bhadrak, which has a sizeable Muslim population. The next day, the print media carried the news. The trigger for the violence was stated to be some derogatory texts about Ram and Sita that had allegedly been posted by a Muslim boy in the social media on 5<sup>th</sup> of April. A section of Hindu youths from Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and Bajrang Dal went to the Town Police Station to lodge a complaint against the alleged culprit, and demanded his immediate arrest. The police reportedly wanted three days' time to apprehend the culprit as the matter involved a cyber crime. However, in the same afternoon, some Hindu youths blocked the National Highway (NH) 45 at Bant Chhak, near the Bus Stand, by burning tyres. Subsequently, a few shops were damaged and burnt in that area. Following this, the administration imposed Section 144 in the town, and convened a peace meeting on the afternoon of the 7<sup>th</sup> of April. However, arson and looting began in some parts of the town just after the peace meeting ended, by 4.30 p.m. The administration clamped curfew around 9 p.m.

Though Bhadrak town has a long history of syncretic traditions, it also has a history of communal violence. The town had experienced major communal violence in 1991. That was in the backdrop of the nationwide communal build-up centered on the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. This time round, the BJP-led government in power at the centre has created an atmosphere of growing intolerance and communal tensions in many parts of the country. Added to this, the recent landslide electoral victory of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh (with a well known proponent of Hindutva becoming the chief minister) has greatly emboldened the Hindutva forces, creating a sense of anxiety among the minorities. It had its effect on this year's Ramnavmi celebrations at Bhadrak too. Against this backdrop, the communal violence broke out in the town.

A team from PUCL, Odisha visited Bhadrak in three phases to understand the situation on the ground, when the situation turned relatively normal, and day-time curfew was relaxed. The team met community leaders of the town, the riot affected people, members of the Peace Committee, noted personalities of the town, activists of the Rashtriya Yuva Sangathan, Superintendent of Police of the District and the Tehsildar of Bhadrak. This report is prepared on the basis of these interactions. It also makes use of newspaper reports and other available documents.

## **Bhadrak Town: A Brief Profile**

Situated on the banks of the river Salandi, various parts of the present Bhadrak municipal town have grown in phases. The river flows from west to east in the municipal area, marking the boundary between Old and New Bhadrak. When Bhadrak became a *sarkar (a unit of administration and revenue)* during Mughal rule, the present Puruna Bazaar and Banka Bazaar area of the Municipality became the headquarters of the Sarkar, and developed into an urban area. With this development, Muslim settlements grew in this area. Various occupational groups also began to reside in the periphery to cater to the Mughal establishment. Till today, this has been a Muslim dominated area sprinkled with Hindu households and their small businesses. It is so integrated, that it's difficult to distinguish one from the other.

With the development of the Chandbali Port in later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, trade and commerce between Bengal and Odisha grew. This led to the growth of inland trade via Salandi and other creeks and channels. As a result, Bhadrak developed into a commercial hub, especially the Chandan Bazaar area. Traders from various parts of the country began to settle here. In course of time, it grew as one of the biggest trading centres in Odisha, largely dominated by Marwaris.

S.L. Maddox in the Final Report on the Survey and Settlement of the Province of Orissa (1890-1900) has this to say on Bhadrak: "The town (Bhadrak) contains two quarters, the Nayabazar on the right bank of the Salandi and the Purunabazaar on the left. The former is situated near the Trunk Road and contains numerous lodging houses for travellers, for suitors in the courts and for the clerks and mohuris in Government employment. Provisions are the chief commodities sold in this bazaar, though a short time ago some Bengali merchants opened shops for the sale of tobacco and piece goods.

"The real centre of trade is, however, the Puranabazar, where Musalman element is strongest. The Mahajans, zamindars and merchants reside here, and Messrs Turner Morrison and Company have a store for the sale of Liverpool salt and petroleum."

After introduction of the Calcutta-Waltair Railway in 1900-1901, a railway station at Charampa was set up. This led to the growth of trade and commerce in Charampa and in turn, it developed into an urban area. In terms of population, it is a Hindu majority area, with a small Muslim community living in some pockets.

During the colonial period, the headquarters were shifted from the Puruna Bazaar and the town expanded in the south-western direction i.e., the present Kachery Bazaar and Nua Bazaar. In the reports of the 1901 Census, Bhadrak has been shown as an urban centre, with a population of only 18, 518. When it became the headquarters of the sub-division in the year 1927, governmental offices were set up and residences of government officials developed in this area. The population of the town remained stable within 18,000 to 19, 000 from 1901-1951.

With the expansion of governmental activities in the post-independent period, this area further expanded. In the year 1960, Bhadrak town was declared as a Notified Area Council (NAC), and in the year 1988, the town became a municipality. In 1993 Bhadrak became a separate district with the eponymous town as its headquarters. People from other parts of the district came to Bhadrak in search of jobs and business opportunities and settled here. With the widening of the National Highway passing through the town in the early 2000s, Bant chhak area developed into a commercial area and shops for branded items opened up here. Gradually, it got incorporated into the Kacheri Bazaar area.

This part of the town is marked by the dominance of the Hindu settlement with businesses under the control of Muslims. Trading activities around meat, fish, eggs, vegetables, fruits, leather goods etc. are entirely owned by Muslims. In fact, many Muslim shops are housed in properties taken on a rental basis from Hindus. All these developments brought about changes in the demographic composition and businesses of the town. The population of the town was 25,285 in 1961, 40,487 in 1971, 60,600 in 1981, 76,435 in 1991, 92,515 in 2001 and 1,21,338 in 2011, out of which Hindus constitute 59.72% and Muslims 39.56%.

What follows from the above is that, both the communities have, historically, intermingled with each other in terms of human settlements and businesses. This has led to the development of a shared culture in the town, and has found its expressions in many ways and forms in the day-to-day life of the

people. However, this culture has been disturbed periodically, against the backdrop of political developments at the national level, triggered by petty local events. As a result, the town has seen major communal clashes in 1946, 1991, and now again in 2017. Even then, majority of the people have stood by each other at the time of these crises, and have shown exemplary courage and solidarity. A brief description of stories of communal harmony and that of violence is presented in the following Section.

## **Bhadrak: Stories of inter-religious harmony and communal violence**

### Syncretic Culture of Bhadrak

*Mogul Tamasa*, a humorous satire on the Afghan rulers, was composed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Bansiballav Goswami. This dance-drama uses homely Urdu, Parsi, Hindi, Bangla and Odia, and reflects the syncretic cultural tradition of Bhadrak. It is traditionally staged in front of Shiva temples during Chaitra Sankranti (in the month of March). People of all communities act and enjoy the drama. This performative tradition is still alive and is being performed not only in Bhadrak, but also in other parts of the state and the country. A prominent leader of the Hindu Surakshya Samiti (a local organisation from Bhadrak purportedly protecting the interests of Hindus) proudly told us 'you would be surprised to know that I still take part in the Mughal Tamasha. My father used to do so earlier'.

*Dhusa-Pehelwan Kabristan* is a burial ground of one 17<sup>th</sup> Century Muslim Fakir/ Sadhu and his Hindu disciple Dhusa Sethi, located at Dhanatola, on the banks of Salandi. The Fakir is said to be a pehelwan. There is a popular saying that one day some youth came to the Fakir, and expressed their desire to become his disciples. The Fakir said that he would accept only those as his disciples, who could lift his wet clothes from the River Salandi. Many tried but failed. Only Dhusha Sethi, a 'low' caste dhobi could do it, and became his first disciple. Even today, thousands of Hindus and Muslims congregate there on Urs to pay homage and receive the blessings of the Saint and his disciple.

*Sadabarta Matha* is a 16<sup>th</sup> century monastery of the Ramanuja sect located opposite of Dhusa-Pehelwan Kabristan. It is a great centre for inter-religious discussions. Irrespective of caste, community and religion, poor people are served free meals and are provided healthcare. There is an interesting story about the Math. When Mr. Mohammed Hanif was the deputy speaker of the Odisha Legislative Assembly, some Muslims went to him to complain that a tree of the Sadabarta Matha has obstructed the road, so that the Tazia procession could not proceed. He was requested to instruct the mahanta of the Math to remove the tree. But Mr. Hanif did not agree to this suggestion. The news reached the Mahanta. When the Tazia procession reached his Math, he and his associates pulled the tree out of the road with a rope, and the procession passed smoothly. This was the way people of Bhadrak used to respect each others' religious traditions.

*Inter-community celebration of festivals:* On many occasions people of both the communities participate in each others' festivals. During the Muslim festival of Eid, Hindus are invited by Muslim families. Apart from family level celebrations, Eid is also an occasion which is celebrated on a larger social level with both the communities participating. On the occasion of Ganesh puja of Hindu Gods *Budha* (old) Ganesh and *Toka* (young) Ganesh, people of both the communities participate. Dining together is a part of all these festivals. Similarly, Diwali is observed by both the communities. In fact, Hanif Club, one of the active youth clubs of Puruna Bazaar, celebrates Diwali in a big way (without fire crackers though!) as this is also the club's Foundation Day.

### *Chauda Mahalla*

Besides these great centres of communal amity, the social institution of *Chauda Mahallas* has played an important role in maintaining harmony amongst the communities. The *Chauda Mahalls* (it has been renamed as *Bhadrak Muslim Jamat*, though in common use it retains its old name of *Chauda Mohallas*) is an old institution of the Muslim community. This is basically a federation of mohalla-level organisations and their leaders. The *Chauda Mahalla* settles disputes within the community. It also acts as an interface between the Muslim community with other social groups and the administration.

Since 1995, the *Chauda Mahalla* has been arranging volunteers, and stations them at Muslim settlements, to oversee the passing off of the Ram Navami procession peacefully. Janab Abdul Bari, the president of the *chauda mohalla* is instrumental behind a number of peace initiatives. One such initiative is preparing a list of people with rare blood groups, with their addresses and phone numbers, and submitting the list to the district hospital so that people can take the help of those donors in times of crises. It would strengthen human bonding, as he asks, 'If a Musalman has received blood from a Hindu and vice versa, will they ever forget this and fight with each other?' He was awarded, in 2013, the national *sadbhavna* award for his exemplary work on peace building. However, recently the social and moral influence of the *Chauda Mahala*, especially over the youth, seems to be on the decline.

### A brief outline of communal violence in Bhadrak

#### *Communal clash of 1946*

During the 1940s, when the Muslim League's demand for a separate Muslim state became strident, its reverberations were heard in Bhadrak. The League supporters organised rallies and processions almost on a weekly basis in the town, and shouted slogans like '*Muslim League Zindabad*' and '*Nehin mante Hindustan, Larke Lenge Pakistan*'. Against this charged political atmosphere, communal tension brewed in the town on 24<sup>th</sup> of July, 1946. A crowd of Muslims obstructed the passage of a Hindu religious procession at Kadambeda, and the police opened fire. It resulted in the loss of three lives, and caused injuries to eight persons.

The Government set up a judicial enquiry by a non-Hindu and a non-Muslim Judge Mr. A. W. Flack, I.C.S., Additional District and Sessions Judge. The enquiry report concludes, "The principal events which led to the firing were deterioration in the communal situation in Bhadrak during the last few years, the intransigent and unreasonable attitude of the Muhammadans who appeared to have been inflamed by some of the more fanatical among them, and the weak and the dilatory manner in which the then District Magistrate handled the negotiations."

#### *Communal clash of 1991*

Around the year 1991, at the national level, the political atmosphere was communally charged, centered on the Ram janmabhumi-Babri Masjid issue. The communal tension created by the BJP's Rath yatra was felt across the country. Bhadrak was no exception. In 1991, a procession was taken out in the town to celebrate Ramnavmi for the first time. The procession was led by hundreds of RSS workers – in their uniforms and lathis in hand. Prior to this, although a section of Hindus celebrated Ramnavmi in Bhadrak,

there was never any public procession on the occasion. This time, not only a procession was introduced, it was also taken out through the Muslim dominated areas while raising provocative slogans such as, '*Hindustan mein rehna hei toh ram nam kehna hei*' and '*Musalman ka do sthan, Kabrstan aur Pakistan*'.

No wonder, while the procession was passing through one of the Muslim areas, there began a clash about the removal of some bicycles obstructing the procession. Soon the clash escalated into a full-fledged riot between the two communities. Shops belonging to both the communities were looted and burnt down. By one account 13 people died in this clash, of which 11 were Muslims and two were Hindu Marwaris. Soon the riot spread to nearby towns and villages. In Soro town, located at a distance of about 35 kilometers from Bhadrak, the riot claimed many human lives along with the destruction of shops and houses. In the rural areas, residential properties were the main casualties.

Following the riots, a Revenue Divisional Commissioner (RDC) level inquiry was instituted. Today, nobody remembers what happened to that inquiry. A number of people were arrested, but in course of time, all the accused got acquitted. Not a single person was convicted. The government banned religious processions of both the communities for five years. This ban was revoked in 1995 and processions were allowed in the town. This was followed by a number of citizens' initiatives to rebuild communal harmony between the two communities.

## **Communal violence of April 2017**

Despite all the peace efforts, people of Bhadrak had to face the fury of a major communal violence this year, after nearly 26 years since the last one. This time too, the riot followed the celebration of Ramnavmi. Is it just a coincidence? Or is there a connection? The president of the Hindu Surakhsya Samiti (HSS) and the Vice-President of the district BJP, flatly, denies any connection. His response was, 'if it had anything to do with the Ramnavmi celebrations, then we would have seen the riot on the very day itself, as in the year 1991. The celebration was peaceful and no untoward incident was noticed on that day. In fact, people from the *chauda mohalla* welcomed the processions at various points, as has been the practice here.'

As mentioned earlier, Ramnavmi was celebrated in Bhadrak in 1991, for the first time. This festival is primarily organised and monitored by the BJP. Going by all accounts, the scale of celebrations of this festival in Bhadrak this time around was unprecedented. The celebrations continued for seven days, whereas it used to be for three days earlier. The scale of the celebrations was massive as well. About one lakh people, nearly ten times compared to previous years, participated in the processions. Given the population of the Bhadrak town, the participation of such huge numbers suggests that efforts were made to mobilise people from outside of the town. There were some processions or the other throughout the week. There were rallies for *agyanmala* and *go-pujan*. A *Meena bazaar* was set up and *gana dauda* (public marathon from one temple to the other) was organised. On the final day of the celebrations, about a hundred *medhas* (floats) participated accompanied by about 80 high decibel music bands (DJs). Saffron flags were flown all over the town, including atop government office buildings. In the words of the president of the HSS, 'After the UP election results, our youths were very excited. Their enthusiasm was very high. And here in Odisha, we did well in the Panchayat elections. So this year's celebration was a special one. It was grand.'

Seemingly, no untoward incident took place on the day of the Ramnavmi. The Muslim community did felicitate the leaders/*medhas* in the processions when these passed through their localities. But beneath the veneer of normalcy, there was apprehension among the Muslim community that something untoward might happen. Elderly leaders, who have seen and understood the communal politics in the country, were already worried after the victory of BJP in UP with Adityanath becoming the Chief Minister. So people were cautious during the Ramnavmi celebrations. Volunteers engaged by the Chauda Mohalla committee were carefully chosen. They were people who would keep calm and would not easily get provoked. Most shops owned by Muslims were closed on Ramnavmi. Processions which generally get over latest by 12 in the night, continued till three in the morning. Along with slogans such as '*Jai Sriram*', chants like '*Hindustan mein rehna hai to Ram naam kehna hai*' were also raised.

Added to the effects of aggressive celebrations during Ramnavmi, tension was also simmering among a section of Muslim youths for another reason. The Urs celebrations of Nasim Sarkar, a spiritual leader highly revered by certain sections of the Muslim community, were planned on 16 April, and posters for this were put up all across the town. During the period of Ramnavmi celebrations, some of these posters were torn off and defiled, allegedly by some Hindu youths. Besides, around the same time, there were some postings in the social media which were offensive to Islam, allegedly posted by some Hindu youths. But the matter was not brought to the notice of the police.

#### Trigger Point - Mobilisation around Ram and Sita in the Social Media

In such a tense atmosphere, on the day after the Ramnavmi i.e., on 5<sup>th</sup> April, certain remarks apparently insulting the Hindu deities Ram and Sita appeared in social media. Allegedly, a Hindu student had posted on his face book wall a picture of Ramnavmi celebration with a text i.e., '*Jai Sriram*'. On this post, some Muslim youths posted their comments which were derogatory. The comments went viral among the student community. By next day, the matter was no more confined to the student community. On 6<sup>th</sup> of April, youths of ABVP, Bajrang Dal and Viswa Hindu Parishad brought it to the notice of the police and demanded immediate arrest of the accused. Reportedly, two written complaints were lodged on the basis of which the police registered an FIR. In one of these complaints, which the PUCL team got access to, the complainant declared himself as an active member of the Bajrang Dal. The said FIR was registered at 5 p.m. The team also learnt that the said complainant is a class 10 student.

Reportedly, the police took time to act upon the complaint since the matter involved a cyber crime and it would take some time to investigate. But the youths insisted on the immediate arrest of the accused. By some accounts, more than a hundred youths were at and around the Town police station from about 11 a.m. till 5 p.m. But the police, the IIC of Town police station in particular, couldn't handle the youths properly. Moreover, an impression was created that the IIC was reluctant to take any action at the behest of the local MLA and his son, as the accused was the son of a BJD leader, an ex-councillor. By the time the FIR was registered i.e., at 5 p.m., along with the students, activists of Bajrang Dal, Viswa Hindu Parishad and Hindu Surakhya Samiti were also agitating outside the police station demanding action. Soon after the FIR was registered, a section of the agitating crowd went on to block the National Highway. This was followed by attacks on shops owned by Muslims near Bant Chhak. After this, the police declared Section-144 in the town and detained some of the rioters.

Next day, on 7<sup>th</sup> April, the district administration convened a meeting of the peace committee to be held at Collectorate in the afternoon. It was also announced in the television. The meeting began around 2-2.15 p.m. and continued till 4-4.30 p.m. By some accounts, many people those who were not the designated members of the Peace Committee had entered the meeting hall and occupied the seats. As a

result, there was no room for genuine members to sit. The meeting was chaotic and a free for all affair. It is also alleged that leaders of certain Hindu organisations were not called to the meeting, so their supporters were shouting. However, the local MLA, Chairperson of the Bhadrak Municipality, IG police and Bhadrak SP and ADM and some community leaders were present in the meeting. The Chairperson of the Municipality announced that 23 shops have been burnt down, and the Municipality would arrange a vending zone for these shop owners.

While the 'chaotic' peace committee meeting was held inside the hall, the scene outside of the hall was in no way orderly. Many people, especially youths had gathered despite the imposition of section 144. No doubt, some of them were general onlookers. But a section of Muslim youth, about 150 in number, had also gathered to know whether their grievance regarding the tearing of the posters of Sarkar baba was being addressed by their community leaders. As it transpired that this matter was not raised in the meeting, the youths got agitated and the leaders (*Perhaps, considering the tense atmosphere leaders had decided not to raise this issue*) tried to pacify the youths, but failed. Some elderly leaders were even humiliated by the agitated youths.

To resolve the issue, the crowd moved to Madina Maidan, located in Puruna bazaar (*This Maidan is the place where community decisions are often taken*). However, the youths proceeded to the maidan on their bikes, shouting slogans on the way. They raised slogans like '*Bulu Pattnaik Zindabad*' (Bulu Pattnaik is a BJD youth leader and son of Jugal Pattnaik, present MLA (BJD) of Bhadrak) and '*Islam Zindabad*' and, by some accounts, '*Pakistan zindabad, Hindustan Murdabad*'. It is important to note that all this happened when both the political leaders and the top brass of the administration were present. Moreover, police vehicles followed the bike-riding youths.

While the administration was holding the peace meeting, leaders of the BJP and its affiliates were mobilising the Hindu youths, through the use of social media and mobile phones. For instance, a Hindu youth leader gave a call on the face book asking '*All Ram Bhakts come to the town thana*'. This was apparently to demand the release of some youths detained by the police during the rioting and arson on the 6<sup>th</sup>, and for the arrest of the person who had allegedly posted the offending remarks on Ram and Sita earlier. In response, the Hindu youths began gathering on the streets of the town thana locality and shouting, '*jo se bolo Jay Shri Ram*'. As on the previous day, the activists of Bajrang Dal and VHP were also part of the demonstration. Seeing the agitating crowd on the road, shop owners began to put the shutters down. Most of the shops owned by Muslims were already shut because of Friday afternoon prayers. Around 5 p.m. the crowd began attacking Muslim shops in the Kacheri Bazaar area. As this message reached the Muslim majority areas, the youth groups, many of whom were already on the streets, began attacking Hindu shops in Chandan Bazaar and nearby areas.

Thus, began a chain of looting and arson. In many areas Hindus looted and burnt Muslim shops where they were the dominant group. Muslims did the same in areas of their dominance. The main affected areas are the Kacheri Bazaar, Bant Chhak area, Chandan Bazaar, Laha Pati and Charampa/Station Bazaar. In all these places, mostly roadside shops were attacked. It did not spread to residential areas. One mosque was attacked and partially damaged in Station Bazaar, and a temple was partially affected in Laha Pati. No human life was lost, and by and large, residential houses were spared. Among the affected, are both rich and poor from the two communities. While the rich have lost property amounting to lakhs of rupees, the poor have lost their livelihood.

### *Dynamics of Riot*

A noticeable feature of the riot this time has been the active participation of the youth, including the students, in looting and arson. While it needs a deeper sociological study to understand this phenomenon, the general perception among the thinking citizens of both the communities is that the hold of traditional leadership on the youth has been breaking down and there is no alternative in place for them. The youths are becoming unruly. There is also increasing unemployment. As a result, vote-seeking political parties are luring them with money to work as their musclemen.

While expressing concerns about the involvement of students in the riot, one elderly gentleman said that many students got themselves involved in looting because of the lure of branded shoes, tee-shirts and denim apparel. Sharing an interesting anecdote, he said, "During riots, some students picked up shoes from the show case of the shop. But they did not know that shoes in show cases belong to only one side. When they realised it, they came back and threw the shoes near the shop, thus effectively returning these".

By some accounts, the present communal clash has something to do with the local dynamics of electoral politics – intra and inter-party rivalries. There are reportedly two factions in the local BJD, led by Shri Prafulla Samal and Shri Jugal Kishore Pattanaik. It is said that Shri Samal is trying to contest the next election from Bhadrak. After the Panchayat election, Shri J. Pattanaik is trying to consolidate his Muslim vote bank. Each is trying to outsmart the other. Similarly, within the BJP, there are a number of aspirants for the Bhadrak Assembly seat. Each is trying to have an upper hand over the other by mobilising people through any means.

There have been instances where Hindus burnt down shops thinking that those belonged to Muslims, but those, in fact belonged to Hindus. In Bant Chhak five Hindu shops were burnt down by Hindu youths. Similarly, in Laha Pati, Muslims burnt down shops being run by Hindus, which were in fact owned by the local Mosque, and one of the shops even belonged to a Muslim. In some areas Hindu shop owners have stopped mobs from burning shops belonging to their Muslim tenants.

As it happens in a riot, rumours played their part too. In Charampa, a rumour started floating around that Muslims had destroyed three temples in the Puruna Bazaar area. This was being evoked by the Hindu youths while attacking the Mosque and Muslim shops. It needs to be noted that, there had been no attack on Hindus in Charampa. In Kacheri Bazaar area when Hindus began destroying Muslim shops, people talked about Pakistani bombs being deposited in Puruna bazaar area!

What is most important, however, is despite all the lootings and burning of shops on roadsides and in market places, people of both communities have shown solidarity, and successfully maintained peace in the residential areas and mohallas. We have presented a few examples of such solidarity later in the report.

## **Experiences of the riot**

### Testimony of two eyewitnesses

*A community leader (Aged 60) belonging to the Muslim community*

It was Friday (7<sup>th</sup> April). All the Muslim shops were closed in the afternoon. Generally, Muslims go for Namaz at noon and don't come back to work. Around 5.30 p.m. to 6.30 p.m. nearly 200-250 people, mostly youths of 18-25 years of age came shouting '*musalmanmanaku jali dio, kaati dio*' and attacked the Charampa mosque and set fire to nearby shops. They had come with *bhujalis*, *lathis*, petrol in bottles, and match boxes. They put tyres near the shops and sprinkled petrol. As a result, eight shops near the mosque were burnt down. They also broke the iron gate of the mosque and set it on fire. The electrical fittings of the mosque have been damaged.

Urmila Choudhury, the local BJD Councilor and Susant Das, ex-Councilor (of the Congress Party) tried to stop the mob, and pleaded not to do any harm. But the mob did not listen to them. They were arguing that three Hindu temples had been damaged by Muslims at Puruna Bazaar. Most of these youths belong to the BJP. They are unemployed and are being used by their leaders. The Puruna Bazaar incidents were mere rumours.

After five days, affected shop owners have lodged complaints. As they were not present on the spot as they had gone for Friday prayers, they could not name any one. The Councilor or ex-councilor who were eyewitnesses also did not disclose any names to the police.

When these incidents began, people desperately telephoned the police station and at the helpline provided by the Government, but nobody picked up the phone. Even Ajay Das, the Havildar of Charampa outpost phoned the police station for assistance, but nobody received his phone call.

Bhadrak became an orphan for three hours – from 5.30 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. It had no father and mother. The mob did what they wanted to do.

*A respected community leader belonging to Hindu community (who lives in a Muslim majority area)*

This time the Ram Navami festival was unprecedented. They had spent a huge amount. There was massive participation. But the most noticeable thing (I have closely observed it) is that on the day of Ram Navami procession, all the Muslim shops of the town remained closed. I do not know if it was decided by the Muslim community or not, it is a fact. On 6<sup>th</sup> April, around 4.30 5 p.m., I heard about burning down of Muslim shops. I immediately closed down my shop. I also got calls from Puruna bazaar that Hindus were closing down their shops. I advised them not to do so and not to bother about what had happened at Bant chhak. I immediately reached Puruna Bazaar and by that time some of our youth club members had reached. We persuaded people to open shops till nine o' clock and assured them of protection. They did it. The night passed peacefully. On 7<sup>th</sup> April, I had also gone to the peace committee meeting. But I left the place soon to attend to my shop. When the bike rally went past, we decided to close down the shop. I sent away other people of the shop on bikes and started to walk down. When I reached the traffic post of Kacheri Bazaar, youths covering their heads and faces with saffron coloured clothes (obviously Hindu youths) had already started vandalising and burning shops of Muslims. The whole sight was terrifying.

I walked down some meters towards my home at Puruna Bazaar. I met Iqbal on the way. He insisted that I came with him at least up to Santhia Chhak from where I could walk home. Evening was approaching. Everybody got apprehensive what might happen in the night. Members of our youth club had come out to the street and waited for me. All of us decided to keep guard there and not to allow anybody to do any harm. I was praying that let tonight pass peacefully. There was no police deployment in the area. We were trying to contact the police station. Around nine o'clock, Manoj Rout, the IIC, who was brought back from Tihidi, reached our area and met me. He assured us that there were already adequate police force and they would be deployed soon. He advised us to go home as curfew had already been imposed. Around 10 o'clock the police force reached our area and we went home.

### Victims' testimonies

*Sk. Liakat (Aged 61), Charampa Bazaar, near the mosque*

In the evening, we got to know about the incident from TV news. My younger brother phoned Abdul Bhai to ascertain about it. He told with sorrow, that he could not save our shops. I had a gas welding shop and my brother (Sk. Muktiar) a cycle repairing shop.

My father had set up this gas welding shop in the year 1955. It was our only source of living. We do not have any land or any other source of livelihood. I stay in Purana bazaar. Each day I cycle seven kilometers to come here. I start work around nine o'clock in the morning to nine o'clock in the evening. On Friday, I go for prayers at noon. The shop remains closed in the afternoon hours. On an average I earn 200 rupees daily. I have a family of 13-14 mouths to feed.

The police told us to clean the burnt down shop as it is becoming an eyesore to everybody as a reminder of the destruction in the riots. But how can I run the shop? All my equipments have been burnt down. When I am taking loans to just feed the family, where is the saving to buy new gear? The Revenue Inspector verified the damage on 12 April. But we are yet to get any compensation. I took Rs. 6000 as a loan from neighbouring shop owners, bought an old gas welding machine, and opened the shop five days ago. Much material belonging to the customers have also been burnt down. I don't know what I will say to them, when they ask for their goods. Only Allah knows.

*Idu Saha (at Bant Chhak, by the side of Over bridge)*

I stay at Dhan tola, Puruna Bazaar. I had a lock and key repairing shop close to the flyover. There were 17 shops here - gas welding, egg shops, fruit shops, pan shops etc. Five of these shops belong to Hindus. We had put up our shops for the last eight to ten years. Though the Municipality threatens to remove us from this place, still we have been running our shops. The Municipality people come and collect Rs. 5/- per day as tax from us.

Some shops, close to the private bus stand, were burnt down on the 6 April. But our shops were not damaged. On the 7<sup>th</sup>, I had opened the shop. After Friday *namaaz*, I went home. Again around 4.30 p.m., I came to check on my shop. I thought nothing would happen. But, everything was burnt to ashes in the evening. I do not know who did this. People residing across the road know. But they are not opening their mouths.

Generally, I earn Rs. 50-100 a day. With that I run a family of three. For the last three weeks, I have earned nothing. All my instruments have been destroyed. I have no money to buy new ones. With the help of my friends in the bazaar, I somehow manage. Say for example, if I eat *bara* in the eatery of Sankar Bhai, he does not ask for money. He says, "You give me money when you have it".

How long can I go without work? We had begun to starve. I am an adult. I can manage with one meal a day. But how can my child survive without food? So I have put up this plastic sheet and opened the shop to earn something. *(When the PUCL team met him, his shop was full of black ashes. While talking to us, he was repairing the lock of a Scooterette with a spanner).*

After the incident, ten of us went to meet the Municipality Chairperson. He assured us of help and sent two Municipality officials to assess the damage. He also advised us to lodge a complaint so that compensation could be given. We are illiterate people. We do not know how to write a complaint. We approached a lawyer for this. He charged Rs.100/- to write one. After much bargaining, he wrote three complaints and charged Rs. 150. It was so difficult to arrange that amount at the time when we had nothing to eat. We have faith in the Chairperson. However, we are yet to get the compensation.

*(His brother Jani Saha had a gas welding machine. He has also lost everything. He is not being able to open his shop as all his instruments have been burnt down. He hopes to do so after getting some compensation.)*

*Sankarshan Jena*

I had a *paan* shop at Bant Chhak. I stay at my village Gardapur situated at a distance of eight to ten kilometers from the town. I have a small patch of land (two *gunthas*). When the problem began on the 6<sup>th</sup> evening, I closed my shop, went home and did not come back. I am yet to lodge a complaint. Hence, my name has not been enlisted for compensation. Now, I have opened a road side shop selling fried fritters just across the road under a tree. *(Despite his precarious situation, Shree Jena does not ask for money when his fellow shopkeepers like Ibu Saha eat in his shop.)*

*Subhendu Sahu - Pan Adat Chhak- shopkeeper*

There were four shops here, such as pan and stationery shops and confectionery stalls. We had got these shops from the Masjid committee on rent. On 7<sup>th</sup> April, we had opened our shops till mid-day. We had gone home for lunch break. As it was hot, we came late in the afternoon. But by 5.30 p.m. shops were set on fire. Everything was burnt down. I had a pan and stationery shop. I am not in a position to reopen the stationery shop. Instead of sitting idle, I am trying to run the betel shop to sustain the family. I do not know how much compensation I would get. My son is studying engineering in Bhubaneswar. I do not know how I am going to send him money for his tuition fees. That is my biggest worry now.

*Pradeep Laha, Sankarpur- Lahapati*

In the 1991 communal riot, my stationery shop at Chandan Bazaar was destroyed. After that, I opened a shop here. Now this one is also destroyed. I had some cash in the shop that has been looted. Around 4.30 p.m., when I heard shouts like *Hindu salon ko jalado*, I quickly shut my shop and went upstairs where we stay. There were about five hundred people with swords, crowbars, petrol cans, *lathis* and *dhurmush*. We rang up the police station, but nobody picked up the phone. Till 8.30 p.m., no police assistance came forth. Even now we live in fear, thinking of shifting elsewhere. It is a Muslim dominated

area. The Hindus who burnt down shops at Kacheri Bazaar should have thought of its repercussions here: the Muslims would cut us into pieces.

After the incident of 7<sup>th</sup> April, we gathered our women folk at the Durga Mandap. We had planned to send them away for some time. But the police persuaded us not to do so. They said, it would send across a wrong message. But we don't feel safe anymore.

*(The PUCL team met him along with other shopkeepers at Brundaban Chandra Radhakrushna Mandir. Two tiger statues in front of the temple have been partially damaged, and the facade of the temple has been blackened by smoke. Six shops (two grocery shops, three pan shops and one stationery shop) have been damaged and looted.)*

### **Bhaichara (Fellow-feeling) does exist**

While the communal and anti-social elements played their part in instigating communal hatred and violence, it has been noticed that during the riot many people, from both the communities, raised their voice and came forward to prevent it from spreading further. As mentioned earlier, in Bhadrak there are many settlements where one finds some Hindu houses within a Muslim dominated area and vice versa. In many places the Hindu and Muslim communities have stood by their minority neighbours and have not let the communal violence affect them. In Puruna Bazaar area, which is demographically a Muslim majority locality, members of Rovers Club and Hanif Club prevented violence in their locality. On the evening of 7 April, news spread that Hindus were burning shops owned by Muslims in Kacheri bazaar. Soon Muslim youths retaliated by burning shops owned by Hindus in Chandan Bazaar. Members of Hanif club and Rovers club tried their best to prevent the rioters from spreading the violence in their area.

The role of the residents of Puruna Bazaar in preventing the riot is admitted even by the President of the Hindu Surakhya Samiti. In his own words, "It is an admitted fact that the Muslim dominated Puruna Bazaar remained peaceful because Muslims took the lead and protected the area from the unruly youths. Even some Muslims threatened to attack their own youths if they indulged in damaging the Hindu houses and shops of their locality. That is the *bhaichara* of Bhadrak town."

In the Zilla School area, Ms. Radharani Mohapatra, a retired lecturer and an advocate, came forward to protect her Muslim neighbours from attacks by Hindu miscreants. In Nangah Mohalla, where a few Hindu families live among the Muslim majority, they were given protection by their Muslim neighbors. In Kantabania, an area at the border between Muslim and Hindu dominated areas, Hazi Sk. Abdul Istar, a lawyer by profession, mobilised residents to maintain peace in their locality. He had seen the 1991 violence. This time, Muslim youths were planning to set fire to shops owned by Hindus. Sh. Istar mobilised his neighbourhood and didn't allow that to happen. After the miscreants retreated from the area, he put up messages of peace in front of his house, using old cardboard sheets. The messages written in Odia read – '*Dangaa Nuhein, Shanti Chahun*', '*Bhaicharara Bhadrakbasi, Shanti Chahanti*', '*Hindu Muslim Bhai Bhai, Dangaa srustikari deshdrohi*'. These examples of fellow-feeling, above religious affinity, give us hope.

In the aftermath of the riot, many concerned citizens of the town, community leaders from both the communities, have been making genuine efforts to bring back peace and harmony among the people. In this regard, the role of Rashtriya Yuva Sangathan, a national youth organisation based on Gandhian

thoughts, is also worth mentioning. Its activists have mobilised peace-loving people from both the communities and have charted out plans to reestablish peace.

## **Response of the government**

People, cutting across religious groups and party lines, blame the police for letting the situation go out of control. On being asked as to why did it the police allow people to gather outside the Collectorate, when Section 144 was in force and did nothing to prevent the rally, the SP said, 'you should ask these questions to the people in charge at that time. I wasn't in charge then. So how can I answer these questions?'

Has there been any inquiry as to the role of the police during the incidents of 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> April? The SP's response to this was, 'It is the job of the government to institute a commission of inquiry to find out whether the police failed in its duty. And no inquiry has been instituted by the government'. In fact, the general public is unhappy about the role of the police not just for its failure in preventing the riot, but also for allegedly acting in a politically motivated manner.

The common view among people is that the previous IIC of the town police station, Shri Manoj Rout was transferred to Tihidi Thana and the new IIC was brought in, simply to serve the interest of local political leadership. The general feeling is that if Mr. Manoj Rout was in charge, the riot wouldn't have happened. People allege that even before the riot, the new IIC had turned a blind eye to the activities of anti-social elements in town, who also enjoyed political patronage from the ruling party. These elements have been active during the riot in looting and arson.

The local police and the district administration did not respond to the communal clashes till the evening of 7<sup>th</sup> April with enough seriousness, the state government swung into action once it became clear that the situation was going out of control. The same evening, the Home Secretary and the Director General of Police rushed to Bhadrak and mobilised additional forces for the town. Curfew was imposed the same night. Order was issued for the immediate posting of a new district collector to take charge of the situation. It needs to be noted that the district administration was headless during the riot, since the Collector had retired from service since 31 March, and no replacement had been posted. The SP and IIC of the Town Police Station, the Additional District Magistrate (ADM) who were on duty when the riot happened, have been transferred since then with a new set of officers posted in their place.

The day and night curfew was in force for a few days, but night curfew remained for over a month. It was finally lifted on 12<sup>th</sup> May. By the time the curfew was lifted, about 275 people have been arrested and the situation seemed to be improving. Among others, the arrested include the State secretary of Bajrang Dal, the district unit secretary of BJP Yuva Morcha and a BJD Councilor. However, a common concern expressed by the leaders and ordinary citizens is about the arrest of many innocents. Apart from the anger felt by the concerned communities and family members of these innocents, the economic hardships faced by the families, particularly those of the poor, is a matter of serious concern. Concerned community leaders feel that the police and the district administration are not doing anything in this regard. When we asked the SP, Bhadrak, regarding this matter, he said, 'we have asked the people to give us in writing if they have any complaints and people have given their complaints'. When asked how many such complaints have been received, and whether there has been any inquiry into these, he said, that, 'I cannot say'.

The following are accounts of two women who allege that innocent members of their families have been arrested.

### **Indiscriminate arrests - Women bear the brunt**

*Habib-un-Bibi, (Aged about 60), mother of Arif Rehman (Aged about 30)*

On 6 April my son had gone to Cuttack to purchase medicine for my eldest son who is mentally ill. When I heard about what had happened in Kachery Bazaar, we told him not to come back. However, one of his Hindu friends helped him reach home. We are five Muslim families living here. Two of these families live in houses with straw-thatched roofs. Next day, when we heard about the burning of houses in Charampa Bazaar and other places, we got scared. My son rang up the police station for help so that our thatched houses could be saved from miscreants. No police assistance came forth. This may be ascertained from the call records of his mobile. He also intimidated the local councilor, community leader Abdul Salam and Naren Palei, ex-MLA.

On 8 April, around 11 o'clock at night, some policemen came and dragged our neighbour Mohammed Safi from his house. Hearing this, my son came out of the house with his hands up and told the police that he had phoned them for help and had nothing to do with the violence. He requested them to check the call register. They did not listen to him. Both of them were taken to the police van parked on the road and the police then beat them up mercilessly. We could hear their screams. My youngest son wanted to go near the van to appeal to the police not to beat up his brother, but we prevented him from going. We were all terrified. Next day, my son sent a message saying that he was detained at the Charampa police station. He was kept there till 10 April. He has been shown on the police record to have been arrested under the Kadambeda (Puruna Bazaar) police station on 11 April, and the case has been forwarded to court.

Is there any law in this country? My son has been put behind bars just because he asked for help. I can vouchsafe that he has no past criminal record. You can ask anybody here about him. Not a single Hindu house or shop has been damaged in the entire Charampa area. How can he be booked for rioting then?

He was working as a driver and was the sole bread earner for our family of 12 members. We do not know when he will be released. In the meanwhile, we starve. One of my sons is mentally ill. My eldest daughter who has been deserted by her husband stays with us. She runs a small tailoring shop. She has a ten-year old daughter too. Now she manages the family with her meager earnings.

*Nasreen Bibi, (aged about 45) wife of Mohammed Safi (aged about 50)*

That night we were all asleep. The policemen came, hit the door and dragged my husband away. We could hear their screams when they were beating up my husband and Rehman on the road. My husband is a heart patient. He is diabetic as well. He is under medication. We have four daughters and one son who is the youngest one. My husband was the only earning member of the family. He had a tyre repair shop. After his arrest, the family is surviving with the help of relatives. But how long can they help us? The wedding of one of our daughters was fixed for 17

April. It could not take place due to the arrest of my husband. He needs medicines in the jail. One of my daughters is mentally ill. How am I going to run the family?

These stories of women testify to their terrifying experiences at the hand of the police in the immediate aftermath of the riot.

### Assessment of Loss and Compensation

Five days after the violence, on 12<sup>th</sup> April, the Chief Minister visited the town and declared that damages due to riots would be assessed and adequate compensation would be provided. Soon after the process of identification of victims and assessment of their loss began. On 20<sup>th</sup> April it was announced that the cost of property damaged in the riot would be rupees nine crores. On the 24<sup>th</sup> it was announced that the compensation amount would be in the range between a minimum of Rs. 20,000/- to a maximum of Rs.2,00,000/-. However, the process of disbursing the money began only in the first week of May, and by mid-May many of the riot-affected people were yet to receive any compensation. Neither did they know how much money would they get. There is discontentment among all sections of victims about the amount of compensation. The PUCL team met the Tehsildar of Bhadrak on 8<sup>th</sup> May, a month after the riots. The team asked the tehsildar for a copy of the list of victims. He said that some names in the list are still being verified. Although about 460 names have been listed, it was not final.

The plight of the poor who lost their livelihood in the riot (and the apathy of the administration towards them) was expressed by one community leader in the following words: "Around 40 families have been affected in Charampa. Of these, 15 families are so poor that they do not have anything to eat now. Their work has stopped for nearly a month. They were eking out their living by tailoring, welding, cycle repairing, vending shoes, fruits, eggs, lock and key repairs, or by quilt making. They don't have any savings to restart their work. No one has come forward to help them. When natural calamity occurs, the Government provides polythene sheets, food etc. to the affected people. But this has not happened in our case. No one (the MLA, Chairman or the Councillor) has cared to do anything for these poor people. I have been saying all these things when TV guys came to interview me. But they cut these things out and did not air them."

### **Some sane voices**

Hindus are responsible for this problem. It is the moral degradation of the Hindu community which is at the root of all this. There is so much space in Bhadrak. Why do they take out the Ramnavmi processions through the Muslim areas? This is deliberately done to provoke Muslim sentiments.'

– A senior advocate and an eminent citizen, belonging to the Hindu community.

I feel guilty and ashamed of the behaviour of the Muslim youths. I felt so helpless when my Hindu friends from Chandan Bazaar were repeatedly calling me over the telephone for help. They were giving me minute to minute description of the incidents of loot and arson. What could I do? I am old and ill. Not a single person was with me to take me to the place and help me stand with them during their distress. I cannot show my face to them. I have been isolated from the communities.'

– A respected social worker and senior citizen, belonging to the Muslim community.

I am ashamed that this happened at Bhadrak. All our efforts to build peace and harmony went in vain. After the 1991 riot, we had worked so hard not to allow this sort of thing to happen again at Bhadrak. *Bara barshara tapashya sukhuapuda re gala.* (The efforts of an eon went down the drain)

– *A noted social worker and leader of the Muslim community.*

Next time any such incident happens in our area, I will first hold myself responsible before blaming others.'

– *Secretary of a Bazaar committee, belonging to the Hindu community.*

'Observations of religious days through processions, whether of Hindus or Muslims, have become marketable affairs. Where is the feeling of spirituality in all these processions? We should stop all religious processions.'

– *An ordinary shop-owner.*

## Conclusion

Despite a rich syncretic tradition, people of Bhadrak, both Hindus and Muslims, have been drawn into communal clashes. This has happened in the backdrop of communal tension in the larger political scenario in the country. This year, the Muslim community had some anxieties after the recent victory of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, and the appointment of Adityanath as its Chief Minister. This provided the backdrop of the celebration of Ramnavmi as political spectacle in Bhadrak this year, although it has never been simply a religious festival. From the beginning, the celebration has been mixed with politics, as it is being organised and monitored by the BJP and its affiliate organisations. The celebration is also associated with the memory of communal riot of 1991. Therefore, there has always been some apprehension that something untoward might happen during the Ramnavmi celebrations.

The scale and grandeur of the celebrations, and the deliberately provocative sloganeering did have an effect on the Muslim community. Though no untoward incident happened on the day of Ramnavmi, the atmosphere was clearly tense. Therefore, one cannot say that Ramnavmi celebrations had passed off peacefully, and that it had nothing to do with the communal riot that followed two days later. Although the trigger points have always been local, the political motivations and communal politics that allow these trigger points to snowball into major communal clashes are of larger national origin.

It was in this tense atmosphere that the objectionable posting in the social media provided the fodder to those forces that were ready to further vitiate the atmosphere. What is worrying is the use of students and unemployed youth as cannon fodder to further gains in electoral politics by cynically creating and manipulating communal sentiments. This will have dangerous consequences for the social fabric of Bhadrak, and if not arrested in time, will lead to violence.

The economic impacts of the riots are ruinous in terms of the shops burnt down and lost economic opportunities of bazaars staying shut during curfew hours. The poorest of the poor bear the brunt the most. They might never recover from these livelihood shocks.

There are signs that households living in areas dominated by the other community no longer feel safe and some families are thinking of shifting out. This is against the ethos of Bhadrak, where communities have traditionally lived cheek by jowl with each other. The possible ghettoisation will certainly impact the town's social fabric.

There is no doubt that if the police had acted in time and appropriately, particularly on the developments of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> April, the situation wouldn't have gone out of control. The government made a knee jerk response simply by transferring the officials. There has been no inquiry ordered to fix accountability.

The allegation that many innocent people have been arrested is not taken up seriously by the local police and the administration. A mechanism needs to be urgently evolved by involving the community members to identify the innocents and release them from jail.

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