FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
AHRC-STM-226-2008
August 30, 2008

A joint statement issued by the Asian Human Rights Commission - Hong Kong (AHRC) the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights - India (NCDHR) and the International Dalit Solidarity Network - Denmark (IDSN)

INDIA: Violence in Orissa is a test to democratic values

The current wave of violence in Orissa, India is not surprising. After all, Orissa is a state in India ruled by the Biju Janata Dal (BJD). The BJD has remained in power with the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu fundamentalist political force operating in India. As a result, the BJD has subscribed to the larger Hindutwa agenda propagated by the BJP and its political allies like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal.

The ongoing violence in Orissa, though has been principally portrayed as a Hindu - Christian issue is in fact an act of attempted subjugation by the dominant caste upon the Dalits. Orissa like the rest of India is in abstract a society where the political economy is defined by the capacity of a dominant caste to arbitrarily subordinate the rest of its members especially the Dalits and the tribal communities. Social order is the excuse for this arbitrary domination; caste and religious practices its sceptre.

In a society dominated by caste, the concept of individual rights and individual freedom does not exist. Caste is the language of unchallenged ascendancy of one group over the other. Subordination of the lower ranks is more a rule than an expectation. The possibility of change is ruled out by awarding semidiurnal birthrights to the privileged and anchoring perpetual subjugation and bondage to the underprivileged.

The essence of Hindu religion is this adamantine de rigueur of life. Vedas and the ultimate Sanadana Dharma are the pharisaic justifications offered to this slavery. The concept of Hindutwa, advocated by the BJP, VHP, BJD and its allies, in principle is the legitimisation sought for the attempted third revival of the Hindu religion and its necromantic practices.

The statements issued by these fundamentalist forces and their antagonism against other religions are transuding with hate speech, calling for the use of brute force to suppress any challenge to the dominant caste supremacy. The violence in Orissa used to suppress the Dalit empowerment in this context is not a surprise.

Orissa is a state in India with an estimated population of 32 million. About 84

percent of this population lives in villages and one third of them do not own any substantial extent of land other than their homestead. An estimated 28 percent of this population are Dalits. Until recently, this large Dalit population suffered unchallengeable exploitation by the dominant castes.

In the past 10 years there has been a massive social movement in Orissa empowering the Dalit communities. Empowered Dalits who declared themselves as socially equal in status started levelling the centuries old uneven social balance in the state.

Education and the knowledge gained through exposure emboldened the Dalits to fight and raise their voice against dominant caste supremacy. Discrimination and slavery were no more tolerated by the Dalits. Obviously, the dominant caste groups led by the VHP and its allies had to take drastic actions to suppress this awakening.

New avenues opened up for the Dalits by delinking themselves from the Hindu caste system and its pretentious hegemony has been an eyesore for the fundamentalist Hindu political forces in the state. The VHP that leads the fundamentalist Hindu forces in Orissa started forcibly closing all possible exits for the Dalits to escape from the furnace of the Hindu caste system. For this, they employed the wisdom they had gained from the annihilation of Buddhism in India.

Naturally for the Dalits the practice of any other religion other than Hinduism was declared a taboo. Regional and state-wide campaigns were organised by the VHP to counter the Dalit empowerment. Sections of the Dalit communities in the state were forced to declare their subjugation to the dominant caste groups in ritualised ceremonies conducted by brute use of force and intimidation.

The state government of Orissa led by the BJD, an invisible partner of the VHP, let these 'reintegration' ceremonies happen throughout the state. The confusion, trauma and sufferings caused by this religious vandalism was exploited by the so called anti-state actors like the Maoists operating in the state. Natural calamities, extreme poverty, starvation and malnutrition also added further fire to the commotion.

The murder of a VHP leader and four of his colleagues on August 23 was only yet another excuse for the communal forces like the VHP to fan out their vendetta against the Dalits and their empowerment in the state. What is being witnessed in Orissa is the meticulous execution of a larger plan to force the Dalits back into the talons of caste based discrimination.

A state government that lets such evil to befall upon a population by its inaction shares equal responsibility like the VHP. The conspiracy of the state administration and the VHP is evident from the five days of complete inaction of the administration to take any steps to prevent the violence. The state

administration must be held equally responsible for the loss of life and property, including that of the VHP cadres.

Now that the state administration has proved itself to be a silent spectator to the violence in the state, the government of India must ensure that the ongoing violence is arrested immediately. The Dalits who were forced to seek shelter and safety in the forests must be provided security to return. The government must also ensure that the victims of violence are adequately compensated.

The true test of a state in protecting and promoting democracy and pluralism is not how much these terms are mentioned in the domestic laws, but how good is the state apparatus in preventing the infringement of democratic values and how much equipped are the state mechanisms in providing redress for any violations.

The government of India, by virtue of its Constitutional mandates and the moral and legal obligations arising out of its ratification of international treaties and conventions must ensure that a state of normalcy return to Orissa.

India by virtue of ratifying international conventions like the Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination also has an obligation under the international human rights law to ensure that similar instances does not recur in the country. The international community also has a moral responsibility to urge the government of India to immediately put an end to the violence in Orissa.

It is only by such tangible affirmative action that the government of India can stand the test of commitment that it has sworn primarily to its own people and also to the protection, promotion and fulfilment of human rights and human values in the world.

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Posted on 2008-08-30
Back to [AHRC Statements 2008]