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Report

The Attack On Pilgrims of
Pali-Naigaon Vasai Taluka,
Thane District, Maharashtra

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**THE INDIAN PEOPLE'S TRIBUNAL
ON ENVIRONMENT AND
HUMAN RIGHTS**

**THE REPORT OF
THE FACT FINDING COMMITTEE
INTO THE ATTACK ON PILGRIMS OF**

**PALI-NAIGAON
VASAI TALUKA
THANE DIST, MAHARASHTRA**

**VISITING THE UNION TERRITORIES OF
DADRA, NAGAR-HAVELI
ON
FRIDAY
13TH MARCH 1998**

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FOREWORD

FRIDAY, the 13th of March 1998, will forever remain a blot, a *kalank*, in the minds and hearts of the 200 pilgrims (180 women, 20 men) of Pali-Naigaon (located 1.5 kms on the West of the Naigaon local station, W. Rly) village, Vasai Taluka, Thane District, Maharashtra State. For on that day they had the experience of their life, a journey through hell and back.

Commemorating and observing the forty days fast of the Lord Jesus with a similar period of penance, they had, in the spirit of atonement and sacrifice, decided to visit some of the remotest mission areas, located in the Union Territories of Dadra, Nagar- Haveli, bordering the Northwestern boundaries of Maharashtra. The day of holi festival, they found appropriate being a holiday, the right day for the pilgrimage.

The safe and secure journey throughout Maharashtra stood in stark contrast to their experience of being beaten, battered, brutalized just within a kilometer of the police station at Khanvel. The assault, attack and aggression at the hands of a drunken mob of hooligans and holi revellers, left them completely shaken up, totally shattered, and scarred for life and dazed into the culture of silence, experiencing as they did, a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. As some of them put it, it was their experience of Calvary and the Crucifixion.

“When the fence begins to eat the grass”, when the custodians of the people themselves turn predators, then to whom and where do the common grassroot people seek for protection and asylum? The police initiated and ended the loot and the anarchy, ably assisted by the local sarpanch, actively supported by the local people. And when the victims did muster up courage to go and lodge a complaint at the Khanvel Police Station, they were just chased off under threat of overnight detention at the police station.

Sushiela of Stree Shakti Sadan had by chance heard of the incident somewhere around the 14th of March 1998. Efforts to get to the bottom of the matter only fruited around the 25th of March. Immediately, a Fact-Finding Team was established and the probe began. Information came in bits and pieces. Fear tormented and dominated the minds of the people. A public meeting held at Pali –Naigaon on the 29th of March 1998, helped open up the floodgates of suppressed emotions and truth. The victims began talking- There is a breakthrough the culture of silence now. The victims are talking and giving a glimpse into some of their worst ever experience.

The Report of the Fact-Finding Committee present some of their findings. The findings send shivers through our spines and makes our hair stand on end. While we had our heads in shame at the madness that debased and dehumanized the victims, specially the women- we also resolved to get to the bottom of the truth and fight for justice for the victims

This is the Year of the Women. This is also the fiftieth year of India’s independence. Both India and the Women deserve a much better deal. Please read on and also tell us in what way we can jointly act, so that such incidents never ever take place on the face of Mother Earth.

Fact Finding Committee

10th April 1998
Good Friday

INTRODUCTION

The Incident: The 13th of March 1998, was a Black Friday for the nearly 200 pilgrims, majority of them women, from the Pali-Naigaon village of Vasai Taluka, Thane District, Maharashtra State, for on this day they were attacked by about twenty five to thirty hooligans and holy revellers, aged between 25 to 40 years at the place of their pilgrimage, at Khanvel of Dadra, Nagar-Haveli, within less than a kilometer of the local police station. And during the attack loud bravados were heard saying that since the sarpanch too was part of the attacking groups, the police would not dare touch them.

The Background: traditionally, every year, a period of fast and abstinence is observed by the Christian community to recall and to relive the forty days of fast of the Lord Jesus. During this period of forty days, some of the people volunteer to go on a pilgrimage to the remote areas of the Church missions. Besides the religious sentiments, this also provides an opportunity to the women folks to get out of their homes and see and visit distant places.

Pali is picturesque and tiny village situated about 1.5 Kms on the Western side of the Naigaon Railway station of the Western Railways (local). Located within the backwaters of the Creek, gardens and fields, the people themselves live in close harmony though they belong to different creeds, communities and colors. A significant number of these original inhabitants are Catholics. These come under a Parish, headed by the present parish priest, Fr. Dominic Fargose.

Fr. Michael Correa, a young assistant priest, organised this year's pilgrimage, for which nearly two hundred people came forward. Four buses belonging to the Sadguru Travels, Virar, were booked. The day of holi was chosen because it was a holiday and convenient for many to participate in the pilgrimage.

THE JOURNEY

The pilgrimage started off at 7:00 am on the 13th of March 1998. Two hundred pilgrims, 180 of them women and 20 men, boarded four buses, and in a spirit of prayer, set out from their village church at Pali, Naigaon.

When the buses took the Mumbai-Ahmedabad highway right up to Talasari then turned right, to enter the Union Territories through the Maharashtra border at Udhwa. They had lunch at the Dapada Church at around 2:30 p.m. By 9:45 p.m. they were back home at Pali-Naigaon after a harrowing experience.

The Experience: - The journey through Maharashtra was peaceful and in stark contrast to what took place within the Union Territories.

The experience started at the entry point of the Centrally Administered Territory of Dadra Nagar-Haveli. Here the local police blocked the roads and demanded holi-bakshish, to enter the territory! The drivers showed them the receipts of the toll- fee (entry fee) paid by the travelers. But the police were insistent and stubborn. The Rs. 80/- entry voucher against each of the four buses held no meaning for them. They wanted more to celebrate their holi festival. The pilgrims explained that they had come to pray and to do penance and not to participate in festivities they did not believe in nor participate. "Pay the *posh* and only then we will allow you to enter".

The police, in broad daylight, were setting an example to the local onlookers who had gathered there. Much coaxing and cajoling did not convince the police. And the people contributed about Rs.90/- and handed the money to the police who shamelessly and brazenly pocketed the loot. The four buses were allowed to enter. The police played the role model!

The police had set the example. The local people followed it ditto, with variations here and there. Blocks and hurdles lay everywhere on the roadside in the form of logs branches and rocks: and local people revelling in an orgy of drunken madness. They would sprinkle the colors generously and in drunken boisterousness, and loudly demanded for their birthright the holi-bakshish. The women, many of them aged, pleaded with the hooligans that they had come for a different purpose and not for holi. The response they got was abuse filthy language and obscene demand for money. The pilgrims much against their will and intention were forced to, time and again, make collections and hand the money over to the foul-mouthed mobs. Even the drivers and the cleaners who were all Hindus were completely disillusioned and disgusted by the behaviour they met on the roads.

Somehow they reached Dapada. This was but the beginning. Fatigued, exhausted and exasperated, the pilgrims prayed for a safe return journey and had their lunches at around 2:30 p.m. The local people seeing their plight and condition strongly exhorted them to turn back as soon as possible, immediately if possible. The chief leader of the group Fr. Michael Correa, along with two other group leaders, went to the Silvassa Police station to seek counsel, guidance and direction for a safe journey. They went all of the 8 Kms to the Silvassa Police Station. But the Police were in no mood to offer protection nor guidance to the people. They were rustic, rude and rough, and curtly told Fr. Michael Correa and the two male leaders, "Go back the way you have come". This was all that the police had to offer, "Go back the way you have come".

Fr, Michael Correa, alongwith the group leaders, counselled the bus drivers to keep the buses together for safety, security, and mutual support. And thus together they set out on their return journey

Journey through the Night: All the four buses left together. Somehow buses No.1 and 2 went ahead and reached the Maharashtra border Udhwa, and landed safely into Maharashtra. Buses No. 3 and 4 got delayed somewhere along the way and got ensnared into the trap set by holi-hooligan-revellers. Just a kilometer away from the Khanvel police station. These last two buses faced huge roadblocks cut-trees, branches, logs and rocks blocked their way. The buses braked and stopped.

Immediately these two buses were surrounded by a drunken mob of about twenty-five to thirty rowdy males demanding Rs. 500/- as holi-posth, holi-baksheesh. The drivers and cleaners tried to reason with the people, saying that they had given them money earlier in the day, and that now it was not fair to give such a large amount once again. This argument only incensed the mob. They pulled out the driver and the cleaner of Bus No. 3 and took away the keys of the buses. They began punching and pounding the driver and the cleaner. They began slapping and kicking them roughly, all the time demanding money for their ransom. Shri Francis Falcao could not bear the sight. He left the secure confines of the bus to assist his fellow travelers who were being roughed up. He tried to reason with the mob and assured them that they would try to make a collection. The hooligans turned their full attention on

him. The driver and the cleaner escaped and were hidden by the women in between the seats. Mr. Falcao got the thrashing of his life and somehow managed to give the slip to the drunken mob and rushed towards the bus. Nearly half a dozen youth caught hold of legs and tried to pull him out as he clung to the door-railings, clinging for his dear life. Iron rods were being flayed in the air. In the melee the spectacles from the badly bruised faces of Shri Falcao fell down and were smashed to smithereens. Shri Francis Limped into the bus and closed the doors securely with all his might. And in the scuffle suffered a snapped tendon of his leg.

The nightmare had begun. The mob danced round the buses demanding money and spraying colour and filthy and foul abuse generously. Francis Falcao was in agony with his leg tendon snapping. The women screamed and shouted that they were their own mothers and sisters. The women assured the mob above all the din that they would make the collection and give them the money. That they had collected about Rs. 250/-. This only angered the hooligans more. They wanted Rs. 500/- and not a paisa less. They began to stone the buses. Bus No. 3 was the immediate focus of their attention and destruction. And in the throwing of stones and all sorts of missiles, this bus suffered a damage of nearly Rs. 15,000/-. Bus No. 4 was second on their list; this bus too was generously stoned, and suffered a loss of nearly Rs. 10,000/-. This was but the physical damage suffered by the Sadguru Travel buses, and could perhaps be measured and mended.

The mental trauma, the personal devastation, the physical wounds would leave scars, hopefully to be healed but never to be forgotten. The personal trauma experienced was both unfathomable and immeasurable. Stones rained on the buses. The glasses crashed into splinters. The glass splinters mingled with the sweat and blood of the pilgrims. Their screams and loud sobbings to be saved filled the air. Stones crashed into the buses, as the women tried to find shelter in-between seats and tried to lie on one another to protect themselves. Some pilgrims swooned into unconsciousness. Motubahi Maroocha about 65 years of age, got her head broken and glass splinters filled her oozing head wound. Joana Johnson, 44 years old, found glass splinters enter her nostrils and bleeding profusely. She has kept her blood-dyed saree as a memoir of the incident. Margaret Bar, 46 years old, suffered deep head injuries with continuous bleeding. Margaret D'Cunha aged 53 found that glass splinters had entered her right eye, sending her to the eye specialist to save her eyes. She is still under treatment. Francis Falcao still limps badly. The mob terrorized and threatened the women that they would enter the bus and strip them of their gold and dignity. The women froze in fear. They turned hysterical with panic.

Holi is a celebration of the destruction of evil and the establishment of righteousness. But what took place at Khanvel on the 13th March 1998, a holi day was holi in reverse: destruction of good and establishment of wickedness!!

The nightmare lasted for full fifteen minutes. During this time, a passing motorcyclist was requested to call the neighbouring police. In about five minutes the police came on a motorbike. Immediately he took the bus keys from the mob and gave them to the drivers and cautioned them to go away. Inspector R.K. Gavit would entertain no appeals to make panchanamas or to register their complaints. Yet the drivers, supported by the pilgrims made their way to the police station. There the wounded pilgrims came out and pleaded for medical attention. They also demanded that their complaint be lodged and First Information Report registered. Some women report, that the only policewoman at the police station was moved to tears at their sight, and that a peon fetched water and gave them to drink. In contrast, Inspector R.K. Gavit threatened them that they should get out of the area, else they would be

detained for the night. All that took place, according to the police, was due to the foolishness of the people themselves. They should not have ventured out on the day of holi. And the people deserved what they got for their folly and foolishness.

And along with a jeep, the police ordered and led the buses up to the Maharashtra border at Udhwa, and then returned back into the darkness.

When the pilgrims of buses No.1 and No.2 saw the plight of the pilgrims of buses No.3 and No.4, all broke out in loud sobs and loud lamentations at the sight of the victims. The police here, in contrast, were human. They sympathized and assisted the victims to get first aid at the Primary Health Centre at Udhwa and Talasari. Beyond sympathy, the police would not register a complaint, saying that the complaint needed to be lodged at the police station of the area where the tragedy took place.

The common grassroots people fear the sight of the police and think of the police as the almighty. When the police treats them the way they did, then their whole human edifice comes crumbling down. And so in their own words, “When the fence starts eating the grass”, where and to whom do they turn?

Shaken to the core, and silenced through the Police behaviour and the fifteen eternal minutes of terror the nearly 200 victims kept locked within themselves the tragic happenings. A majority of them even turned ‘magical’ in the Paulo Freirian language; they felt that their blood had mingled and mixed with the blood of Christ on his way to the crucifixion and tried to spiritualize their inhuman experience. Others caught in the vortex of their service demands, felt that they had come out from one hell and now why go to another and lodge a fresh complaint with the police. And so, “Better be silent, rather than speak” they rationalized. “When the police turn predators, silence was their only protection” they internalized.

The individual meetings. Shared experiences. Emphatic reassurances. Critical analyses of their devastating experience and the public meeting of the 29th of March 1998 held at Pali, Naigaon, helped open up the floodgates of pent up emotions, and locked and battered feelings and agony. The victims opened up their hearts and poured out their sufferings and their experiences. Voices were feeble and fearful at first. Then slowly the voices turned forceful and fearless. They were even able to raise some probing questions. Spiritualization, rationalization, internalization made way for critical analysis and liberating action. All gave witness that now they had broken through the culture of silence into which they had been ensnared and entrapped. Now they seek for liberation through just action. Now they are willing to stand up and make themselves heard. Now they and we demand for justice and justice in such a way that such an experience will never again be repeated.

Wont you the reader respond also and act and suggest ways and means out of such a dehumanizing situation?

Questions That Come to Mind

1. In a free and democratic India, are the citizens not free to travel anywhere in the country, when and where they want?
2. India being a country of rich cultural and creed diversity, should not the loud-mouthed phrases by leaders of the SARVA DHARMA SAMBHAVA be implemented at the grassroots by the lumpen and common elements?

3. Does anarchy prevail in the Union Territories of Dadra, Nagar-Haveli and Khanvel, where the local sarpanch alongwith the local police, terrorize and traumatize the pilgrims instead of providing them with protection and welcome?
4. Are the local police there all out to protect the terrorizing mobs and preventing the citizens from performing their duties as citizens?
5. Will the authorities help the citizens to get to the root of the matter, and punish the culprits?
6. Will you dear reader, not join hands with us and help make India a more harmonious, more united, more secular Nation where not only believers but even non-believers will be loved and respected?
7. Is it not time to initiate a public debate on what constitutes public nuisance in the name of socio-religious celebrations?

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