

Deliver us from cultural conflict.

A writer reflects on a media initiative that is meant to halt religious violence and heal wounds

By Siddhartha

“Hindus and Muslims have always lived together in peace in our slum. Its outsiders who try to create conflict between us!” insists Khader, a young Muslim who earns his living selling cheap footwear. He goes from slum to slum carrying the footwear in a basket on the back of his bicycle.

Khader lives in a slum on Mysore road, in the southern city of Bangalore. Like thousands of others who lived in the area around Mysore Road, Khader had rebuilt his life after the Hindu-Muslim riots that rocked the area several years earlier. The riots took place in 1994 and more than forty people had lost their lives. Thousands were either hurt or their houses burnt and their possessions destroyed. Pipal Tree, an NGO working in Bangalore, got involved in Khader’s slum after these riots. At first the task was to do relief work: to help distribute some rice and lentils for food, kerosene for cooking, clothes to wear (old clothes collected from middleclass homes) and assistance to rebuild the burnt and destroyed huts. Slowly we realised that if there were alert and watchful leaders in the area it would be difficult for outside (or inside) saboteurs to incite the people and create a conflict. Peace committees were formed after considerable discussions. These peace committees were composed of local youth, community leaders, local politicians and members of the local police force.

In one incident a few years later a local Muslim politician lost an election. In the general disarray that followed an assistant of his stabbed a Hindu volunteer of the opposing political party. Tension mounted in the area and everybody feared another Hindu-Muslim conflict. But the local peace committee decided to act. They became mediators between the Hindus, the Muslims and the Deputy Commissioner of police. The discussions went on till 2 a.m. in the morning. A peace agreement was finally thrashed out and the main political parties and the local Hindu and Muslim leaders decided to calm the people and prevent the situation from getting out of hand. A major crisis was averted, thanks to the steps taken by the peace committee.

Since the activists in Pipal Tree were also writers it was decided to act for peace through the media as well. The question had to be posed in a different manner. What does a writer do when he sees his country slowly slipping into a quagmire of religious intolerance and violence? As writers what was our modest role in bringing about peace and harmony among peoples. Out of this challenge emerged 'The Transforming Word', a print-media network meant to encourage journalists to write articles in the press on issues related to cultural conflict, literature, art and cinema, environment, civil society and issues pertaining to democracy and trade. 'The Transforming Word', promoted by The Alliance

for a Responsible, Plural and United World, is today a global media programme with correspondents in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America.

Early in 1998 I traveled to the central-eastern state of Orissa to investigate the brutal killing of an Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two little children. Graham Staines had worked in India for over twenty years. He had set up an important institution for leprosy patients in the small, poor district town of Baripada. He and his wife Gladys worked with destitute villagers on health, rehabilitation and education. For the poor people in the villages, who had little to gain from the feeble, and often non-existent, government programmes in the area, Graham and Gladys were symbols of hope. On January 22nd 1998, a disgruntled Hindu fanatic named Dara Singh led a mob that torched the jeep in which Graham Staines and his two sons, Timothy and Philip, were sleeping. The flames engulfed the jeep and in a few minutes Graham and his sons were burnt alive, charred beyond recognition. This terrible incident sent alarm bells among the Christian community in India. They realised that they too could be the victims of the newly emerging Hindu nationalism. I wrote a long piece on these events in the Deccan Herald, a newspaper with a readership of over a million people. It was my hope that the article might lead to some soul-searching, and raise disturbing questions on the factors that bred religious hatred and spawned a terrible tragedy that left much of a nation deeply ashamed. Later the same article was picked up by Humanscape and republished.

Many will say that religious intolerance in India received a major boost from the events of 6th December 1992. On that day thousands of people menacingly surrounded a mosque, the Babri Masjid, in the northern Indian town of Ayodhya. A specially trained team of Hindu religious activists, wearing yellow headbands, worked their way through the crowds towards the mosque. They carried ropes, pickaxes, shovels and hammers. In a few hours the mosque was demolished. In the aftermath of the event, bloody riots erupted in many parts of the country. More than 1200 people died between 6th December and 13th December in the clashes. The killings continued into January 1993, when 458 persons died in Bombay, the epicentre of the violence. The number of Muslims killed were substantially more than Hindus, and many of them were killed in direct clashes with the police.

The Babri mosque had been the centre of a controversy for many years. According to the activists of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (a Hindu militant organisation) the mosque was built on the exact site where the Hindu god Rama was born. It was alleged that the Muslim ruler, Babar, destroyed a temple in the sixteenth century and erected a mosque in its place. Several historians have stated that there is no serious evidence to justify the claim that the mosque was built on the ruins of a temple. With the demolition of the mosque the cultural history of India was bound to take a different course, and the myth that the country was a haven of non-violence would be exposed. The land of the Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi was poised to be a battleground of ongoing religious conflict.

The Hindu Nationalistic movement in the country is collectively referred to as the Sangh Parivar. Its main ideological wing is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The

political party, which rides piggyback on the movement, is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The agenda of the movement is called Hindutva, which is a rather free reinterpretation of Hinduism, with the view to give it more political muscle. It talks of a common culture, common civilisation and history. Everybody had to accept or appreciate the Hindu God, Rama, even if non-Hindus did not see him as divine. Hindutva ideology plays upon historical memory and portrays the Muslims as tyrannical during the medieval period. Muslims are often seen as unpatriotic. It is not uncommon to hear people saying that Indian Muslims are more loyal to Pakistan than to India.

Let me now return to the question of the media and its response to cultural conflict. For us in South Asia our media-programme received a fillip when the Japan Foundation supported two workshops in 1998 and 1999 with writers, journalists, publishers, social-activists and NGO's to understand the causes of cultural conflict in the region and what different people were doing to promote peace. For those who came to the workshops it was an occasion to feel they were not alone, that they could net-work and coordinate with others all over the region. It was also an occasion to learn from each other. Those who came were people with great compassion and personal intensity. Their lives and efforts were eloquent testimonies against fatalism and cynicism. They believed that it was truly possible to transform the hearts and minds of people. Essentially the workshops were opportunities to oxygenate our minds, to renew our hopes and commitments. But they did not end there. The workshop reports were distributed to a large number of people and were found to be useful and inspiring documents. The presentations of the last media workshop in December 1999 were edited by The Transforming Word and Pipal Tree and are due to appear in a special issue of the journal *Humanscape*, one of the most widely read magazines on social issues. The action-efforts of many of us in South Asia benefited from these workshops. So did our writings, which gained in clarity and purpose.

What we found at our workshops was that the number of journalists who were committed to social issues was reducing. This also meant that the journalists covering religious and cultural conflict were too few to make a significant impact on the media. What is the reason for this? There were two obvious reasons. The first was the attitude of the proprietors of newspapers who saw newspapers increasingly as commodities for sale. In the past few years the example set by *The Times of India* could not be ignored. *The Times* decided that they would do everything possible to increase their sales even if it meant a significant change in their editorial policy. It put in more news on fashion, entertainment, light-hearted human-interest pieces and more colour pictures.

The new-look of *The Times of India* certainly made for more engaging reading, but in the process the notion of the social responsibility of a newspaper took a back seat. Perhaps the middle classes were also tired of reading articles on poverty and religious conflict. There is an increasing feeling that if you cannot change something it is better that you don't read about it. Reading about social disasters only makes you feel depressed, powerless and guilty. Businessmen and Industrial houses were also pleased with the new *Times of India* policy and granted them more advertisements. This forced the other newspapers to follow suit in varying degrees.

The other reason why we are not able to get more quality articles on social issues into the press is the paucity of journalists with a social conscience. Even if one made allowance for those journalists who wish to write but are not able to do so due to editorial policy and other constraints, the number of those who care deeply for social issues is still few. Some writers are themselves influenced by the general religious intolerance and are therefore part of the problem. They have no moral compass to guide them. In earlier years writers had been exposed to social philosophies like Gandhism, varieties of Socialism and secular or religious humanism.. This made them acutely aware of the social, cultural and political problems. Most of today's younger writers do not have this exposure and usually see journalism as a mere career. The workshops we organised helped to inspire and infuse new ideas and vision to the participants. Perhaps I should put it differently. The participants found the space at these workshops to discuss their doubts, dreams and future efforts. Everybody went away feeling that they had recharged their batteries. It was felt that we needed to inspire younger journalists and even see if we could enter into a dialogue with the publishers of newspapers and the producers of television programmes. Many felt that media programmes like the Transforming Word and The International Alliance of Journalists, and journals like Humanscape could play an important role to encourage more objective and compassionate writing on conflict resolution and peace-building.

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