

Marad Peace Initiative: A Gandhian Intervention in an Inter-religious Conflict

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Abstract

The paper documents the peace intervention made by activists from four Gandhian organisations of Kerala⁽¹⁾ for restoring communal harmony in a coastal fishing village called Marad where in two violent communal (Hindu - Muslim) conflicts that occurred in 2002 and 2003, fourteen people were killed.

Marad, a fishermen's village on the Arabian Sea coast in northern Kerala in India, consists of a mixed population of Hindus and Muslims. In the past there existed a strong bond of interconnectedness among the villagers generated and strengthened by the challenges of sea-fishing together. Although communal harmony was occasionally marred by ordinary bickering between the villagers on insignificant issues, these were previously resolved locally. Gradually, political parties and communal organisations manipulated these petty squabbles and altercations into two violent communal clashes in 2002 and 2003 which left 15 people dead from both communities. Further intervention by militant Hindu organisations resulted in flight from the village by all 400-500 Muslim families of Marad to three relief camps. Owing to the stiff resistance of external militant Hindu organisations the government of Kerala could not organize the return of the Muslim families back to their homes. Police intervention also failed. Subsequently the Kerala State government approached Kerala based Gandhian organisations for help. These local Gandhian organisations organized jointly to establish a peace camp in Marad. The organizations collected locally relief supplies and established relationships with the villagers and the families which had fled to safe camps. The Gandhian organizations developed a strategy of community interactive dialogue and accompanied phased return of the families which had fled back to their homes in the village. The author provides a critical insiders view of the experiences of this peace initiative which provides a positive model of addressing communal strife.

Background

Marad is about 12 km from Kozhikode or Calicut, in northern Kerala, South India. It is a fishing village on the Arabian coast consisting of a mixed population of Hindus and Muslims. There is a strong bond of interconnectedness among them as they confront the challenges of sea-fishing together. All the same, there was occasional bickering between them, most often on insignificant issues and the same used to be resolved locally. With the advent of communally oriented political parties⁽²⁾ communalisation became a significant feature of Indian politics and the politics of Marad also got vitiated. In order to strengthen their influence and to consolidate their control in the area, political parties and communal organisations manipulated even petty squabbles and altercations. They encouraged the remembrance of grievances behind settled differences and issues. In the gatherings of political parties and communal organisations the speakers often referred to them and exhorted the erstwhile victims and their community not to forget them. All these contributed to creating distrust and widening the distance between Hindu and Muslim communities in Marad and consequently building up communal tension in the area.

In 2001 there occurred an altercation between a few fishermen on the question of New Year's day celebrations which, as previously, was settled by local elders. However, due to the interference of political parties like Bharatheeya Janatha Party (B.J.P.) and Indian Union Muslim League (I.U.M.L.), and communal organisations⁽³⁾ like National Democratic Front (N.D.F.), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (V.H.P.), it developed into a communal conflict in 2002 in which five people were killed of which three were Muslims and two Hindus. This violent incident hardened the attitudes of people on both sides and this was used by political and communal forces to create further divide among the local population. As a result of continuous machinations and manipulations of communal forces supported by political parties, further violence occurred on the beach on May 2nd 2003, killing nine people, eight of them Hindus, and one Muslim. Militant Hindu organisations sprang into action, vowed to avenge the death of the Hindus by threatening to set fire to houses and kill suspected Muslims. Sensing large scale retaliation, all the Muslim families in Marad, nearly 500, had to flee and find refuge in relief camps⁽⁴⁾ or the houses of relatives or friends in distant places.

The government of Kerala made a few attempts to bring the Muslims back to their homes but all such attempts were thwarted by the threat of resistance and violent retaliation from the side of militant Hindu organisations, in particular V.H.P., Hindu Aikya Vedi, and Arayasamajam⁽⁵⁾. Their main demand was that the investigation of the case should be handed over to the central agency, namely the Central Bureau of Investigations (C.B.I.). The insistence of the Hindu side on C.B.I. enquiry was due to their apprehension that as the Indian Union Muslim League was a member of the ruling coalition of the then government of the state of Kerala, an enquiry by a state

government agency will not be impartial and the real culprits will not be brought before the law. The Hindu organisations also alleged a deep conspiracy behind the incident and averred that militant anti-national Muslim outfits were involved in the massacre. In fact, I.U.M.L. openly opposed the C.B.I. enquiry. Their argument was that the state investigating agency was competent and the enquiry has been progressing well and in the right direction and hence investigation by a central agency was unnecessary, legally untenable and politically motivated. The result was that the state government did not accede to the demand for C.B.I. enquiry.

The Marad issue began to be seriously discussed and debated in the print and electronic media. The threat by the militant Hindu outfits that they will resist the resettlement of the Muslims at any cost was viewed by many as an affront to basic human and civil rights and a challenge to the authority of the government. Public opinion across the state was in favour of allowing the Muslim population to return⁽⁶⁾. In the public discussions the government was accused of being partisan to the Muslims as it refused an independent inquiry by a central agency. On the other hand it was argued that by yielding to the pressure of militant Hindu organisations and by not ensuring the legitimate right of the Muslims to return to their houses the government was surrendering its authority and thus losing its legitimacy and credibility. In fact, the government felt totally helpless; it was literally between the horns of a dilemma.

It was at this juncture that the Chief Minister (C.M.) took personal interest and contacted Mr. P. Gopinathan Nair, Chairman of Kerala Gandhi Smaraka Niddhi, for help from Gandhian organisations (Gos) in resolving the crisis. The C.M. told Mr. Nair that the people of the state were looking forward to an immediate but peaceful solution for the problem and he found no other way than seeking a Gandhian intervention. The request from the C.M. was irresistible, though challenging. For the Gandhian fraternity, it provided another opportunity to test both its organisation and its founding principles. Mr. Nair contacted other leaders of Gos and it was decided to accept the request of the government and to initiate peace action in Marad. The result, in short, was that in a phased manner all the families were brought back and resettled in their homes and a certain level of peace and communal harmony could be restored in the region due to the peace initiative.

How the Gos worked for communal harmony and peace in Marad

The First Round

Immediately following the acceptance of the government invitation the first task of Gos was to prepare the ground for intervention and talks were held with the leaders of both groups involved in the problem, the leaders claiming to represent the Hindu and Muslim communities. It was hard and challenging as there were several individuals and organisations claiming

to represent the communities. On the side of the Hindu community the picture was comparatively clear as the leadership was with known organisations and leaders – in Marad village *Arayasamagam* indisputably represented the Hindu community; but not so with the Muslims. There were known and not so known organisations and one of the most active organisations like N.D.F., (now renamed Popular Front of India) deliberately used different names for misleading the authorities and taking advantage of the confusion it caused. The I.U.M.L. claimed to represent the Muslim population and did not want to bring in any other Muslim groups into the dialogue. I.U.M.L. was, in fact, opposed by organisations including the N.D.F. who maintained a different Islamist philosophy. The state government was in a hurry to begin the resettlement process as it knew that any further delay would confirm the criticism that the government was totally inactive, and failed in its primary legal duty to ensure the protection of the lives and property of the citizens and thus corrode the credibility of the government. This additional restriction compelled the Gandhian organisations to work through IUML without trying to reach out to other Muslim organisations. Moreover, the Gos felt that if they tried to contact other Muslim outfits or insisted on bringing them also into the process the I.U.M.L. which was crucial actor in the process might non-cooperate resulting in a stalemate. It was also felt that organisations like N.D.F. were following a hard (read extremist) line in the matter and did not want to settle the problem through third party intervention and, therefore, involving them might complicate the issue and scuttle the peace process rather than solving it.

Representatives of Gandhian organisations held separate and combined discussions with the ministers of the government and leaders claiming to represent the contending Hindu and Muslim communities. A general consensus was arrived at according to which all the Muslim families who left their homes in Marad subsequent to the massacre would be allowed to come back and settle in their former houses. Leaders of the Hindu community assured that no one from their side would obstruct this process. It was the responsibility of the intervening Gandhian organisations to facilitate their return. The Gos wanted the police force to be stationed outside the village to oversee the law and order situation without interfering in the process of resettlement in any manner unless demanded by them. This was accepted by the government and the Chief Minister issued strict instructions accordingly and the police and the state administrative machinery complied with the directions fully and consistently. Non-interference from the side of the police was important for the Gos in two ways. If the police force were brought into the resettlement process that would give the impression that the Gos were not fearless and were acting hand in glove with the government. That would certainly undermine the credibility of the Gos and would have an adverse impact on the work. It would also raise questions on their political neutrality. In fact, this position really helped the work of the Gos.

Facilitating the Return

The return of the Muslim families back to their houses was, of course, not smooth. Responses of the Hindu community members were, in fact, mixed. They varied from hearty welcome to raging anger; there were instances of warm and tearful hugging of returning neighbours after a short but painful separation. Some Hindu families had prepared tea and snacks, and some a whole meal, for the returning Muslim neighbours and did not allow them to go to their own houses before accepting their hospitality and partaking of the meal. It was a rare sight of the noblest expression of human goodness and neighbourliness. There were also cases of strong protests, threats and abuses. Angry responses were mainly from the family members of those who were killed in the incident which made their anger and protests understandable. The Gandhian volunteers who accompanied the returning Muslims intervened to pacify the angry Hindu folks. The tactic was of patient listening, requesting for forgiveness and mercy, gentle persuasion and also reminding them of the promise made by their leaders. There was no attempt to convince or stop by argument. On the contrary, the accompaniers tried to reach the head through the heart. This facilitation succeeded in pacifying the angry. The reason was simple, so to say: right from the beginning it was very clear that the only aim of the Gos was to encourage and establish communal harmony and peace in the area and had no other interest to serve by getting involved in the process. Within a few days the settlement was complete.

The Healing Process

The successful resettlement of the Muslims was hailed as a grand success - both for the government and more so for the Gandhian movement. What the government could not do with police reinforcement was done by the Gandhian activists inviting least resistance and no violence was, undoubtedly, an achievement. But for the Gandhian peace activists it gave no reason for complacency. They knew that road ahead was hard and steep. Marad was a fuming volcano; it could burst at any moment; the slightest provocation from either side could upset a fragile peace. Communal harmony had been shattered and many had fallen victim to hatred. Both sides thought that they were more sinned against than sinning. It is obvious that in such situations reason does not prevail. Frustration could result even in revenge. It was, therefore, crucial to take into account the total reality of the situation and address all the factors in order to create an atmosphere congenial for mutual understanding between hostile communities and eventually leading to re-establishment of communal tolerance. So, it was necessary to understand the undercurrents and develop appropriate strategies for a comprehensive peace action – which involved peace keeping, peace-building.

Shanti Sena Camp

Consequently a Shanti Sena (Peace Brigades) Camp was opened in the area in order to systematically carry out the work of peace-keeping and peace-building. The Camp worked for three months. It consisted of about thirty volunteers at any time and some senior leaders. Some volunteers stayed and worked for the whole three months while others worked for shorter periods. Those who had to leave were replaced by new volunteers. The resources – materials and money - required for maintaining the camp and doing the work were donated by support groups, particularly those based in Calicut. The government offered to meet all the expenses for running the camp, but the offer was politely turned down. Leaders of the Gos were of the view that accepting financial support from the government would invite governmental interference which, in turn, would hamper the process and progress of peace action. Individuals and groups have come forward to extend support to the peace initiative as they felt that this was a crucial act of service. In the city of Calicut a support group consisting of concerned citizens, which included prominent businessmen also, was formed and they offered financial help for the peace action. Throughout the three months when the Shanti Sena Camp functioned in Marad there was no dearth of resources for the campers. The support group promptly and generously supplied every requirement. Similarly the government machinery – both the police and the civil service - extended substantial cooperation by constantly keeping in touch with the leaders of the Gos.

Peace Initiative

Mahatma Gandhi's *Constructive Programme*⁽⁷⁾ provided the paradigm for the Marad peace initiative. Drawing insight and inspiration from the Gandhian Constructive Programme the peace volunteers developed a programme of action for Marad. The Camp formulated and followed its own schedule and discipline which included, among other things, morning and evening prayer, reporting and regular evaluation of the day's work and planning for the next day.

Work in the community included regular/daily house visits and conversations with the members of families. Each family had its own story to narrate. The volunteers listened patiently and sympathetically and shared the family's anguish. Some of them had lost everything in the clash and when they returned found their houses substantially destroyed. Some houses were in dilapidated condition. Some had genuine complaints and grievances and did not know what to do for their redress. They were afraid to approach authorities as they feared that it might land them in worse troubles. In all such cases the volunteers offered their help and made positive interventions in all possible cases. In practical terms such interventions helped in improving the physical quality

of life of the people and it generated a certain degree of contentment and happiness among them. This, in turn, resulted in building trust between the volunteers and the people.

These conversations with the villagers were also intended to serve the purpose of civic and moral education. The volunteers talked about the need for accepting and respecting cultural and religious diversity and pluralism which were unavoidable facts of life. It was not difficult to convince them that there cannot be just one religion and one culture in the world. The volunteers quoted from the Holy Quran and the Hindu Vedas to convince them that it was a universally shared understanding.

Conversations on topics like this were carried further to the level of group discussions. The topics of such discussions were carefully chosen with a view to inculcating values of tolerance and respectful acceptance which were crucial in creating and maintaining communal harmony. Topics discussed included Environmental Protection, Coastal Regulatory Zone, Disaster Management, Traditional versus Mechanised Fishing, etc. These topics were politically neutral and through them both Hindus and Muslims could identify their common concerns and interests and realise the need for living together in peace and harmony. They realised that they shared a common fate and therefore, tolerance and cooperation were necessary for survival.

Such group discussions were organised in different parts of the affected areas. Initially, the response was poor and discouraging. But the volunteers persisted in their persuasive tactics and the attendance improved gradually and such gatherings helped in reducing communal tension and improving mutual tolerance and respect. This could be gauged from the composition of the audience. Initially Hindus and Muslims had refused to sit together in public functions. 'The religious other' was stereotyped as 'the most detestable enemy' and thus the enemy image got imprinted in their conscious mind. Gentle persuasion started paying its dividends and gradually the situation changed and the gatherings became interreligious. It was very encouraging (and a positive sign) to note that the communication gap which was a mark of the communal divide was narrowing down and the level of communication between members of both communities improved in and as a result of these group discussions.

In Marad the main occupation of the people is fishing. Fishing cannot give full employment to the people and many of them were struggling to make both ends meet. During family meetings people asked the volunteers how they could find some gainful employment for the villagers. One contributory factor in the unrest and violence was unemployment. Therefore, the Shanti Sena members decided to devise some programmes which would help them find some gainful employment. Three members of the Shanti Sena had expertise in umbrella making, book binding and soap making. They trained some villagers, particularly women, according to their interest

and preference in these works. While book-binding was done in the Camp, soap making and assembling of umbrellas were done in houses. Provision for providing raw materials for production and the marketing of finished products was mobilised by the support groups who provided the raw materials and purchased the products in bulk. This was easy for the support groups as they had merchants and traders as members. Together with improving the economic condition of the villagers this also helped considerably in easing the atmosphere of tension that prevailed in Marad and its neighbourhood.

This economic programme paved the way to formation of women's self-help groups called *Kudumbashree*⁽⁸⁾. Several self-help groups were formed and their activities helped considerably in removing the distrust and misunderstanding that divided the people of Marad. It generated considerable positive energy in society which changed the attitude of people for the better. Villagers started talking about their common interests and began to see more clearly the need for living in peace and harmony. They shared with the Shanti Sena volunteers their realisation that unless there was peace and communal unity life would be miserable for them again.

Winding up the Camp

By the end of three months it was decided by consensus to wind up the Camp. Some members wanted the work to continue, but the general feeling was that as outsiders the Gos should step out and allow the flow of life in the region to take its own natural course. It was made clear that the police camp will function as a regular station; they will be vigilant and will not allow the situation to drift. The withdrawal of the peace camp was a quiet event.

The Present Scenario

It may be said that Marad remains quiet and peaceful for now. Is the calm only on the surface? Or is it the calm before a storm? These are the questions that many students who try to study the Marad problem are compelled to ask. On interacting with a select number of people from both communities very recently it became clear to me that the calm that prevails in that area is probably not likely to endure.

The people of Marad are satisfied with and thankful to the Gos for facilitating the rehabilitation of the families. But some of them feel that Gos could have done more and better. For example criminal cases were registered against many innocent and incapacitated people like the blind, the old and the lame who had absolutely no role in the massacre. One person said: "The Gandhians did not do anything to verify or correct such grave errors and injustice. They could

certainly have helped to remove the names of such people from the criminal list". Some of the locals questioned the sincerity and impartiality of some of the leaders of Gos.

At the beginning of the peace process the public had very high expectations but most of them were not fulfilled. Naturally, they were disappointed and frustrated as the negative comments show. After the closure of the Shanti Sena Camp there was no follow up from the side of the Gos. The state government appointed a Judicial Commission to inquire into the communal disturbance⁽⁹⁾, and then the government also withdrew. The people of the area have been left to an uncertain fate. As a member of the peace initiative and as a member of the Gandhian fraternity I would say in retrospect that the Gos did not do what they should have done. In fact, the Gos did not do enough preparation before undertaking the peace action. They did not have a well-made plan to act upon. Long term and short term goals were not spelt out and strategies were not designed for their effective implementation. Of course, there was a severe constraint of time but that does not justify lack of adequate preparation. But most of the peace volunteers were experienced and endowed with skills to handle such sensitive issues. In addition to skills, they also possessed qualities like sincerity, commitment and sensitivity. They developed a group dynamics which made the work effective and succeeded in bringing in a certain level of peace and calm in the area. But communal forces are once again becoming active in the area. Political parties have once again started employing their technique of divide to dominate and control policy and try to keep the Hindu – Muslim divide as wide as possible. Old memories are raked up and the resentment is rekindled.

In the absence of urgent, adequate and well-organised follow up work the situation may drift and violence may erupt again.

Endnotes

(1) Kerala Sarvodaya Mandalam, (2) Kerala Gandhi Smaraka Nidhi, (3) Gandhi Peace Foundation, (4) Kerala State Prohibition Council. They are all Kerala chapters of national level Gandhian organizations.

(2) The re-emergence of communalization of politics in India could be traced to the formation of Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) in 1980 and the Ramajanmabhoomi Movement launched jointly by Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a militant Hindu organization and the B.J.P. The campaign led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a mosque built in the town of Ayodhya in 1527 by Babur, the first Mughul emperor of India and named after him, on December 6, 1992. It led to large scale rioting and the Muslims of India started getting communally organised as never before following this. It naturally got

reflected in the domain of party politics and the process of communalization Indian politics set in extensively.

- (3) N.D.F. is a militant Muslim organisation and V.H.P., as mentioned above, a militant Hindu organisation.
- (4) These relief camps were organised and maintained by I.U.M.L., Communist Party of India (Marxist), though they did not acknowledge it openly.
- (5) Arayasamajam is a local organization of the Hindu fisher folk owing allegiance to the B.J.P. and V.H.P. Their leader at the time of the clash was one Suresh who openly acknowledge his allegiance to the R.S.S. which is an important constituent of V.H.P.
- (6) This is can be seen both in articles and letters to the editors in the newspaper of those days..
- (7) In this monograph Gandhi presented a package of 18 items (more items were added later) for nonviolent rural reconstruction through voluntary and cooperative effort of people. It is a compact and integrated package including socio-cultural and economic programmes to be used selectively taking into active consideration the ground realities of the area where they are going to be implemented.
- (8) *Kudumbashree* means prosperity of the family and is the name of the women oriented, community based, State Poverty Eradication Mission of Government of Kerala. It aims at the empowerment of women, through forming self-help groups and encouraging their entrepreneurial or other wide range of activities. The purpose of the mission is to ensure that the women should no longer remain as passive recipients of public assistance, but active leaders in women involved development initiatives.

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