

## 1. A Flemish hero

Herman Rasschaert (1922-64) was a Flemish Catholic missionary in Chotanagpur, and now the subject of a hagiography by the Flemish author Robert Houthaeve: "*Recht, al barstte de wereld!*" (published by the author, 9 Puitstraat, 8890 Moorslede, Belgium). The term "hagiography" is not used pejoratively here: as becomes clear in Houthaeve's very detailed and well-documented description of his hero's life and times, Rasschaert was an idealist of a type which is hard to come by nowadays. In Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern half of Belgium, Catholic children of my generation used to be told the then-recent account of his martyrdom; as Rasschaert's sister was a schoolmate and lifelong friend of my mother's, I have heard his story many times. Checking the story we were fed against this new and detailed account proves most interesting.

Herman Rasschaert was born in the Netherlands, where his parents were temporary refugees because of their role in the "Activist" movement (anti-Belgian Flemish nationalists collaborating with the Germans) in World War 1. During his school days in the Flemish provincial town of Aalst, Rasschaert himself was known as an ardent Flemish nationalist and admirer of Joris Van Severen, the leader of the Catholic-nationalist "Union of Thiudic [= Pan-Dutch] National-Solidarists", murdered by French soldiers in 1940. When he entered the Jesuit order, he chose as his own the motto used by Adrian VI, the only Dutch pope in history: *Fiat justitia pereat mundus*, "Justice be done, even if the world perish for it!" (the Dutch version is the title of the book: *Recht, al barstte de wereld*). The same sense of justice which made him a supporter of the Flemish cause, also determined his attitude to India in two ways. Firstly, it led him to understand the Indian distrust of Christians and missionaries: he compared their position as former protégés of the British colonizer to that of the collaborators with the Belgo-French oppressors in Flanders. Secondly, it helped him choose a career in the service of a poor and often oppressed population: the Munda tribals in the forests of eastern India.

## 2. Travails of the tribals

The tribals of India are often called Adivasis ("aboriginals"), on the assumption that they are somehow more ancient inhabitants of India. In a biological sense, of course, practically all Indians are descendents of the earliest human inhabitants, and separating a minority by calling it "aboriginal" (meaning that the others are invaders) is simply mischievous. It is at most in a linguistic sense that some communities, or at least their languages, may be traced to fairly recent foreign origins.

Even then, the term "Adivasi/Aboriginal" is mistaken in the case of several of the tribes who now proudly wear that label and claim special rights on that basis, e.g. those who speak Dravidian (e.g. Oraon, Gondi) or Sino-Tibetan (Naga, Mizo, Bodo): most linguists believe that Dravidian entered India from southern Iran (Elam/Makran), while the origins of Sino-Tibetan were in the middle basin of the Yellow River in China.

However, one may justify the term "Adivasi/Aboriginal" on the patronizing assumption that their lifestyle is *culturally* more "original", meaning "primitive"; but in that case, the labels "Christian" and "Adivasi" are mutually exclusive, since the act of conversion is a dramatic break with their ancestral traditions.

At any rate, the author consistently uses the term (in its vernacular form Adibasi) to designate the tribals among whom Father Rasschaert worked, in particular the Munda tribe. In their case too, the term is as inaccurate as it would be in case of the Indo-Aryans, the ones typically targeted for exclusion (as being foreign invaders) by the very term "Adivasi". For, it is now generally accepted among linguists that the Austro-Asiatic family to which Munda belongs, originated in Southeast Asia, which remains its demographic centre of gravity, its most spoken member being Vietnamese. If Hindi-speaking Brahmins aren't "aboriginal", then neither are the Mundas.

The author briefly relates how the Mundas had become the victims of exploitation and oppression. Since the Moghul dynasty opened up the forests of Chotanagpur for cultivation, settlement by landholders and tax collection, the tribals lost their splendid isolation. British rule accelerated the process: modern economics did not recognize communal ownership of land, roads and railways further destroyed the protective isolation, increased demographic pressure in non-tribal regions and the discovery of ores encouraged outsiders to settle in the newly opened areas and in industrial boomtowns, with tribals as cheap labour. Since many of the landholders and traders heartlessly exploiting the tribals' inexperience were Muslims, this evolution also set the stage for the Adivasi-Muslim conflagration which was to make Rasschaert a martyr.

The dispossession of the tribals, who often had the law on their side but lacked the societal skills to have the law enforced, created a God-given opening to the Christian missionaries: under the leadership of the Flemish Father Constant Lievens s.j. (1856-93), they offered their services in legal help and social self-organization in exchange for the souls of these poor heathens. It should also be said in favour of the Flemish Jesuits that the schools they opened mostly have the mother tongue along with Hindi as the medium of instruction, in contrast with the English-medium schooling organized and propagated by Anglo-American missionaries. In this respect at least, Hindu nationalists would be wrong to denounce the missionaries as "anti-national" (I remember how in 1974, bishop Kerketta, groomed by the Flemish Jesuits, visited our school in Leuven, Belgium, and was asked why India had just exploded a nuclear bomb; his reply was not the usual protest that a poor country should waste money on armament, but that "we must be strong against the threat from China!"). Houthaeve rightly sings the beauties of the Lievens mission, though he ought to have mentioned the tribal opposition against the missionaries as well.

Thus, since 1947, several legal amendments to prohibit and effectively thwart conversions by force or fraud (practices documented in the 1956 Niyogi Committee Report, internationally misrepresented by missionaries as an attack on the freedom of religion) were pushed by tribal MPs. For another example, the genuinely indigenous revolt led by Birsa Munda in 1899 was modelled on the Hindu reform movement Arya Samaj (he wanted his fellow tribesmen to renounce witchcraft, intoxication and animal sacrifices, and to wear the Brahminical sacred thread), and started with an attack on a mission post. Birsa receives only a single and quite scornful mention in this book, even though he is still a national hero for the Mundas.

### 3. Long-distance martyr of Pakistani pogroms

In early 1964, the pestering of the largely christianized Garo tribals in East Pakistan by the Muslim majority culminated in bloody terror, killing many hundreds, which sent the survivors fleeing to their brethren in India. Their arrival sparked off a wave of "revenge" against Muslims in Chotanagpur and Orissa, killing hundreds. On 24 March 1964, Father Rasschaert tried to intervene in the siege of a mosque (which served as shelter for hundreds of Muslims) by an armed mob of tribals. Many of the mobsters had come from other villages and mistook him for a Muslim; with his robust build, fair skin and full black beard, he could have been a Pathan. Though the locals of this village, Gerda, were brought to their senses when they recognized their priest, others from adjoining villages continued to rail against him and pelted stones at him. He was hit on the head, fell down, and was finished off with knives and axes. His parishioners in the mob took his body away and gave it a Christian burial.

As Congress MP Mani Shankar Aiyar, then the Embassy secretary in Brussels conveying the official condolences to Rasschaert's parents, confirmed in a eulogy of the Christian missionaries in his *Sunday* column (19 June 1994): "Father Rasschaert died at the hands of the very people to whom he had brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

As he lay dying, the mob entered the mosque and killed the Muslims inside. This seemed to confirm the warnings of his fellow fathers and nuns, viz. that it was reckless and useless to intervene in an Indian communal conflagration. Yet, Herman Rasschaert's sacrifice was not entirely in vain. When the news of his martyrdom spread in the tribal belt, people came to their senses and abandoned their revenge campaigns forthwith. This way, his death undisputedly did save a sizable number of lives.

To fully understand this drama, we must bear in mind a few events which did not take place because they could not have taken place. No missionary has stepped in and courted martyrdom to defend the tribals and Hindus of Pakistan, in fact no missionary was around when the initial massacres took place in East Pakistan, because the missions have disinvested in Pakistan. The missions in Islamic countries find their converts harassed and even killed by their own families, their schools and churches attacked on all kinds of pretext, their graduates not given jobs. So, the missionary headquarters prefer to direct their energies to more hospitable countries like India. The fact that a missionary was killed by a "Hindu" while defending the Muslims, and not the other way round, proves in the first place that Catholic priests can function in India, much more than in Pakistan.

Another aspect of the story is that the non-Muslims in the Ranchi area were desperate about their government's unwillingness to defend the Hindus in Pakistan. One of the chief culprits behind the massacre was Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the patron of "secularism", who used Father Rasschaert's death as yet another occasion to parade his concern for the minorities *in India*, and to put "Hindus" in the dock. He himself (and the entire secularist establishment till today) reneged on his duty to defend the non-Muslims surviving in the Islamic state which he had helped to create. In the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950, he had given up every right to interfere on behalf of the minorities in Pakistan. By effectively condoning the persecution of non-Muslims in Pakistan, he must accept a share in the responsibility for the retaliatory tribal violence which killed Rasschaert. But the international press has never investigated the matter, and has instead confined its

reporting on Father Rasschaert's death to condemning the "Hindu" fanatics, weeping for the Muslim victims, and praising Nehru as the voice of sanity amid the religious madness.

#### **4. Blood on Christian hands, too**

It is a matter of embarrassment for the missions that this wave of violence definitely included the christianized sections of tribal society. The Christian version for international consumption was always that "Hindus" were guilty. The Church never tires of repeating that "tribals are not Hindus", but when something negative is said about the tribals, they suddenly become "Hindus" again, even the baptized ones. Houthaeve admits that till today, the local priests cannot say who exactly was responsible, but he mentions sufficient testimony to refute the white lie on which Catholic schoolboys including myself used to be brought up, viz. that only "heathens" were capable of such barbarity while the baptized tribals had stayed aloof from the rioting.

The fact of Christians killing Muslims is hardly surprising,-- remember the Christian massacres in the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Chatila in Lebanon.

Christians are not above the human inclination to vengefulness. Christian channels of information in India like to take a holier-than-thou attitude vis-a-vis Hindu-Muslim violence, but it may be recalled that in Nagaland and Mizoram, armed separatism is 100% Christian, and Christian Kukis are ethnically cleansed by Christian Nagas. Less well-known but even more sinister is the role of the Church in Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka. Many of the Tamil Tigers are Christian, including the late miss Dhanu, Rajiv Gandhi's suicide-murderer. The Church would like to get rid of the assertive Sinhalese Buddhists, who do not indulge in self-deluded Hindu nonsense that "all religions say the same thing", but firmly oppose the Christian mission. Consequently, it supports the creation of an autonomous territory for the Tamils, confident that the Tamils' ideological disorientation (a faint remainder-Hinduism weakened by decades of Christian schooling, Tiger Marxism and Dravidianist atheism) will allow Tamil Eelam to become a stronghold of the mission.

Another noteworthy aspect of the Rasschaert drama is the fact that in Belgium, the Jesuit order is strangely inhibited about the memory of its slain saint. In the academic session where Rasschaert's biography was presented, there was a conspicuous absence of VIPs from the Order, the Church hierarchy and the Christian-Democratic socio-political organizations. Insiders told me that Rasschaert does not fit in with the image which the Church and the Jesuit Order want to project today. Always friends of the powers-that-be, they disown the martyr's Flemish nationalism as well as his identification with the effort to convert people. Nationalism is anathema to the globalists and its Flemish variety is an offence to the Belgian establishment, while conversion campaigns are hard to reconcile with the "multiculturalist" line which the Churches in Europe are adopting. In addition, an unspoken reason might be the apprehension that too much publicity around this martyr would draw attention to the embarrassing fact of Christian participation in Herman Rasschaert's death.

(adapted from my article in *India*, the organ of the now-defunct Shanti Darshan Belgo-Indian Association, spring 1996)

