

Challenge of Shabarikumbh

“At & Post Shabaridham, Subir, Dist. Daang - (Gujarat)” This address will be known all over the country in 2006. This Vanavasi Daang district with its thick forest is 200 Km from Nashik and situated at the foot of Saputara hills range. The local dialect called 'Daangi' is a mixture of Gujarati and Marathi and is in vogue even today. Till 1998, this district was altogether unknown to the urban population. However, Christian Padres and Nuns were all quietly and tenaciously busy in dispensing salvation to the Vanavasis through their 'Package Deal' and converting Vanavasi Hindus to Christianity. By and by, the Vanavasis started to find this programme of 'welfare and development' troublesome. With great courage they raised their voice against it. Swami Asimanand, who is popularly known in these parts as 'Swamiji' implanted the seed of patriotism in the hearts of the simple Vanavasis and awakened their confidence.

Swamiji is a 'Social Sanyasi' who constructively, legally and persistently protects and nurtures Hinduism and Hindus. Alarmed at his success, the missionaries and their secularist friends raised a storm against Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram and BJP not only in India but all over the world. A planned conspiracy to denigrate Hindus was hatched. Media was used to spread disinformation. However all these attempts only brought forth issues of Daang, its Vanavasis, their problems, and the extent of Christian aggression, the challenges before the Hindu organizations and the future of Hindu society.

The activities of Missionaries and the hypocrisy of secularists were exposed. Local Vanavasis appealed the Hindu organizations, workers and personalities to give fillip to their fight. As a result to stop the Christianization, awaken Hindutva, develop Vanavasi area, revive local traditions, faiths and honor, organizations of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal started reaching out to all small and large localities, houses and huts. Slowly, the change manifested itself. The conversion activities of missionaries were restricted to a considerable extent. Through the numerous festivals, celebrations and programmes, Vanavasis started getting organized. People felt the need to have an auspicious spot in this area for them to come together. As per tradition, Daang area is a part of Dandkaranya of the Ramayana and a place where Matang Rishi had done his penance. The special thing about this area is that at this very spot, Shri Ram-Laxman had met Shabarimata. Prabhu Ramchandra had eaten the Bers (a small sweet fruit found in jungles), which Shabarimata had already tasted to make sure they were sweet. The pride over that event and tremendous devotion for Shabari is all pervading here.

At the spot, there is a simple cottage-type temple. It was here that the meeting of Shabarimata and Sri Ram had taken place on Kojagiri Pournima or Sharad Pournima. Every year, on Sharad Pournima, children, teenagers, youngsters and elders come in procession from small and large localities with some youngsters dressed as Shri Ram, Laxman and Shabarimata and gather at Subir (Ahawa) and the programme of feeding Bers is celebrated with great enthusiasm. This is the tradition here. But this place is in a very thick forest and to reach it there is only a foot-wide trail full of thorns and pits. And yet, this programme is held on a huge scale here overcoming all the obstacles.

Considering this, a 'Shri Shabari Seva Samiti Trust' affiliated to Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram was established and a determination was made to resist the Christian aggression and taking care of Vanavasi Hindus. Immediately, the Trust gave an organized form to the traditional pilgrimage. It obtained land by explaining to the Forest Department and State Government the importance of this festival and discussing future situation with the help of proper documentation. Last year, it arranged the popular programme of 'Ramkatha' by Sant Moraribapu. The response was overwhelming and the whole area was pervaded by Ramkatha.

On this occasion, a project of building a magnificent temple of Shabarimata and holding the first “Vanavasi Mahakumbh” was announced. With detailed planning and hard work of activists from Nashik, Dhule, and Nandurbar and from all over Maharashtra, the temple of Shabarimata was at last ready. The ceremony of “Praanprathishtha” (invoking life or Chetana in the idol) was held at 12.39 PM on 28th October, 2005 amidst the chanting of Mantras and Homas. The huge crowd raised slogans of “Shabarimata ki jay, Prabhu Ramchandra ki jay”.

In the morning, the religious rites started at the hands of Swami Asimanand, All India President of Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram Jagdeorao Uraon, Organizing Secretary Gunawantsinh Kothari and local Vanavasi brothers. The idol of Shabarimata was unveiled and Vanavasi brothers showered flowers on it. On seeing the actual idols of Shabarimata and Shri Ram-Laxman that was always in their minds for generations and years, they had tears in their eyes. Tears of fulfillment of a dream! There was a great clamor of Dholkis, Cymbals, Chiplyas and Conches and drums. It looked as if the blowing wind, the small and huge trees around, bushes and hills all were singing the Bhajan of Shabari and the virtues of Shri Ram.

In this atmosphere pervaded with Ramchandra, a plan was drawn for the first Vanavasi Mahakumbh on 11th, 12th and 13th February 2006, i.e. the Magh Pournima. The holy Pampa Lake is about 8 Km away from Shabaridham. This Shabarikumbh will be held in the surroundings of the lake only. It is estimated that more than half a million pilgrims through the medium of Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram and various organizations and from this multi-purpose Mahakumbh, Daang will be a centre of energy for Hindu thoughts. The organizers think that this Kumbh will give boost to Hindu efforts to give a fitting reply to the treacherous activities of missionaries. For the programme of 'Peraanpratishtaa' the Vanavasis had made preparations by laying Rangolis, Toranas and garlands of flowers. The Aaratis and the Bhajans after the Praanpratishtaa had continued till early morning of next day. A number of Hindu dignitaries were in full attendance. All India President VKA Jagdeorao Uraon said, "All undertakings of this trust will be run as one of our projects and a trust allied with us." Swami Asimanand said, "The work of this trust will be done with the objective of altogether stopping the conversions in Daang by 2010 A.D. and to make the Vanavasis to be confident and able to stand as proud Hindus." The programmes in which Shabarimata Seva Samiti is engaged are to reconvert to Hinduism the Vanavasis who had been converted to Christianity, to awaken the religious and nationalist sentiments through Bhajans and Satsangs at villages or small localities (popularly called Paadaas), to arrange visits to various places of pilgrimage, celebrate Ramnavami, Gokulashtami, Ganeshotsav, Navaratri, Rakshabandhan as well as hold free camps for eye diagnosis, treatment and surgeries, medical inspections, mobile dispensary and other health-related preliminary work.

Besides, the response for the spread of education has been very encouraging. On all this background, Daang district is likely to be a subject of national discussion. This fight is between the preparations by the Trust (Nyaas), participation by various Hindu organizations, aggressive Vanavasis, determined organizers, budget of some crores of Rupees, the challenge of basic infrastructure facilities, BJP government in Gujarat, CM Modi versus so called intellectuals, media, Leftists and international pressures. On account of the ignorance of majority of Hindus, today, the scales are heavy in favor of secularists.

How ever with the determination, tenacity, professionalism, diligence, practical approach, commitment to principles and pliability to adapt, the Kumbh is bound to be grand success. This needs the involvement of Hindu society at large. In the statement of Trust, it is said that Kumbh will be a symbol of national inspiration. It will be ensured that this first Vanavasi Hindu Shabari Kumbh will be a different one than the other Kumbhas, will be remembered for long, and will prove to be worth following its example. Hence, it is the responsibility of the people dwelling in the towns and cities to help the Kumbh in all ways.

Although the work of Hindu awakening is going on in Daang, according to the 2001 census figures, there is an increase in the Christians by 5%. These figures cannot be overlooked. It will be suicidal. If Christian missionaries can come from thousands of miles and work for religion, is it not our duty to serve and help our own brethren? This Kumbh is one more test of Hindu society. To pass or to fail is to be decided by us. Otherwise, the coming generation may be Hindu by birth, but the daily behavior, Sanskaars will be Christian.

Please do remember, "Love thy neighbor" actually means, "First convert your neighbor and then love him".

Courtesy: Author Makarand Mule, *Vivek* weekly (Marathi), 25-Dec-2005