

Digana Riots: Justice Denied Six Years On

Fasting period. Mohammad Ismail from Digana leaving the mosque after the daytime prayers (March 30, 2024). He and his community are preparing for this year's Ramadan festival. "Thigana city, which is bustling today, was not like this during the same period five years ago. Broken or burnt buildings, some shops open, many not, and a sort of calm after the storm has passed, such was this city." Ismail says.

It is not only him, but also his community who still suffers from those bitter experiences in the old memories.

In early March 2018, one member of the community was killed in attacks targeting Muslims in areas such as Digana and Theldeniya near Kandy. Many were injured. Property worth several millions of rupees was destroyed. The 'Digana Riot' has gone down in history as one of the most significant attacks on minority communities in Sri Lanka.

A Sinhalese driver, who was assaulted on March 22, 2018, passed away two weeks later on March 3, 2018, following his hospitalization. He engaged in a dispute with four Muslim youths in a three-wheeler, leading to his admission to the hospital due to the escalating confrontation. The authorities apprehended the four individuals from the three-wheeler and detained them.

Targeted Muslims

The death of the Sinhalese youth led to a series of violent incidents. Amit Weerasinghe of 'Mahason Balakaya' organization and Ampitiya Sumana Thera of Batticaloa Mangalaramaya Vihara arrived in Kandy on March 04, 2018. Sinhalese people from different parts of the country rushed to Kandy in vehicles.

"There are also people who phoned us and boarded the train at two in the morning from Galle. There are people from Matara. Not the neighbors. There are people who came in a van from Vavuniya Sinhala village. People have come from Kurunegala Mavatthagam." As Amit Weerasinghe had said in a meeting with Buddhist Theras and Muslim protesters. (March 4, 2018)

The attacks, which took place from March 04 - 07, also claimed one life, with his brother expressing his concern over the loss of a 25-year-old youth.

"My brother, who turned 25 and was not even married, our house was completely gutted by fire. The brother died inside this house." He shed tears showing his brother's photograph, deceased S.M.Basit's brother SM Fasal of Palgekala Bazar, Kengalla.

ACM Irfan, a resident of Thigana, Hijrapura, Rajawella, who runs a small shop on his own, shared his bitter experience of being unable to walk even after six years since he fell while running to escape the attack.

“Can't say how many. I didn't have the chance do a head-count. They hit as soon as they arrived. In our mosque, two maulavi ulamas got beatenen. That's when I got stuck. My life turned dark when the STF (Special Task Force) came chasing. I fell as fast as I ran. I don't know what happened when I fell. After falling,I could not get up. The problem with these legs started then.” He says.

Many Muslims, like Irfan, say they have lost their income due to these planned attacks. Today, six years have passed and they have rebuilt their businesses and business activities with the help of various parties. The affected people also allege that the then government did not fully provide them even the promised compensation.

At least six mosques, 37 houses of Muslims, 46 commercial establishments and 35 vehicles were reportedly damaged in the attacks carried out between March 4 and 7, 2018 in Kandy-Digana and Teldeniya areas.

The then head of the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission, Professor Deepika Udagama, said that the attack was premeditated. In an interview given to NewsFirst media on March 15, 2018, he said, “We do not consider the incidents that took place in and around Teldeniya as an isolated incident. We treat them as a series of events.” As pointed out.

State-sponsored violence

Various parties have pointed out that the Digana riots were state-sponsored. In particular, the affected people alleged that even when the police, special operations forces and the army were sent to maintain peace, they cooperated with those responsible for the riots.

“Guns and uniforms threatened Muslims. Because the armed forces entered the houses of the Muslims with guns and locked them inside the house so that they could not come out, it was at this time that the thugs who came on behalf of the Sinhalese community set fire to the houses, torched the shops, damaged the goods inside the houses and did all the injustices they could. The police and army, who are supposed to maintain law and order, did not provide security to Muslims, they provided security to commit atrocities and stopped Muslims from coming out.” Says M. I M. Musadiq, a journalist from Kumbukandura, Digana..

Jainulabdeen Abdul Haneef, from Kumbukandurai, Digana describes, about the support given by security forces to the attackers during the violence, as thus;

"In fact the people who should protect us are the security forces, the police, the army and the navy. However, in Digana's incident, there were situations in which the police was supporting. Those police officers turn a blind eye on it. No one stopped it. Those who were stoning the Digana mosque, were continuously involving in the violence."

Meanwhile, "My friend and I who were at home without engaging in any violence, were arrested, were dragged in the street, and detained along with the rioters and tortured by the police." says M.M.M Fazil from Hijrapura, Digana.

"They dragged us along the road saying such and such and they attacked us. They dragged and tied us in a place in Digana. There was also a racist mob that set shops on fire. They kept us with them."

On March 18, 2018, the affected people brought to the attention of Muslim political leaders and ministers about the negligence of the law enforcement officials who entrusted the implementation of law and order. Abdul Aleem, the Minister responsible for Islamic Religious Affairs at the time, during a media conference held on March 12, 2018, had commented that the attacks took place while the security forces were watching and there was nothing to hide in it.

Meanwhile, Ambiti Sumana Rathana Thera, who gave an interview to a foreign media on that occasion, mentioned that the police had planned the attack. "I state this responsibly. What all the officers, from the former Senior Deputy Inspector General of Police to the Headquarter Inspector, did was, called all the Buddhist monks in the area to the police station, called Amith Weerasinghe and called the politicians, this conflict was engineered by the police officers and I am ready to come anywhere in the world to testify that." He mentioned.

Jayangani Sithum Kumari, the wife of Amith Weerasinghe who was the head of the Mahasona Balakaya organization, had informed the media in Colombo that the police had brought her husband to Digana and made him involved in the riot. "It was the police who asked Amith to come at that time. Kandy DIG who called Amith to come for a while, I am surely saying that it was Kandy DIG who trapped my husband in this trouble."

Human Rights Commission investigation

Amid pressure from many after the riots subsided, the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission issued a media statement on March 21, 2018 titled "Human Rights Commission Investigation into Religious Hate Violence in Kandy District". It announced that as an initial phase of the investigation, written evidence and proofs from victims of the violence and other interested parties would be collected.

“Organizations such as Human Rights came and captured video, interviewed, they did everything, we also went to Kandy several times, they too came to the town. Nothing happened by them either,” says M.M.M. Fazil from Hijrapura, Kandy.

The Human Rights Commission has conducted investigations and recorded evidence but has not yet produced at least one interim report with regard to it. Being an essayist, I have twice sent emails to the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission requesting a copy of the report. However, even those emails have not been replied yet.

Denied justice

Not only M.M.M. Fazil but also Muslim people affected by these incidents express their concern as “investigations were conducted and arrests were made, but we have not received justice yet.” Why, even Fazal and his family, who lost his brother in this riot, have still not received justice.

On March 10, 2018, 9 people were arrested, including Amith Weerasinghe, the leader of Mahason Balakaya, who is considered to be one of the main suspects behind the riots. It was later announced that a total of 81 suspects had been arrested, and 10 of them were arrested by the Terrorism Investigation Unit. However, Buddhist monks and others pressurized the police to release them. No one knows what happened later.

M.M.M. Fazil who was arrested by the police and later released, alleges that the then government knew that it was a planned attack but has not yet shown justice. “The government very well knows that it was an attack done by the majority to minority. If injustice has been done to them, the government should have intervened and ceased the case,” says he.

In such a situation, when the trial of this incident was held in the Theldeniya Magistrate's Court, it was considered that the judge who conducted the trial was a Muslim and he would act on behalf of the Muslim people, was transferred and the a shocking news was reported by the journalist Musadiq that the judicial service commission also cooperated in transferring the judge.

“The judge who judges the cases related to communal riots in that court was a Muslim. However, fearing that his justice would be unjust, he was transferred on the appeal of the Buddhist monks, through the Judicial Service Commission. He was transferred to Kandy court. Instead, a Sinhalese judge was appointed and proceeded with the trial.” says Musadiq.

Musadiq further states that those arrested were released on bail, trials were held but even after five years no judgement was given. “Criminals are free, victims have been waiting longingly for six years, nothing has happened and there is no chance of happening,” says he.

It is the expectation of the Muslim people that all those involved in this riot which claimed lives and destroyed millions of properties should be arrested and brought to justice and punished. Justice has not yet been established for the violence unleashed against the Muslim people in Kintottai, Beruwela and Alutgamai. Digana too joins the list.

Massacres, attacks and riots against minorities in Sri Lanka continue to take place in one form or another. There is no alternative opinion that most of these incidents in the post-independence period have explicitly or implicitly had the support of the majority government.

Realizing the status of the majority government, the Tamil people are demanding international justice for everything, whether it is a political solution or the issue of missing persons. Even the Catholics affected by the Easter Sunday attacks demanding international justice today. In this context, Musadiq emphasizes that justice can be established through the international community for the Muslims affected by the Digana riots.

“I would like to emphasize here that reparations for such losses of Sri Lanka should be pursued as international justice through the international access system. There should be an international mechanism to investigate the crimes committed for any reason against the minority community in Sri Lanka. When it is handled through an international mechanism only, the minority people will get justice,” he says.

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