

## ***Lankesh Patrike, 24 December 2003***

### **Gauri Lankesh**

Harmony between communities characterises the culture of Karnataka and most people in the state aspire to preserve it. Proof of this is the great support for the 'Harmony Convention' at Chikmagalur held by various organisations from across the state, and for those who went to jail following the event.

The convention of 7 December 2003 and the two-day stay in jail afterwards were unforgettable experiences. When the district administration halted our march in the city and took hundreds into custody, we all went to jail singing the famous song in unison, "Rebuild! We shall rebuild... the broken hearts and the lofty dreams... We shall surely rebuild..." My eyes grow moist even now when I recall that day.

As the police took us in a crowded bus to the newly built Chikmagalur jail and we waved white flags and threw pamphlets out of the window all the way, it struck me that the government that wanted to stop our procession had actually facilitated it by taking us through all the main streets of the town. We would have probably got less attention had we walked the streets instead.

The jail was new, but lacked all basic facilities. The place was built for 250 people but more than a thousand of us had been packed in like sheep. There was no drinking water or privacy for women prisoners. We had to sit on dharna to get just about anything — food, water or bedding.

Finally when the drinking water arrived, it did so in large barrels designed to carry garbage with 'Swaccha Chikmagaluru' labels pasted on them! The food was sufficient for only about three hundred people. We asked for beds and got thin carpets and thinner sheets instead.

But none of these difficulties hurt our confidence or lessened our zeal. On the contrary, the two days brought us closer together, inspired us to keep up the fight and nourished our spirits. When writers and activists K Ramdas and Bhanu Mushtaq called anxiously, imagining that we faced hardship in jail, I assured them, "No, there are no problems. Actually, it has been such a good experience that I wish you too were here. I'm sure you would feel envious if I told you about our time here!"

The jail was indeed like a microcosm of Karnataka. It had young boys and girls, progressive thinkers, communists, Muslim community leaders, artists, journalists, teachers, women activists, farmers' leaders and politicians from across Karnataka.

The funny part was that there were also a few who had come to take part in the Datta Jayanti organised by the Bajrang Dal. They had somehow got into our vehicle and were pushed into jail with us. But it looked like they were complete converts to the cause of social harmony after the two-day stay with us. All of us who spent time crammed in one place were really perfect

strangers, and yet bound by a strong sense of unity. Nothing untoward happened at any time.

I was arrested on a Sunday and the *Patrike* had to go to print the same night. Even if I wrote my column in jail, it was impossible to fax it to Bengaluru.

What was worse, our Hassan reporter, Chandrachud, who had come to help me was also in jail with me. So I had to dictate my column to the office on my cellphone.

Senior police officer Subhash Bharani came even as I was dictating the column on phone.

“Today is your deadline, right?” he asked. “We are planning to release everyone tonight. If you wish, you could leave right away.”

“I need to be in touch with my office today. My phone’s battery has run out of charge. It would be enough if the phone charger was brought from my hotel room,” I said.

Although he agreed, it was not to happen. It was a case of the king’s orders being undone by the palace guards. The police guards wouldn’t allow for my charger to be brought to me. “You can leave, but you cannot come back,” they said. Though the young activists of the Communal Harmony Forum and the All India Youth Federation asked me to leave, I did not want to be released unless everyone else was.

Finally Bharani, who got wind of this, arranged for my suitcase to be fetched from the hotel room. There were more than a hundred cell phones amongst us. Allowing them to be charged meant contact with the outside world. So the next day, the jail authorities cut off the power supply.

The people who stood with us all through were the Muslims of Chikmagalur. Bababudangiri, which represents the syncretic Sufi tradition, was not an important place of worship for most native Muslims of Chikmagalur town. So they had generally remained aloof from the controversy. But the recent developments in Chikmagalur, with the saffron brigade growing all-powerful, have made them realise that they would end up the victims if communal riots were to occur. This realisation has made them proactive in protecting the harmony between communities in Chikmagalur.

The previous day, special prayers for the success of our rally had been offered at all the mosques of Chikmagalur. As soon as they heard that about a thousand had been arrested, the local Muslim leaders collected 40,000 rupees to arrange our food. They sent us bottled water and food whenever these fell short. They sent us sweaters, coffee, tea and—since it was biting cold—even cigarettes and beedis. A group of young Muslim men was stationed outside the jail just in case we needed anything. We are eternally grateful to Yusuf Haji, who took over the leadership of all these activities.

Though we were in jail, we sang, danced and debated and didn’t notice the two days pass. I couldn’t read a single page of Gabriel García Márquez’s just-released autobiography that I had brought along.

There were so many unforgettable events and people in those two days — a loyal *Patrike* reader who wept on seeing me struggle to write the column; the naughty boy who screamed ‘Lara Datta ek hai’ when we shouted the slogan ‘Baba Datta ek hai’; the Muslim youth who quietly entered my more spacious cell at the crack of dawn to offer their prayers even as I slept; the young man who impatiently said we should stop our old slogans on overcoming caste and creed since we had anyway achieved it after being crammed into the jail and instead coin new slogans demanding food; the students who fretted about their exams the next day...

The cool moonlight that spread across the jail courtyard at night and groups of people who sat scattered in small clutches, warming themselves in front of bonfires... These scenes are unforgettable too.

My heart spills over with a new enthusiasm when I think of all those young boys and girls who spent time with us in jail. I feel a new spurt of life that drives me to go on. It was a place that forged new friendships, new affections. In a very real sense, it was an abode of harmony. It was not something I alone experienced. I have no doubt that hundreds of people who were together with me there felt just the same way.