

Indian

JOURNALISM WITH A SOUL

Currents

www.indiancurrents.org • Vol. XXXIII • Issue 52 • 20 - 26 December 2021 • ₹15

Total Pages - 40 Including Cover

SAFFRONIZATION OF SECULARISM



The Centre is taking the nation for a ride with denial of diversity and deadly mix of religion and politics



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DENIAL OF RIGHT TO CHOOSE



“How can you decide what I eat outside? Tomorrow you will decide what I should eat outside the house? Tomorrow they will say I should not have sugarcane juice because it causes diabetes? Or coffee (because it) is bad for health?” These powerful words came from the Gujarat High Court which was hearing a plea against the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation's biased action of seizing the street vendors' carts selling non-vegetarian food.

The Court's pungent observation could be extended to several other areas where rights of some are considered sacrosanct while others' rights are trampled upon. The Constitutional provision of right to equality is becoming a dead letter under the present dispensation at the Centre and in several States. The Gujarat High Court's stringent strictures come as a slap on the face of those who belligerently act against the pluralist polity nurtured over the decades.

The country, in the recent years, has been slipping into a contrived majoritarian view that the rights of some people are more important than that of others. This view is increasingly manifested in dealing with people's right to belief, and right to decide on what to eat, wear and such other personal matters. If the State interferes in the personal choices of individuals, based on some bizarre political agenda, it is nothing less than a threat to civilized life.

The decision of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation to seize the street vendors' carts was apparently based on the argument that sale of non-vegetarian food is an affront to the religious sentiments of some people. The civic body failed to recognize that the right of non-vegetarians is equally important as the right of the vegetarians. In a diverse country like India, the State and its agencies should not overstep their limits in curbing the people's right to choose.

We have witnessed similar lopsided logic in removing egg from the mid-day meal of children in many BJP-ruled States. Even by the government's own survey, every third Indian child is undernourished. Still, some of the BJP-ruled states have taken out egg from the mid-day meal on the curious plea that it is objected to by a particular section of people. The government's focus is not on the well-being of the 'people in pain' but the pressure of the people who can 'manage vote'.

The syndrome of 'yes to my rights' and 'no to your rights' has been in full show in the recent attacks against worshipping places and denial of places of worship to minority communities. On the other hand, the nation witnessed the Prime Minister going all out in leading the rituals related to the inauguration of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor with a lot of fanfare.

We have witnessed similar spectacles earlier too wherein religious events got 'political colour' with the blessings of the government. It is good to recollect the words of Jawaharlal Nehru to get the right perspective in this regard: "The religious inaugurations are not governmental. Government of India has nothing to do with it. We must not do anything that comes in the way of our state being secular. This is the basis of the Constitution." Putting Nehru's words into practice would be the best way to bring about a level-playing field for every community.

As always, we would be happy to hear your reviews, comments, and suggestions.

Happy Reading!

Dr. Suresh Mathew
Editor

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SAFFRONIZATION OF SECULARISM



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Vishwa Guru at work

BY A.J. PHILIP



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Indian Current Publications

375 - A, Pocket - 2
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POWER QUOTES



We are impatient, anxious to see the whole picture, but God lets us see things slowly, quietly
- Pope Francis

• • •



Talk to yourself once in a day, otherwise you may miss meeting an intelligent person in this world
- Swami Vivekananda

• • •



If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children
- Mahatma Gandhi

• • •



Go out into the world today and love the people you meet. Let your presence light new light in the hearts of people
- Mother Teresa

• • •



Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned
- Buddha

• • •



Happiness is not something ready made. It comes from your own actions
- Dalai Lama XIV

• • •



Difficulties are part of life. They are there to prepare you, increase you, and develop you
- APJ Abdul Kalam

• • •



Everyone seems to have a clear idea of how other people should lead their lives, but none about his or her own
- Paulo Coelho

• • •



SAFFRONIZATION OF SECULARISM

The Centre is taking the nation for a ride with denial of diversity and deadly mix of religion and politics



The bells of Kashi

Vishwa Guru at work

BY A.J. PHILIP

Shakespeare describes seven stages in the life of man. In contrast, a devout Hindu believes only in four stages. In the last stage, he aspires to go to Kashi. It is because he believes that bathing in the Ganga remits sins and that dying in Kashi ensures release of his soul from the cycle of transmigration. Many Hindus, therefore, go to Kashi to die.

I have visited the Vishwanath temple at Kashi, walked on the ghats, seen the Aarti performed there and marveled at the people's faith that it is the oldest city in the world. There are thousands of priests to help the devout perform his religious rites. People go to Kashi with Shiva's name on their lips and in a state of total surrender to God.

Nobody makes a spectacle of his visit to Kashi because Kashi reminds him of the ephemeral nature of life in which health, wealth, beauty, knowledge, status and power do not count. What matters is



one's preparedness to surrender to God in all its senses. Once a person is in Kashi, he is at peace with God. There can be no rancor, no ill-feelings and, in fact, no worldly feelings.

Otherwise, a trip to Kashi is like my own trip as a tourist. Nobody has ever made a visit to Varanasi with as much pomp and show as Prime Minister Narendra Modi did a few days ago. Not even Ahilyabai Holkar of Indore, the "philosopher-queen" who rebuilt the temple in the 18th century.

She was a pious person who saw rebuilding and refurbishing ancient temples as her call. She did a wonderful job, as was the norm then.

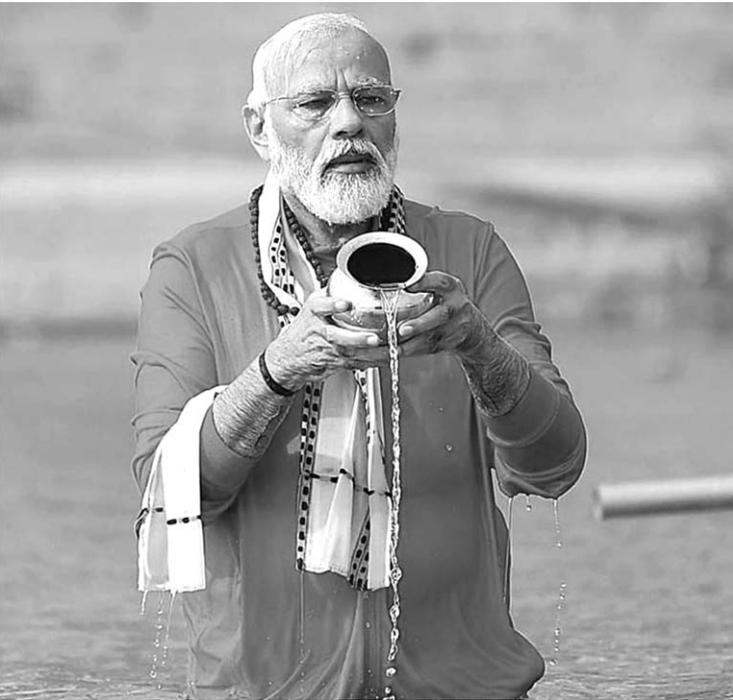
Modi is altogether a different kettle of fish. He is a democratically elected leader of a "secular socialist" nation, who does not have the mandate to spend public money on religious pursuits. To be frank, I did not see his Kashi programme on television as I do

not watch the idiot box.

When I received a link from the Prime Minister's Office by email, I opened it to find an exclusive reportage that lasted more than two-and-a-half hours. I have never seen such a long programme focussing entirely on one person.

Neither Bollywood, nor Hollywood has dared to produce a film that focuses only on one person. The film 'Ten Commandments' that depicts the story of Moses or the Malayalam movie Kumarasambhavam, based on Kalidasa's work that describes the courting of the ascetic Shiva by Parvati, were not one-man or one-woman shows.





The Kashi show was an out-and-out Modi show. Yes, there was a Yogi, whom he kept at a long distance, more than warranted by the pandemic. The message Modi wanted to send out from Kashi was clear to one and all.

The Preamble of the Constitution may say that India is a “secular socialist” republic but he considers himself as the leader of a Hindu nation, empowered to spend money on his pet projects that has no bearing on the lives of the Daridra Narayans of this country, be they Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian.

Last week, I spent a few hours at Haridwar where I photographed a huge statue of Shiva that can be seen from a long distance. Very close to the statue was another, though smaller, of Swami Vivekananda. Modi may not know that Daridra Narayana is an axiom enunciated by the Swami, who taught that service to the poor is equivalent in importance and piety to service to God.

Where was Daridra Narayan when Modi changed his attire every now and then and had the movie and still cameras focussed on him? It is sacrilegious to compare him to Nehru, who refused to associate the government with the rebuilding of the Somnath temple in Gujarat.

Haven't grand temples like the Akshardham temple in Delhi and Gujarat come up in the country without the involvement of the state?

What scriptural or legal right does Modi have to spend public money to promote one religion? The pity is that nobody – not even Opposition leaders – is prepared to question him for fear that they would earn his wrath. It is pitier that even large sections of the media find it convenient to eat out of Modi's hands. India is a democracy but Modi did not allow anyone to share the spotlight at Kashi. Even the priests were relegated to the background!

No, I am not against building a temple corridor. Nobody in his senses would object to renovation of a temple. But I know what happened when in the same state of Uttar Pradesh the then Chief Minister Mayawati tried to build a “corridor” to the Taj. I know that she is now facing charges on account of the money spent on the corridor project to which archeologist KK Muhammed referred in detail in his autobiography.

Of course, nobody would ask how Rs 399 crore was spent on the Kashi project. Or, from where the money was sourced. How much is the Centre's contribution and the State's? When it comes to matters of faith, people are afraid to ask questions, particularly to a person like Modi who converted his first swearing-in ceremony into something like a coronation. No political leader in India has ever attempted anything as spectacular as his Kashi Yatra.

No one knows the media better than Modi. When he spent a few minutes at Kedarnath cave with cameramen following him to capture the moment for the world to see, he knew how it would fetch votes from the gullible. Nobody goes to the Himalayas in a helicopter to meditate in designer dress. He

The Preamble of the Constitution may say that India is a “secular socialist” republic but he considers himself as the leader of a Hindu nation, empowered to spend money on his pet projects that has no bearing on the lives of the Daridra Narayans of this country, be they Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian

knows that wearing Hindutva on his sleeves would appeal to those who opposed the tricolor as the national flag and objected to the use of any reverential word while referring to Mahatma Gandhi.

Nehru described projects like the Bhakra Nangal dam and the Heavy Engineering Corporation (HEC) as the temples of modern India. Unlike him, Modi took 2,000 kg of sandalwood to be donated to the Pashupati Nath temple at Kathmandu on his visit to the Himalayan Republic. The children of Nepal would have been happier if he had donated 2,000 laptops which would have helped them to acquire knowledge that would stand them in good stead.

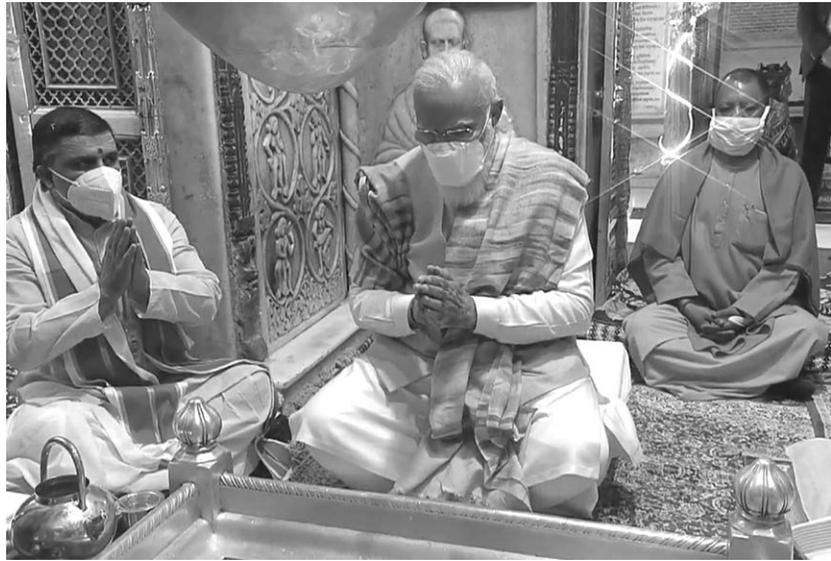
Later, when he went to Japan, he donated to his counterpart, a special edition of the Bhagavad Gita. Earlier, visiting prime ministers and presidents used to be taken to the iconic Infosys campus in Bengaluru. Now, Modi takes them to Kashi to show them Aarti.

Two days ago, I traveled by Metro which has posters of Modi and Yogi claiming credit for the Kumbh Mela. Such melas have been happening long before Savarkar wrote that Hindus and Muslims were two nations and, thus, sowed the seeds of Hindutva and the Partition.

Modi has thrown to the winds even the pretensions of secularism. Now it is clear to one and all that Hinduism has virtually become the official religion of the country. That is why Muslim refugees from Myanmar are unwelcome and Muslims cannot get citizenship under the amended laws of citizenship.

Even if these are unacceptable under a secular system, many would not question it for fear of offending the majority community. While tens of millions of rupees are spent on beautifying temples and building roads to connect them in the high mountains, how are the minorities treated in the country? There is a minority commission for education which does not have a Christian representation.

Even the showpiece Christian KJ Alphons, who is ever-ready to play to the whimsical tunes of the BJP, is not considered worthy enough to be in the Union Ministry. Muslims in Gurgaon, now called Gurugram after someone who demanded the thumb of Eklavya, used to offer Friday prayers in public places. Now they can't. They are ready to chip in money to buy a plot of land but that is not possible as the Hindut-



va-wadis won't allow them to do that.

Nobody asks the government why it can't allot some land to the Muslims so that they can offer prayers. When have prayers become a threat to the nation? Even stand-up comedians are not allowed to make a living. Christians have been feeling the heat for quite some time. When two nuns accompany a novice to her home, they are accused of conversion and taken to a police station.

I saw a video of some officials entering a children's home run by a Christian organization and virtually ransacking the premises. I also heard them asking the stunned nuns why the Bible was kept there. I did not know that keeping the Bible or reading it was an anti-national act. In Karnataka, the BJP government is bringing forward an anti-conversion Bill to harass Christians. Why can't the government know that anti-conversion laws have been in existence for many decades but till today nobody has been convicted of converting anyone.

The fact of the matter is that conversion is not possible through fraudulent means. Conversion happens only when a person feels like converting himself. That kind of conversion happened when Ambedkar renounced Hinduism and adopted Buddhism at a ceremony in Nagpur, where the RSS has its headquarters.

Modi thinks that the minorities do not matter in India. There are many states in India where the Muslims do not have any representation in the state legislature. He began his Hindutva experiment in Gujarat and he succeeded by marginalizing the

Muslims. They are so underprivileged and scared that they are compelled to vote for the BJP. Studies showed that the Muslims who suffered during the Gujarat pogrom and have been living in camp-like conditions in Amit Shah's constituency voted massively for the home minister.

It is this experiment that is being tried out at the Centre. The Muslims constitute about 15 percent of the population but they do not have virtually any representation in the Cabinet. All this is seen as an attempt to declare India eventually as a Hindu nation, where, as Guruji Golwalkar prophesied, the minorities would be treated as second-class citizens.

Muslim names for places, roads and institutions are being changed. I won't be surprised if General Bipin Rawat's name is given to Akbar Road in Delhi, as demanded already by some. Aurangzeb Road overnight became APJ Abdul Kalam Road.

The way the Prime Minister attacked Aurangzeb during his speech at Kashi, one got the impression that he was his contemporary and not someone who lived 300 years ago. The country saw him donning the robes of a priest when he laid the foundation stone for the Ayodhya temple at Ayodhya where even the district's Muslim name was changed. Why is there so much of intolerance of Islam when Modi happily went to Saudi Arabia to receive a silly award given by an Islamic state? It was the same Modi who refused to wear a Muslim cap, when he was offered one with a lot of affection.

In his home state of Gujarat, Muslims are not allowed to sell non-vegetarian food on handcarts. Even eggs are declared as non-vegetarian. Even children in Lakshadweep who are used to eating fish and meat are not served non-veg items as part of their mid-day meal.

Modi thinks that the minorities do not matter in India. There are many states in India where the Muslims do not have any representation in the state legislature. He began his Hindutva experiment in Gujarat and he succeeded by marginalizing the Muslims



While Christians are asked why they keep the Bible on their premises, Modi's handpicked chief minister of Haryana says students in his state will have to learn by heart verses from Hindu scriptures from the next academic year. Neither Modi nor Khattar will read the memorandum given by Rajaram Mohan Roy to the British authorities that they did not want students to learn scriptures but science, philosophy, mathematics, English etc.

For Narendra Modi the model is the queen from Indore who with public money renovated temple after temple. If she had, instead, spent the money on education, hospitals and roads, it would not have been easy for the British or, for that matter, other European countries to occupy the nation. India was never poor. The wealth was concentrated in the hands of some, who splurged it on building massive temples, and feeding the heavenly-born, as in Travancore. That is why India remained a poor country. Alas, we are going back to the days when it was known as a land of snake charmers. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Rise in attacks on Christians in Karnataka

A fact-finding report by a Protestant group in India has documented 39 violent attacks on Christians in Karnataka since January

The Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) published the report on Dec. 13 claiming that the Christian community in Karnataka had good reason to feel targeted by the outbreak of violence.

“It is clear and obvious that an atmosphere of fear and apprehension prevails in the Christian community and its grassroots religious clergy because of a systematic targeting through a vicious and malicious hate campaign,” said Reverend Vijayesh Lal, EFI general secretary and publisher of the report.

He further added that it was “equally obvious that those involved in carrying out this hate campaign and fear-mongering enjoy the protection and possibly support of elements within the political and law and order apparatus in the state.”

Reverend Lal said the EFI was making the report public in the interests of the Christian community in the state and the country and to help safeguard peace and harmony by calling upon the state government to act immediately before any major untoward incident takes place.

Copies of the report have been sent to the office of the prime minister of India, the federal home minister, the National Commission for Minorities, the governor and the chief minister of Karnataka.

The report claimed that constant talk about enacting an anti-religious conversion law at the highest levels in the state government had encouraged non-state actors to target Christians, a minuscule minority at 1.87 percent of Karnataka’s population of 68.4 million.

The report said the Karnataka government’s proposal to survey “official as well as unofficial churches and Bible societies aimed at preventing alleged religious conversions” surfaced in the first half of October.

The proposal was initiated by a ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) legislator who is also the acting chairperson of the committee on the welfare of backward classes and minorities.

However, it was reported on Oct. 28 that the state



Members of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties speak during the release of the report at the Press Club of Bangalore

government had put a hold on the survey. Following this, the state government started gathering information about people who had converted to another religion in the past 25 years.

The escalating situation seems to be getting out of hand and so far there is no effective response from the authorities to stem the hate campaign, the report said.

The latest attack was reported on Dec. 9 when some Hindu activists attacked four Christians and set their religious books on fire at Srinivasapura in Kolar district.

On Dec. 4, an unidentified man armed with a machete barged into a church in Belagavi and chased the priest in charge.

A video of the incident posted on social media showed the armed man charging at Father Francis D’ Souza, the parish priest of St. Joseph Worker Church. Luckily, no harm came his way as the intruder escaped after people raised the alarm.

Reverend Lal said the commission team had met over 50 such affected priests and leaders, including those who are leading pastor fellowships across the state. (Courtesy: UCANEWS) ©



A Mockery of Secularism, says Ghanshyam Tiwari, SP Spokesperson

The recent inauguration of phase 1 of Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has evoked strong reactions from opposition parties because the event was telecast live across the country and at thousands of places across Uttar Pradesh. In his official capacity, Prime Minister traveled to Kashi, performed a puja and several other religious ceremonies, including a dip in the Ganga. This was telecast live on state-owned Doordarshan, as well as shared on all platforms by social media platforms of the government.

The Opposition has described the opening of the

corridor as part of a pre-poll strategy that the BJP adopts before every election which often includes the inauguration of developmental projects. Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav said that they (PM Modi & other BJP leaders) should stay there for not only one, two or three months and added that people spend their last moments in Banaras.

Former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and BSP chief Mayawati said that inaugurations of half-finished projects are not going to help the BJP. The Congress too slammed the BJP accusing it of cashing on religious sentiments. Does this violate the secu-

lar nature of the Indian state? A national debate has started on it.

Anju Grover spoke to Samajwadi Party spokesperson **Ghanshyam Tiwari** to know his party's views on the political implications of the development on Indian politics.

Q How do you look at the inauguration of Kashi corridor by the Prime Minister and its media coverage?

A PM is visible on television only. BJP may be strong in doing propaganda but it has a shallow agenda. It was a tamasha led by Prime Minister Modi and supported by UP CM Yogi Adityanath for two days.

Q What about the mega coverage of PM's Kashi visit?

A In BJP's belief, India is not a secular state and it has never indicated so. From PM to top BJP leaders, all of them have made a mockery of the idea of secularism by lampooning those who speak about secularism. When BJP came to power, it had adopted false slogans like Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas and Sabka Vishwas. The BJP's agenda is clear. In Adityanath's Cabinet, 45 percent members have criminal charges against them. BJP leaders are not rising for providing good governance but (they work) on the basis of sloganeering, hate speeches and creating vigilante groups that put common people in danger. The BJP, which is in the most powerful form today, is turning the entire state into a one-sided ideology.

Q Has the Kashi corridor given a political edge to the BJP?

A The BJP may believe that it has an edge over other parties but that's not true. People of Uttar Pradesh can see that with so much power, this government has not been speaking about unemployment or price rise. A Central Minister who is circumstantially accused in a conspiracy to mow down farmers has still not been sacked by the Prime Minister. People know that the mission of this government is not harmony and it engineers hate in the society. The government has failed to fulfil all promises. I believe people have an edge and not the propaganda of the BJP. The public support for leader Akhilesh Yadav at rallies is an indication of BJP losing the ground.

Q But our Constitution supports secularism. Your comments.

As far as Samajwadi Party is concerned, it is going for rainbow alliances with smaller parties to cover every section of the society so that it can take on BJP in 2022 UP polls

A India has a powerful civilization. I don't think India's secular fabric is under threat. This is a government which believes in bending fundamental values but people will prove them wrong. Leaders following one set of ideology cannot break secular fabric.

Q Your views on BJP using religion as a card to win polls?

A The BJP has perfected the art of politics which is built around tamasha and politics of fear. It has won elections. People have given them power but it has failed to fulfil all its promises. However, this election will be a turning point.

Q How do you look at the BJP as a party?

A Under BJP's model of nationalism or Hinduism, the party will always point fingers at others and question their nationalism and patriotism. BJP may accuse other parties of doing something, but it is playing politics driven by its ideology. The ideology cannot sustain itself as it is bereft of any governance model, agenda of providing prosperity and peace, employment and provide better opportunities. How can BJP claim to be patriotic? The party has pushed the poor into a corner in the last few years. The party has also pushed the country into worst sphere of inequality, unemployment and disharmony.

Q How will the divided Opposition take on BJP in the upcoming polls in UP?

A It is good that India is not a two-party system. We are a society where anyone whose community has not got due representation can enter the political arena easily. BJP contests to win elections while the Opposition parties contest to serve people. Winning elections cannot sustain for a long time. As far as Samajwadi Party is concerned, it is going for rainbow alliances with smaller parties to cover every section of the society so that it can take on BJP in 2022 UP polls. ©

POLITICS OF VEGETARIANISM

Court turns down Gujarat municipal body's decision to seize carts of street vendors selling non-vegetarian food

BY **RAM PUNIYANI**

The Town Planning Committee of the Ahmadabad Municipal Corporation recently ordered stalls selling non-vegetarian items would not be allowed along public roads and in the 100-meter radius of schools, colleges and religious places. On similar lines, decisions were also taken by Vadodara, Bhavnagar, Junagadh and Rajkot Municipal bodies. As the hawkers selling non-vegetarian items approached the Court, it struck down the decision by the authorities.

Surprisingly opposition to non-vegetarian food is part of the communal agenda. It is being propagated that non-vegetarian food causes violent tendencies. By now it has become a routine for one to hear at different occasions that Muslims are aggressive because they consume non-vegetarian food. When probed further, the consumption of beef by Muslims is also brought forward. Additionally, the point is made that since cow is holy for the Hindus, Muslims are hurting the sentiments of the former.

Two issues have been deliberately intertwined in the social common sense. One, non-vegetarian food causes violent tendencies and two, eating of beef by Muslims hurts the sentiments of Hindus. It is clear that the definition of non-vegetarian food varies from place to place and community to community. Eggs are permissible for some vegetarians and strict no for others. Some regard sea food, fish and the like as vegetarian while



for others it is non-vegetarian food. Today world over roughly more than 80-90% of the population is non-vegetarian. As per a survey conducted by IndiaSpend, around 80 per cent of Indian men and 70 per cent of women consume meat weekly.

While Muslims in India are the object of wrath, Europeans, Americans etc. get away easily in this narrative despite having beef and other non-vegetarian food as their staple diet. In the countries and among people who follow the biggest apostle of non-violence ever, Lord Gautam Buddha, the consumption of non-vegetarian food is no less in quantum. In India too, there are innumerable communities for whom beef has been a part of the food habits. Different surveys show that eating non-vegetarian food is substantial in most communities in all states including Gujarat.

There are political undertones in this 'hate non-vegetarian' thinking. One can go to the extent





of saying that vegetarianism is also being used as a social and political weapon to browbeat the minority community. No doubt, one has the choice of shifting to vegetarianism with full commitment, but to be intolerant to non-vegetarians and to label Muslims as having violent personality due to their food habits is a part of political campaign, bereft of any scientific-psychological rationale.

Historically speaking, beef and other non-vegetarian diet were common in Vedic times (Cow is essentially food, *Atho Annam Via Gau*, (cow is verily food)). Swami Vivekanand points out, “You will be astonished if I tell you that, according to old ceremonials, he is not a good Hindu who does not eat beef. On certain occasions, he must sacrifice a bull and eat it” (cited in ‘The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda’, Vol 3 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1997, p. 536).

D. N. Jha in his book ‘Myth of Holy Cow’ shows that it was with the rise of agricultural society that the restriction was brought in on cow sacrifice by Lord Buddha. The primary goal was to preserve the cattle wealth. The ardent follower of Buddhism, Emperor Ashok, in one of his edicts to the royal kitchen orders that only as many animals and birds be killed as are necessary for the food in the kitchen. This was to put a brake on the animal sacrifice which was part of the Brahminical rituals. It was as a reaction to this that Brahminism came up to project cow as mother to show that it also has concern for cattle and in due course Brahmanism, and politics around it, gave her the status of mother.

As far as the violent personality and food are concerned, not much scientific literature is available to prove the co-relation of food with the violent tendencies. Violence is a personality trait, in the realm of psychology, which is shaped by familial,

social and political circumstances, and keeps changing according to the situations.

There are systems of medicine, the traditional ones which classify food according to the Satwik (leading to pure, quiet persona), Tamsik (increasing anger) and Rajsik (royal) but it hasn’t been vindicated beyond empirical assertions. Despite some people holding on to human nature co-related to type of food, it is far from being vindicated by any of the modern scientific studies; on the other hand, there is an example of vegetarian Hitler unleashing the biggest ever genocide.

There are groups of people taking to vegetarianism and the latest vogue is that of veganism. The element of religiosity is not mixed up here. Neither should people be intolerant to the ones who consume non-vegetarian food. The phenomenon being observed among the sections influenced



by communalism operates at the level of religiosity. Vegetarianism has become a part of one’s political agenda. As it is being mixed up with religion, it becomes associated with emotions and that’s where the rejection of non-vegetarians in the neighborhood comes in. Many housing societies refuse those who eat non-vegetarian food.

In Ahmadabad, I observed that landlord/ladies will barge into the kitchen of their tenants to ensure that strict vegetarianism is adhered to. Now amazingly this has been turned into one more tool to demonize Muslims. Overall, as seen in parts of Gujarat, vegetarianism is propagated and imposed in an aggressive way; the orders of Municipalities reflect that. One can certainly say that those propagating vegetarianism in such a fashion is intolerant to the hilt. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RAM PUNIYANI is an activist and a prolific writer. He was awarded National Communal Harmony Award in 2007.

SAFFRONIZATION OF SECULARISM

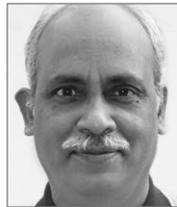
A secular nation should never mix-up religion with politics. But, after the Modi govt. came to power, the line between the two is getting blurred

BY JULIAN S DAS

There has been a lot of talk and fanfare around the Prime Minister's inauguration of Kashi Vishwanath corridor, flashing the event with unprecedented live coverage on national electronic media; some media outlets claimed this as one of the greatest achievements of the Prime Minister, who restored the dying Indian civilization to its pristine nature.

The legislators in some states of the subcontinent think that one of their greatest enemies is Christianity, and they would go to any extent to attack Christianity tooth and nail, bringing all allegations against the missionaries and their institutions.

The frantic attempt by the Karnataka Assembly to bring in anti-conversion Bill, so that those who convert people by offering favours could be brought to book. The sword-wielding man interrupting services, caught on the CCTV camera in the



same state is not enough evidence for the state machinery to know and understand that passing such Bills, targeting a minority religious group, may only unleash unlawful activities given legal protection and amnesty.

But the picture is larger than we may have imagined. No wonder, the government had to spend Rs. 800 crore in order to complete the renovation of Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, which the Prime Minister inaugurated on December 13, and took holy dip in the Ganges. There are several other "holy" projects lined up, in order to exorcise alien religions and establish the 'sanatana dharma'.

The sporadic violence on Christians across the country is a disturbing phenomenon, and though they may appear to be isolated events, if looked at from a different perspective, we would realize that it is part of a well-calculated, minutely-manicured





Modi takes holy dip in Ganga before inaugurating Kashi Vishwanath Corridor

attempt to sabotage the emancipation of the voiceless, empowerment of those who begin to claim their rightful place in society. Behind the well-orchestrated slogans, selectively chosen from the Constitution of the nation, there is another persona hidden from the masses, behind the sacred curtains of secularism.

Contradicting Secularism

Living in India makes one believe that we are not in a secular country, where the Constitution reigns supreme; though the Constitution proclaims that we live in a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic, republic, how much of secular strands do we observe around, especially when it comes to state and central government programs and functions?

The Prime Minister taking a “holy dip” in the Ganges before inaugurating the Kashi Vishwanath corridor implies that he is the one who is promoting a monotheistic and even monolithic religion and culture, which goes against the law of the land. Where is the image of the Prime Minister as a secular citizen, with no bias towards any particular religion? Would the Prime Minister express such

The Prime Minister taking a “holy dip” in the Ganges before inaugurating the Kashi Vishwanath corridor implies that he is the one who is promoting a monotheistic and even monolithic religion and culture, which goes against the law of the land

respect and reverence towards the holy places of other religious groups in the country?

Sure, Narendra Modi as a citizen of the country has all the religious freedom, guaranteed in Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, to profess, practice and propagate his religious fervour, and that is given to every Indian citizen, but when he is a public servant, he cannot indulge in such acts, which are contrary to the secular values of the country. But he would do anything to win the political support of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Looking at what is happening around, especially how the nation is governed by a handful of men and women, who are convinced that the country belongs to the majority religious group, and the minority groups have to either toe their line, or be gone, wherever they wish, we wonder where we are heading to. There are political leaders who shout the slogan, ‘India is for Hindus’, forgetting Article 25 of the Constitution. If the Hindus are the children of India, then whose children are the Christians and the Muslims, the Sikhs and the Parsis, the Jains and the Buddhists living in India for centuries?

Watering down Secularism

Though the Indian social and political leaders love to shout aloud the glories of the largest secular republic in the world, in reality they do not wish any other religious group to occupy any seat of power and therefore the easiest way they could prevent this happening is to throw mud at them. That is what is making a small group of people to target Christians and accuse them of forcible conversion of Hindus to Christianity.

On December 12, while condemning the central government at a rally in Jaipur, Rahul Gandhi is said to have declared, “This is a country of Hindus and not Hindutvavadis.”

We would have thought that at least the predominant opposition party in the country, the Indian National Congress, would remind the ruling party, which is working hand-in-glove with religious leaders about the secular fabrics, that keep the nation intact, and condemn any attempt on the part of the government to saffronize the life of people at large.

Unfortunately that does not seem to happen, as a leader of the opposition party recently revealed. On December 12, while condemning the central government at a rally in Jaipur, Rahul Gandhi is said to have declared, “This is a country of Hindus and not Hindutvavadis.”

Sure, the heir apparent to Congress leadership wished to make a distinction between ordinary Hindus and fanatic, vociferous, men and women who have donned the mantle of the custodians of the Hindu tradition and religiosity, while subtly pushing through their hegemony and autocracy. But what is unsaid, but understood loud and clear, is that the country belongs

only to Hindus, and the Hindutvavadis obviously fall under the bigger grouping of Hindus.

The chief of All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), Asaduddin Owaisi, reacted saying, “India belongs to all Bharatiyas. Not Hindus alone. India belongs to people of all faiths and also those who have no faith.”

The Union government is happy to promote anything which is in line with the ideology of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and their close associates. They would organize special trains to all the pilgrim centres of Hinduism, including the coveted Ayodhya, which came under the control of the Hindu *sants*, thanks to the parting judgement of the former Chief Justice of India, Ranjan Gogoi (who has been amply rewarded for it). There would be several innovative initiatives taken in order to paint all that Indian as Hindu.

There are two things undertaken by the foot-soldiers of the saffron band, demolition of Churches on the one hand and building of state-of-the-art temples, with generous offerings made by the government from the tax-payers’ sweat and blood.

On December 13 came the three-day foundation stone laying ceremony for Maa Umiyadham Temple in Sola area in Gujarat, the home state of both the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and the Home Minister, Amit Shah. The Prime Minister had virtually attended the ceremony on the last day, while the Home Minister was present in person to take part in the ceremony. The project is expected to cost Rs. 1,500 crore. Though it is said that the temple campus

belongs to Umiya Matiji Sansthan of Unjha, Mehsana, it is understood where the money to build such a monumental campus is going to come from.

What about the Char Dham project, yet another ambitious project of the Prime Minister in order to woo the religious minded Hindus, who believe that visit to the four holy places in Uttarakhand (Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath) would help them achieve moksha (salvation), in line with the Hajj pilgrimage





PM Modi inaugurated transformed Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham in Varanasi

There are two things undertaken by the foot-soldiers of the saffron band, demolition of Churches on the one hand and building of state-of-the-art temples, with generous offerings made by the government from the tax-payers' sweat and blood

of Muslims, and the Holy Land pilgrimage of Christians. The Chardham Mahamarg Vikas Pariyojana (Chardham Highway Development Project) was inaugurated by the Prime Minister on December 27, 2016, with a cost of Rs. 12,000 crores.

Malicious Fallacy

It does not require great mathematician or logician to state that the fears and assumptions of the right wing that the Christians are converting Hindus, and could one day overpower them, are unfounded and malicious. Over the past decades, the Chris-

tian population in the country has not increased, it continues to be 2.3%. If Christians were converting Hindus, then the population should have increased proportionately over the years.

Recently a WhatsApp message was going rounds and it read: "Must say that these Christians are very inefficient. After converting and converting and converting every Hindu who studied in a convent school, the Christian population of India stands at a measly 2%. Need to do better, guys!"

It is ridiculous that when the Christian population continues to be the same decade after decade, and yet there are serious allegations that Christians are convert-

ing Hindus, and therefore they would do anything to stop such forcible conversions.

Looking at the spate of violence on Christians and their institutions, one really wonders if the accusation and allegation of rightwing Hindu fanatics is on Christians converting Hindus; it appears that such a reasoning is only a lame excuse for them to camouflage the real reason, namely the empowerment of simple, ordinary and even illiterate men and women, providing them education and social awakening, which is too much for those on the other side of the fence to digest.

Unfortunately, the media mechanism in the country is such that everyone believes that Christians are trying to convert the whole of Hindu population, but the hidden agenda of those who claim to 'own' the country is something hard to unearth.

The latest accusation of the right wing Hindutvavadis in Gujarat tarnishing the image of the Missionaries of Charity in Vadodara of luring young women to embrace Christianity is part of the systemic attempt to spoil the good name that Christian institutions enjoy. It has been proved that even the government machinery is incapable of doing what the Missionaries of Charity sisters are doing in different parts of the country.

Crux of the Matter

It would be too naïve to imagine that the rightwing Hindutvavadis would soon stop all accusations and



We may need to ask this moot question: Did the reputed Christian schools and colleges fail to instill in their students, most of whom are at the helm in the affairs of the nation, a conscience which would go beyond the binaries of ‘we’ and ‘they’?

allegations against Christians about ‘converting’ gullible Hindus, and bring an end to forcible ‘ghar-vapsi’. The part of the strategy which seems to be operative is the establishment of a mono-culture, monotheism (everything centred round Hinduism), and monopolized by a handful of men and women, whose whims and fancies would determine the law and rule of the land. Anyone who thinks otherwise would be termed ‘anti-national’ and ‘anti-people’.

Unfortunately, most of the reputed national institutions are being ‘bought’ by the right wing activists who would twist and turn the law to their advantage, to forcibly thrust upon the people the hegemony of the might, who alone can be right.

The spate of violence on Christians is only a ploy to claim superiority over the ‘alien’ religion, though the contribution of Christianity over the past two centuries in the fields of education and health-care is undisputed. We may need to ask this moot question: Did the reputed Christian schools and colleges fail to instill in their students, most of whom are at the helm in the affairs of the nation, a conscience which would go beyond the binaries of ‘we’ and ‘they’?

Ultimately those who call the shots are the ones who determine what is truth and what is untruth; the subordinate officers are to organize things in such a way that even truth would be twisted as untruth and innocent men and women brought to book, not to say the unnecessary harassment and bringing dishonor to those who have committed their lives for the dignity and welfare of the last, the lost and the least.

The words of Gamaliel in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles to the Sanhedrin is the hope which impels the Christians to daringly go ahead with their works of mercy and compassion, come what may: If our work is the work of God, then no power on earth can bring it to an end, not even the vile attempts of the high and mighty, not even the supreme dictators of our nation. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JULIAN S DAS is a freelance video program producer, specialized in production of ‘massive open online courses’

PEOPLE IN 'EXTREME PAIN'

Governance has failed in many respects; the agony and distress of the people are rising. The government tries to hide its failures by resorting to short-cuts and polarization on communal lines

BY **JACOB PEENIKAPARAMBIL**

The title of this write up is borrowed from an address by Nobel Laureate Abhijit Banerji to the students of Ahmedabad University in Gujarat on 11th December from the US during the University's 11th Convocation. He said People in India are in "extreme pain" and the economy is still below the 2019 levels, with "small aspirations" of people becoming even smaller now. He added, "We don't know how much below, but it is substantially below."

The people of India are in extreme pain not only because the economy is below the 2019 levels but mainly because of the blunders, failures and lapses in governance and the atrocities committed by the right wing groups on the minorities and deprived sections of the society. Unfortunately, large sections of people are anesthetized with the drug of religion and ethnicity and as a result they are not aware of their pain and do not search for the causes of the pain.



The recently published two reports by the government agencies National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and Niti Aayog's first Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) and two reports published by international agencies expose the nature, the magnitude and the causes for the pain of the people of India. The two reports by the international

agencies are the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2021 prepared jointly by Irish aid agency Concern Worldwide and German organization Welt Hunger Hilfe and the World Inequality Report authored by Lucas Chancel and coordinated by several experts including French economist Thomas Piketty.

The four reports cumulatively present an overall dismal picture of India: 1) increasing hunger in India in spite of the country's granaries overflowing with grains; 2) alarming rise in economic inequalities; 3) rise in poverty; and 4) worsening health condition of people as reflected in rampant anaemia among women and growing malnutrition among children.

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Abhijit Banerjee

According to the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2021, India has slipped from 94th position to 101st position among 116 countries for which the report is prepared. In 2020, India was ranked 94th out of 107 countries. This year's report shows that India is in the "alarming" category along with its neighbours Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. Only 15 countries fared worse than India this year. The GHI score is calculated based on four indicators: undernourishment, child wasting, child stunting and child mortality.

As per the World Inequality Report, the top 1% of India's population earned more than one fifth (21.7%) of the country's total national income in 2021, while the bottom 50% received just 13.31% of the income. Regarding wealth distribution, the report says that the top 1% and 10% of the population owns respectively 33% and 65% of the country's total wealth whereas the bottom 50% owns a meagre 5.9%.

Two worrying aspects revealed through the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) are malnutrition among the children and anaemia among women. Over 35% of children less than five years of age are stunted. The figure for wasted children is 19.3%. Every third Indian child is still undernourished. 57% women in the age group of 15 and 49 were anaemic in 2019-21.

The findings of the report published by Niti Aayog are very much linked to the issues highlighted in the NFHS 5. According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) report published by Niti Aayog, 25.01% of the Indian population are multi-dimensionally poor. The MPI is based on three equally weighted dimensions: health, education, and standard of living.

They in turn are represented by 12 indicators such as nutrition, school attendance, years of schooling, drinking water, sanitation, housing, bank accounts, among others.

The report reveals that Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh are the poorest states in India. As per the index, 51.91 per cent population of Bihar is poor, followed by 42.16% in Jharkhand, 37.79% in Uttar Pradesh and 36.65% in Madhya Pradesh. Kerala is the state with the lowest percentage of population being multi-dimensionally poor at 0.71%, with nine out of its 14 districts having a poverty ratio of less than 1%.

Political parties, irrespective of those who are in power, have always a tendency to play down or even deny the issues of hunger, poverty, unemployment, bad education, lack of healthcare facilities etc. Even when multilateral and international organizations expose governance deficits through research studies, the governments are often in a denial mode and they even find fault with the methodology adopted by these organizations. The BJP government at the centre has questioned the methodology adopted in calculating the Global Hunger Index and refused to accept the findings regarding India.

The BJP came to power at the centre in 2014 promising good governance. But what actually happened during the last 7 years was a series of blunders on the governance front like demonetization, unplanned implementation of GST, declaring nationwide lockdown with eight hours notice that resulted in migrant labourers' tragedy and utter failure in dealing with the second wave of Covid 19. In order to hide its failures, the Modi government resorted to the shortcut of focusing on divisive issues and passed controversial laws like abrogation of Articles 370 and 31A, Citizenship Amendment Act and the three farm laws which the government was forced to repeal because of the stiff resistance by the farmers through their non-violent struggle for more than one year.

The opposition parties have failed to transform the pain of the people into a movement against the misrule of the BJP. On the contrary, they are fighting alone against the BJP, and pulling each other's leg. Mamata Banerji of the Trinamool Congress is involved in a game of dividing the opposition votes by entering into the states in which it has no presence. The Aam Aadmi Party of Arvind Kejriwal is also involved in the same destructive game.



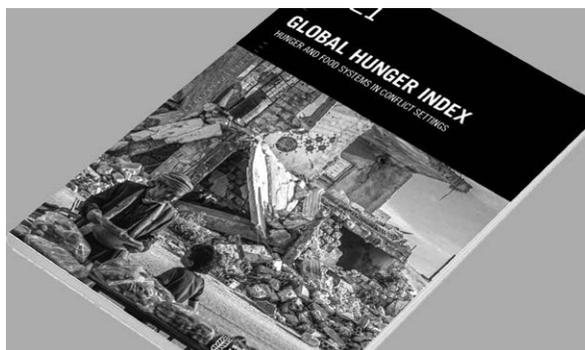
The opposition parties have failed to transform the pain of the people into a movement against the misrule of the BJP. On the contrary, they are fighting alone against the BJP, and pulling each other's leg

At the same time, the BJP with the support of the Sangh Parivar continues its divisive strategy to polarize the Hindus. The phenomenal rise in the attacks on Christians and Christian institutions in the BJP-ruled states on the issue of conversion is part of its strategy to polarize the Hindu votes in the forthcoming Assembly elections and the parliamentary election in 2024.

Another strategy is refocusing on religious issues to divert the attention of people from the issues of bread and butter. The inauguration of phase 1 of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor constructed at a cost of Rs. 339 crores with a lot of fanfare by the Prime Minister on 13th December is part of this strategy. The whole government machinery was mobilized for a religious event in a secular country and it was converted into a political event. A conscious attempt was made to weave the Hindutva narrative with the thread of development. The Prime Minister presented a paradigm of a combination of religious pride, infrastructural growth and welfare schemes. All BJP Chief Ministers were asked to offer prayers at the makeshift Ram Janma Bhoomi temple at Ayodhya on 15th December.

Hindutva as defined by the Sangh Parivar has become the fulcrum of politics and governance of the BJP today and there is no political force to contest this dangerous paradigm. As *The Indian Express* wrote in its editorial on 14th December, "the visual and spectacle that has accompanied its inauguration, the leading role of the PM, with BJP Chief Ministers in attendance, in the run-up to the UP election, also proclaims the remarkable success of a political project, led by one man".

Against the backdrop of a kind of helplessness among the citizens who are concerned about the secular democracy of India, the successful non-violent struggle of farmers for more than a year should give hope and inspiration not only to the opposi-



tion political parties but also to the civil society. The power and strength of the farmers emerged from their sacrifice. As the freedom fighters of India, they were ready to undergo any suffering for their cause. Thousands of them were exposed to extreme cold and extreme heat. More than 700 farmers laid down their lives, hundreds of them got injured and thousands suffered financial loss. They proved that sacrifice is the core of Satyagraha.

Unfortunately, the political leaders of today are not ready for any sacrifice. On the contrary, they often resort to shortcuts like appealing to emotional issues, hate speech and buying MLAs and MPs. That is why the opposition political parties are not able to come together to fight against the BJP, even though they know the country is going to the dogs. They give priority to their egos and narrow political gains to saving the nation from the jaws of authoritarianism and majoritarianism.

The followers of Jesus cannot remain silent spectators when the people are in extreme pain; when draconian anti-conversion laws are being passed by the BJP-ruled states and violence is unleashed on Christians and their institutions by the Hindutva goons. Their silence will only embolden the right wing groups to unleash further violence. One fails to understand why the bishops in India are silent when the Archbishop of Bangalore alone is fighting against the proposed anti-conversion law.

Only the disciples of Jesus with people-oriented spirituality will be able to feel the pain of people and will be ready to struggle to lessen their pain. Those who follow cultic religiosity will be cowards and will not be able to feel the pain of people. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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BASHING CHRISTIANS

The FIR registered against the Missionaries of Charity in Vadodara in Gujarat accusing them of forcible conversion of girls in their Ashram is yet another instance of the government going after the blood of Christians

BY **CEDRIC PRAKASH**

It is been happening with frightening regularity across India and particularly in States run by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP): the bashing of Christians. It is a well-orchestrated campaign to denigrate and demonise the Christians. Their design is devious: a method in their 'madness!' The divisive agenda is clearly to polarise sections of the majority community against the Christians. The bogey of so-called 'conversions' is always raised creating unfounded 'fears' that the population of Christians is increasing in the country whereas official Government statistics clearly show a decline in numbers.

The long-term strategy is clear: They bash up minorities and, in several cases, notch up electoral gains. There is evidence to prove this, be it in Gujarat in the past or recently in Tripura. Besides with bogeys and myths, the way is paved for a national anti-Conversion law. Ultimately, it is meant to usher in a nation-state based on the 'hindutva' ideology.

Christians are being bashed up, their institutions are attacked, Christian literature is burnt, undemocratic demands are made on them, false charges framed, anti-Conversion laws are made weapons to intimidate and harass. Reports on these come in daily -- they don't seem to stop. Above all, those who



are responsible for these heinous crimes do so with impunity and are apparently guaranteed impunity by the bosses and their ilk.

The latest attack is on the Missionaries of Charity (founded by Mother Teresa) in Vadodara when on 13 December the Gujarat Police registered an FIR against them

(the Missionaries of Charity which runs the Ashram), for allegedly "luring young girls into Christianity and hurting Hindu religious sentiments." This is an allegation that is false and fabricated.

The sequence of events is as follows:

- On August 29, 2021, Mr Priyank Kanoongo, the Chairman of the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), paid a "surprise" visit to the Ashram and apparently finds a couple of Bibles with the names of a child written on them.
- He directs the District Administration and police to take action; they do visit the Ashram later and find nothing wrong. In fact, they had all appreciation for the work of the sisters.
- On 9 December the District Social Defence Officer with the Chairman of the CWC visited the premises during which they 'apparently' found some serious issues.
- This visit took place because there was apparently plenty of pressure from 'above'.
- An FIR was then filed; the sisters came to know about it from the media.
- On 13 December 2021 around 7 p.m. a team consisting of an Asst Commissioner of Police, the P.I. of Makarpura, a Social Welfare Officer from the CWC and a lady constable visited the premises till 11 p.m. for 'investigation'.
- On 14 December, another team of police came to the Ashram to interrogate the five girls whose names were written on the Bibles - no MC Sister or lawyer/representative (on behalf of Sisters) was allowed to be present. The interrogation went on for more than four hours.



The complaint was filed by the District Social Defence Officer Mayank Trivedi. During his visit Trivedi 'apparently' found girls being forced to read Christian religious texts at the shelter and that similar activities were conducted with the intention of "steering them into Christianity."

The Missionaries of Charity have been booked under sections 295 A (deliberate and malicious acts to outrage feelings of any class by insulting its religious beliefs) and 298 (deliberately uttering words to wound the religious feelings of a person) of the Indian Penal Code. The FIR also invokes sections of the 'Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act, 2003', including those providing for prohibition of forcible conversion and punishment for it.

The FIR states: "Between February 10, 2021, and December 9, 2021, the institution has been involved in activities to hurt the religious sentiments of Hindus intentionally and with bitterness... The girls inside the Home for Girls are being lured to adopt Christianity by making them wear the cross around their neck and also placing the Bible on the table of the storeroom used by the girls, in order to compel them to read the Bible... It is an attempted crime to force religious conversion upon the girls."



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Ref: To Diocese of Baroda

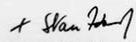
Dear Sisters, Brothers and Fathers,

You have seen the newspaper news of the FIR and investigation at the MC Sisters Ashram in Makarpura, Vadodara. I visited the Sisters at the Ashram this morning accompanied by Fr. Praveen Viegas, Financial Administrator, who is also a lawyer. The Regional Superior was out and we met Sr. Immaculate who is in-charge at the moment. The sequence of events is as follows :

On 29th August, Mr. Priyank Kanangoo, Chairman of National Child Protection Rights, Delhi, visited the Ashram section by section and found a couple of anomalies. He sent a letter to the Collector to take action. Thereafter there were enquiries from the Social Welfare, the Police, etc. These had no problem with the running of the Ashram and the work of the Sisters, in fact, they appreciated their dedication. But pressure seems to have come from the capital and a FIR was filed. The Sisters were unaware of the FIR till someone called them. Some media persons interviewed the Sister-in-charge. It was nearly 7.PM when a team of Asst. Commissioner of Police, P.I.Makarpura, Social Welfare Officer, Child Welfare Committee Member, a Lady Constable went around the institution till 11.PM. As I write (4.PM) another team has come to question five girls whose names are written on the BIBLE, which seems to be the proverbial 'needle in the haystack'. No M.C.Sister has been allowed to be present at this questioning.

This is one attempt to denigrate our institutions as instruments of 'conversion'. The local Social Welfare Officer used to point the Ashram as a model for child welfare and care of the handicapped and aged persons. All I can request you is to pray for the Sisters, and for my ministry in Vadodara.

Fraternally in Christ Jesus,


Abp. Emer. Stanislaus Fernandez, sj
Apostolic Administrator of Baroda

14th December 2021

'Karnataka saw 39 attacks on Christians this year'

PUCL blames right-wing groups, police

STAFF REPORTER
BENGALURU

Documenting 39 instances of attacks on members of the Christian community this year, a report by the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), on 'Hate crimes on Christians in Karnataka, 2021', has alleged that all recent attacks on members of the community were perpetrated by Hindutva organisations. In most instances, the police colluded with these groups, alleges 'Criminalising the Practice of Faith', said the report released on Tuesday, which documents cases till November-end.

The report was written after speaking to 39 pastors from each of these incidents.

"The perpetrators behind these communal hate crimes in all the instances are Hindutva organisations, namely the Rashtri-

ya Swayamsevak Sangh, Bajrang Dal and the Hindu Jagrana Vedike. A new organisation's name that has emerged is that of Banjara Nigama. This organisation appears to be small but rather violent," the report said, adding that two MLAs – Sunil Hegde and Minister M.C. Narayana Gowda – were also named by community members as people who supported the police in targeting them.

In most cases, while the police arrived minutes after the mob stormed a prayer meeting, the former "join the Hindutva organisations in accusing the pastors of converting Christians against their will," the report said.

When contacted, Praveen Sood, Director-General and Inspector-General of Police, Karnataka, denied "any collusion".

The Missionaries of Charity vehemently deny these false allegations saying that the twenty-four girls living in the Ashram and under their care, are very well looked after. No one is forced to do anything; if the girls want to, they are free to pray in any way they wish; besides no one is converted or forced to marry a Christian.

The calculated attempts to dismantle the tremendous work done by the Missionaries of Charity for the poorest of the poor, the unloved and rejected, the orphans and widows, needs to be condemned unequivocally and strongly by all enlightened citizens who not only value the great legacy Mother Teresa has left us but who admire the work done by her sisters today.

All efforts to tarnish the name of the Missionaries of Charity will, besides hurting their tremendous work, greatly affect the thousands of the poorest of the poor, destitute, abandoned, rejected and others (irrespective of caste or creed) they so lovingly care for day and night without counting the cost. ©

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A SHIFT FROM COLLEGE TO UNIVERSITY

It is time for Christian Churches in India to upgrade their premier colleges to the status of private universities

BY **FR. J. FELIX RAJ**

With a world population of 7.80 billion and Indian population of 1.38 billion people (2020), we – as individuals and societies – are called to live together sustainably and harmoniously. We need to act responsibly because what we do today can have implications on the lives of people and the planet tomorrow. We understand well how the educational mission and network, in which we are engaged, empowers people to change the ways they think and work towards a sustainable and harmonious future. In this context, educational involvement has been synonymous with the Christian mission of announcing God's Kingdom and preaching the Good News in India, right from its inception in the first century.

With the unfolding of Independence in 1947, the Christian Churches took over responsibility for an educational system in full vigour as nowhere else in the world. India holds first place in the world in the



number of Christian educational institutions.

Christian education has revolutionised the academic scenario of India, tempering the system of imparting education with values that have become significant in human history. Thus, Christian education has produced leaders in every occupation, and these leaders have furthered and fostered the Christian principles.

Every major town or city in India has either a Christian School or College. Other religious and secular societies and institutions have adopted Christian educational methods. Many teach, but few inspire, and Christian institutions believe that they need to form, not merely inform. This motive dominates the mission.

The Christian population in India is only 25.6 million (about 2.3%). The Christian Churches administer around 562 Higher Education Institutions of



various types. Universities and colleges alone make up to 196 of which nine are universities. (The Church situation is so varied that we do not have accurate data for its numerical and institutional presence).

Christian Higher Education Institutions in India	
Christian Degree Colleges	187
Universities	09

Although the Christian population is 2.3% and the number of Christian HEIs form just 1.6% of the total number of HEIs in India, no one can deny that Christian contribution to education in India is significant. That is why, the former President of India, late Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, applauded the Christian missionaries for their great contribution to the development of education in India. 'Being a Jesuit alumnus myself, I am aware of the great contribution of missionary education not only in India, but around the world,' he said while speaking at the inauguration of a global conference of the alumni of Jesuit institutions at SXCK in January 2003.

Former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, during his visit to St. Xavier's College, Kolkata on its 150th anniversary in January 2010, applauded the work of the Christian community. He said, '... the Christian missionaries who came to this country chose the path of education to reach out to the hearts and minds of the Indian people ... Institutions like St. Xavier's provide progressive all-round education to the rich and the poor, privileged and under-privileged and to the children of all faiths and all religions ... We owe these Fathers a deep debt of gratitude and I salute them for their immense contribution to the intellectual enrichment of the people of our country and to the nation at large...'

The Christian Churches have been pioneers and vanguards in providing education to the rural poor, Dalits, tribals and girls. Sixty percent of the Christian educational institutions are in the rural areas. The Christian educators are the makers and markers of a future filled with hope and harmony for the India. In the existing global and regional contexts

today and particularly in the context of Indian educational scenario, the Christian community is called to promote regional, national and apostolic networks, while strengthening the existing educational networks and expanding it to meet the growing needs.

Christian Universities

Christian initiatives in higher education have been only in terms of colleges since 1543 when St. Francis Xavier started the first Jesuit College in Goa. The idea of establishing universities is a recent phenomenon among Christians. Today there are nine Christian Private Universities in India.

- (i) Christ University, Bangalore;
- (ii) XIM University, Bhubaneswar;
- (iii) St. Joseph's University, Kohima;
- (iv) St. Xavier's University, Kolkata;
- (v) Sam Higginbottom University of Agriculture, Technologies & Science, Allahabad;
- (vi) Karunya Institute of Technology, Coimbatore;
- (vii) Spicer Adventist University, Pune;
- (viii) Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Chennai; and
- (ix) Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati

Higher Education Scenario

The education system in India is the third largest in the world, next to the United States and China. Knowledge is power. The more knowledge we



promote, the more empowered we are as individuals and as a nation. Even after 76 years of independence, India has only 96 million graduates (7 % of the total population).

There are 1019 Universities as on November 30, 2021 and around 49,800 Colleges of all types (including stand-alone institutions) with 39 million students. Of the total number of colleges, 12,870 are under 2(f) and 381 are under 12(B) of the UGC Act. We should take note of the enormous quantum increase in the number of universities in recent years, particularly state and private universities.

India is one of the youngest countries in the world: 65% of India's population is within the working age group of 18 to 59 and around 50% below 25 years of age. The young people are the pride and future of this country as the average age is 29. Dr. Kalam used to rightly aspire that 'our young people must become ignited minds of India, unleashing the power within them'.

The 12th Plan (2012-2017) Document had fixed targets of 30 % Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by 2020-21. As per All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2017-18, the GER in higher education is 25.6 %. The NEP 2020 envisages increase of GER to at least 50 % by 2035.

Number of Higher Education Institutions in India as on November 30, 2021	
Colleges of all types (2019)	Around 49,480 (including stand-alone Institutions)
Autonomous Colleges	832 (As on October 2021)
Students	39 million
Teachers	1.75 million
Teacher/Student ratio	1:23
Central Universities	54
State Universities	442
Deemed to be Universities	126
Private Universities	397
Total Universities	1019

Private Universities

Universities in India, whether central/state/private, are established by different state/central Acts and



adhere to the provisions laid down in the UGC ACT 1956. According to the laws, state universities may provide affiliations while private ones are unitary (single entity) and cannot affiliate. Private universities operate as per the State Act within the territorial boundaries of the state where it is established.

The private sector is strong and potent in higher education. This has been partly due to the Government's decision to encourage private investment and participation. Different state governments took advantage of this initiative and passed private university Bills. Only universities established by the Central and State Acts, and higher education institutions empowered by the Parliament are entitled to award degrees.

In 2005, there were only 20 private universities. However, as of November 2021, there are 397 private universities. Seventy-eight percent of colleges in India are private colleges; of which 64% are unaided ones.

It is a fact that there has been a quantum leap in the number of universities. There is high scope for the role of private universities as India has huge potential in terms of opportunities in higher education. Private universities can meet the challenge of a huge demand for quality learning with a wider choice of subjects and assured placements.

There is a felt need for independence and autonomy for Indian Higher Education Institutions to emerge as world-class centres of knowledge. As public expenditure is insufficient and public institutions suffer from political interference and government control, private participation becomes necessary.

Role of Private Universities in NEP

The National Education Policy 2020 says that as India moves towards becoming a knowledge economy and society, more and younger Indians are likely to aspire for higher education.

The aspiration is to move towards a higher educational system consisting of large, multidisciplinary universities and colleges, with at least one in or near every district.

It envisages that growth will be both in public and private institutions, with a strong emphasis on developing a large number of outstanding institutions. It encourages private institutions with a public-spirited commitment to high-quality equitable education.

It recommends a complete overhaul in the regulatory system of higher education that has been too heavy-handed for decades, in order to re-energise the higher education sector and enable it to thrive.

It has announced that all HEIs – public and private – shall be treated at par within this regulatory regime. This regulatory regime shall encourage private philanthropic efforts in education. There shall be common national guidelines for all legislative Acts forming private HEIs thus enabling common standards for private and public HEIs. These common guidelines shall cover areas of governance,

financial stability and security, educational outcomes, and transparency.

Kolkata Experience

The Jesuits in Kolkata responded to an invitation from the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, and started the St. Xavier's University, Kolkata. In the beginning we weighed quite a few options:

- (a) To upgrade the existing St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata (SXCK) to a university but because of some technical problems relating to minority status and State aid, we had to give up this option.
- (b) Then, we proposed a public-private partnership (PPP) model. This model was found to be unworkable.
- (c) St. Xavier's College, Kolkata had been selected as one of the 35 colleges for upgradation under RUSA scheme. However, even after two meetings between Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India (MHRD) and (SXCK), the proposal did not come through.
- d) Finally, we decided to go private and submitted our proposal (LoI) to the State Government.

The state government was very cooperative and did all it could. The Chief Minister herself took keen interest in the establishment of the Jesuit University. The Government gave us 17 acres of land at New Town.

The State Assembly passed the St. Xavier's University, Kolkata Act 2016 in December 2016 and the Governor gave his consent in January 2017, paving the way for the university to come into existence. The Government notification was announced on February 8, 2017. Our alumni joined hands and pledged their full support. We prepared a road map – Vision 2020 -- and began our journey.

Many premier Christian colleges seal the status of being the best in their states or in the country in NAAC accreditation. Christian institutions are large in number as well as high in NAAC grading



When Malcolm Adiseshiah introduced the concept of 'autonomous college' in 1970s, he chose some of the outstanding Christian Colleges to introduce the new scheme. The project was highly successful and was introduced by the UGC across the country

Our dream came true when the Chief Minister inaugurated St. Xavier's University, Kolkata in July 2017. In four years' time, we have 3,100 students on the rolls now. Our focus is on Vision 2025:

- » Developing SXUK into a world-class Jesuit University – a centre of excellence in teaching-learning, research, consultancy and innovation – with strong global networking for the greater glory of God in the spirit of Magis;
- » Fulfilling the aspirations of people like Mamata Banerjee, who said at the inauguration ceremony, 'I want St. Xavier's University to become one of the best universities of the world like Harvard and Oxford. I am confident that this university will achieve this goal,'
- » 'A Quality University with a new and forward looking vision' as envisaged by the NEP 2020;
- » A University with a multidisciplinary environment and liberal approach.

The Jesuits of SXUK believe that with the Divine providence and the wholehearted support of their stakeholders, they shall be able to achieve their 'Vision 2025'.

The Road Ahead

The Christian HEIs impart the best-known education in India. Almost all of them are reputed and highly regarded for their quality, discipline, environment, relationship and research.

According to the NIRF Rankings, announced by the Ministry of Human Resources Development, for all higher educational institutions in June 2020 and September 2021, there are 34 and 32 Christian Colleges respectively in the lists of 100 best colleges in the country.

Many premier Christian colleges seal the status of being the best in their states or in the country in NAAC accreditation. Christian institutions are large in number as well as high in NAAC grading. The Higher Education policies and proposals of the Government are, I can confidently say, the reflections of what is going on in our premier institutions.

The concept of a college has undergone many significant changes in India since independence. Governments have repeatedly announced policies that have effected changes in the education system over the decades. There are now different categories of colleges. To mention a few: undergraduate, postgraduate, aided, unaided, autonomous, degree-awarding and so on. When Malcolm Adiseshiah introduced the concept of 'autonomous college' in 1970s, he chose some of the outstanding Christian Colleges to introduce the new scheme. The project was highly successful and was introduced by the UGC across the country. As a result, today we have 832 autonomous colleges.

The time is not far from now when the Central and the State Governments will stop their aids to colleges. Privatisation in Higher Education has come in a big way. For example, as of November 2021 there are 521 private universities (including Deemed-to-be) out of 1019 in India (51.38%). There are only nine full-fledged universities in India which are fully administered by the Christian churches.

Christian Churches need to prepare themselves and be ready for the future challenges with perspective plans for the next 10 to 20 years. I do not want to discuss the pros and cons of a college or a university here. All that I should suggest is that there are clear signs of a paradigm shift and they need to respond to the changing times before it is too late and they are left behind in the lurch.

Their next steps are: (i) To upgrade their premier colleges to the status of state private universities; and (ii) To upgrade other eligible colleges to degree-awarding colleges.

State-level private universities could be set up with the provisions of constituent colleges within the territories of the respective states. Christian Churches need to set up a strong network and negotiate with state governments on this matter. ☉

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Karnataka officer transferred after his survey showed no forced conversion

The survey was conducted to find out the total number of forced conversions but ended up revealing that no forced conversions have taken place.

While the BJP government in Karnataka continues to make allegations of a rise in forced conversions, an official survey carried out in one of the districts that have been subject to these allegations raises questions on the validity of the claim.

Thippeswamy, a Tahasildar who surveyed illegal forced conversions in two villages of Hosadurga Taluk in Chitradurga district has now been transferred. In what is being seen as the repercussion for contesting the state government's claims through the survey, he has been stripped of official titles until further orders.

The survey was conducted to find out the total number of forced conversions but ended up revealing that no forced conversions have taken place, and people of the villages voluntarily attend the prayer meets.

"I have been transferred after the survey. No post has been allotted to me at the moment. I conducted the survey after several allegations of forced conversions in two villages. But when I enquired with the people, they said they were not lured with any benefits and converted out of their own will," the Tahasildar said.

Dismissing the survey, Prakash, the official spokesperson of the BJP in Karnataka, has said that the party continues to stand by the allegations of forced conversions by the Christian community.

"Gulihatti Shekar, who is an MLA, his mother herself was converted and she converted back to Hinduism. There are several instances of conversions taking place in those areas. An MLA certainly won't make such allegations without verified information. So, how the report by the Tahasildar has been prepared and where he enquired or investigated is not clear," the BJP spokesperson said.

The survey was ordered by the Tahasildar after Hosadurga MLA Gulihatti Chandrashekar made



an allegation on the floor of the house that nearly 20,000 people in his constituency had converted to Christianity. He claimed his mother was one of them.

"The Tahasildar is a part of the government. In his report, he made it very clear that there are no forcible conversions. Hosadurga MLA Gulihatti Chandrashekar is saying that his mother was forcibly converted. He has to explain why his mother has converted to Christianity. He owes an explanation. We may have to draw an inference that there is a political motivation. We will oppose this (anti-conversion) bill in the assembly," said V.S. Ugrappa, Congress' state spokesperson.

Despite the survey showing no forced conversions in the two villages, and with no proper documentation to back the claims made by the Karnataka government, the BJP is due to place the anti-conversion bill by next week for discussion in the assembly.

The hotly debated proposed anti-conversion Bill that the state government plans to introduce in the assembly is expected to have penal provisions, and it may also insist that those who wish to convert to another faith file an application before the Deputy Commissioner two months prior.

Congress has opposed the bill, calling it "unconstitutional" and detrimental to the state's interests. (Courtesy: NDTV) ©

Police probe Catholic-run orphanage in Madhya Pradesh

Church leaders say allegations are part of a malicious campaign to defame Christians and seize orphanage land



A police probe has been initiated into a Catholic-run orphanage in Sagar Diocese in Madhya Pradesh following allegations that its inmates were given beef and taught the Bible, among other charges.

Church leaders denied the charges and said they were part of a well-orchestrated malicious campaign to defame the Church, especially by those who have an eye on the orphanage's land.

This is the third such incident targeting a Catholic-run institution in the diocese within a month.

A joint team of police and district Child Welfare Committee (CWC) members visited St. Francis Orphanage in Shampura in Sagar district on Dec. 6 following a complaint that the orphanage authorities had supplied beef to the inmates and tried to teach the Bible, among other charges.

"The team interacted with students and took statements of five boys and five girls and also those of officials," orphanage director Father Sinto Varghese told UCA News on Dec. 9.

"The following day another team of CWC members, mostly women, visited the orphanage and took statements from all the girls."

The orphanage is home to 44 children – 21 girls and 23 boys – aged up to 19.

"Local police, judges and CWC members regularly visit it and inspect its running as per the government guidelines and we do not know suddenly where the cow meat and other charges came from," Father Varghese said.

"Where will we get cow meat?" asked the priest as cow slaughter and consumption of beef are prohibited in the state. "We provide chicken as per the government food menu and those who don't eat meat are given vegetables and other stuff they require."

CWC president Chandra Prakash Shukla told UCA News on Dec. 9 that the allegations were being investigated, hinting that the probe team had not come across any evidence to substantiate the claims.

Police refused to divulge any details about the investigation. However, sources said prima facie the allegations have been found to be false, but a deeper probe is being carried out to avoid further pressure from certain interest groups. The police also summoned the orphanage's director and other staff including the cook for interrogation.

"This is part of an ongoing campaign against Christians to discredit their work among the poor and the downtrodden," Bishop James Athikalam of Sagar told UCA News on Dec. 9. "The diocese carries out several welfare programs among the poor, especially educating poor children and providing them with hostels and other facilities.

"When they get educated, they begin to oppose atrocities, exploitation and other social evils and therefore some vested interest groups opposed to their growth are targeting our institutions with false complaints." The prelate said a man named Omarkar Singh had made more than 15 complaints against Catholic institutions and all were found to be false after investigation. But such complaints are released to the media and get highlighted as if Christians are carrying out illegal activities.

"Unfortunately, when the truth is found out after the probe, the media rarely covers it to dispel the negative impression it had given against Christians and their institutions," said Bishop Athikalam.

"This is the reality in which we are living but we are not going to bow down. Instead we will continue our work as long as possible as problems and difficulties are part of Christian life."

The orphanage is part of a 277-acre land plot the Church received from former British rulers and now some vested interests have set an eye on it after the government refused to renew its lease.

The lease issue is now pending in Madhya Pradesh High Court. Church leaders suspect these false charges against church-run institutions on the same land could be used as evidence to get a favorable order from the top court.

On Nov. 8, CWC chairperson Priyank Kanoongo led a team of officials on a surprise inspection of a Catholic-run girls' hostel in Intkheri village in Raisen district in the diocese. The team, consisting solely of men, entered the girls' dormitory and searched their belongings and charged the hostel authorities with promoting Christianity after finding a couple of copies of the Bible. The Bibles belonged to five Christian students. The search was carried out when

the students were in school and the team did not even bother to take statements from them to verify if they were made to learn the Bible or attempted to convert them.

However, the panel chairman released a video of the inspection on social media and tried to create the impression that the nuns were trying to convert the students.

In another incident on Dec. 6, a Hindu mob vandalized St. Joseph School in Gang Basoda, also in Sagar Diocese, on the false allegation that eight students were converted. The school management had on Dec. 5 informed the police and sought protection for the school after a right-wing Hindu group publicly called for a protest in the school.

"None of these incidents are spontaneous but are well planned and executed to target us and defame us," said Bishop Athikalam. (Courtesy: UCANEWS) ©



RSS Chief asks Hindus to pledge to ensure 'Ghar Wapsi' of those who have converted

Mohan Bhagwat's plea comes amidst rising violence by Hindutva groups citing "forced conversion" by Muslims and Christians, with little evidence

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat on, December 15, asked Hindus to pledge to ensure the "ghar wapsi" or 'return home' of those who had converted into other religions.

Bhagwat's plea, at Chitrakoot in Madhya Pradesh, comes amidst rising clamour and violence by Hindutva groups citing "forced conversion" by Muslims and Christians – claims which in many cases have been reported to be ruses for escalation of tension. Like Bhagwat, speakers at the 'Hindu Mahakumbh' at Chitrakoot brought up "love jihad" and "conversions" repeatedly, according to a report by Deccan Herald. Several BJP-ruled states have brought "love jihad" laws in the recent past, giving legal credence to the Sangh Parivar's bogey of a conspiracy to convert Hindu women into Islam through marriage. The Union home ministry, however, had said that it has no data on such cases.

"Take a pledge that I will persuade those who have converted, to embrace Hinduism and also make sure that the Hindus don't convert...I also take a pledge to protect the dignity of our Hindu sisters," Bhag-

wat said. From across India, and especially in Karnataka and Uttarakhand in recent times, incidents of violence have been reported in which prayers by minority communities have been disrupted over unfounded and unproven allegations of "forced conversion."

The PUCL had noted in a recent report that the "illegal conversion" claim is a mere myth and that there is a pattern in such rightwing attacks in Karnataka. Other speakers, according to the report, all spoke on communal lines, noting without evidence that "Hindu girls are being lured in the name of love jihad", calling for cow protection laws, and saying, "We already have A and K, now we want M."

The 'A', 'K' and 'M' are understood to stand for 'Ayodhya' and 'Kashi' respectively. While a Ram temple is under construction at Ayodhya, following a Supreme Court verdict on the title dispute over the land on which the Babri Masjid stood until it was destroyed by kar sevaks in 1992, the Hindutva brigade has been pushing for the demolition of mosques at Varanasi and Mathura now.

(Courtesy: The Wire) ©

MISINFORMED FORMALISATION

It is not enough to formalise workers through digitalization. It is important to guarantee wage and social protection for them

BY **JOSE VATTAKUZH**

Sandeep has been a street vendor in Delhi for eight years but recently he managed to have a smartphone and started transactions with customers through Google pay when it demands.

A domestic worker, Poonam from U.P living in Delhi, gets her earnings transferred into her account by her employer.

Sarath, a data entry and DTP operator at Bangalore town, recently got registered in e-Shram and received an unorganized worker card.

Pinky in Odisha is a Jan Dhan Yojana account holder and she is a three-month beneficiary of Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana.

In Kerala, Ramdas had applied for benefits from the (*Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana*) PMKSY program after the loss of crops due to incessant rain.

Rani in Maharashtra had to register for GST to place her jute products on Amazon.com, as an online business web portal as a seller.

Pratibha in Nawada village of Bihar is a worker under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA).

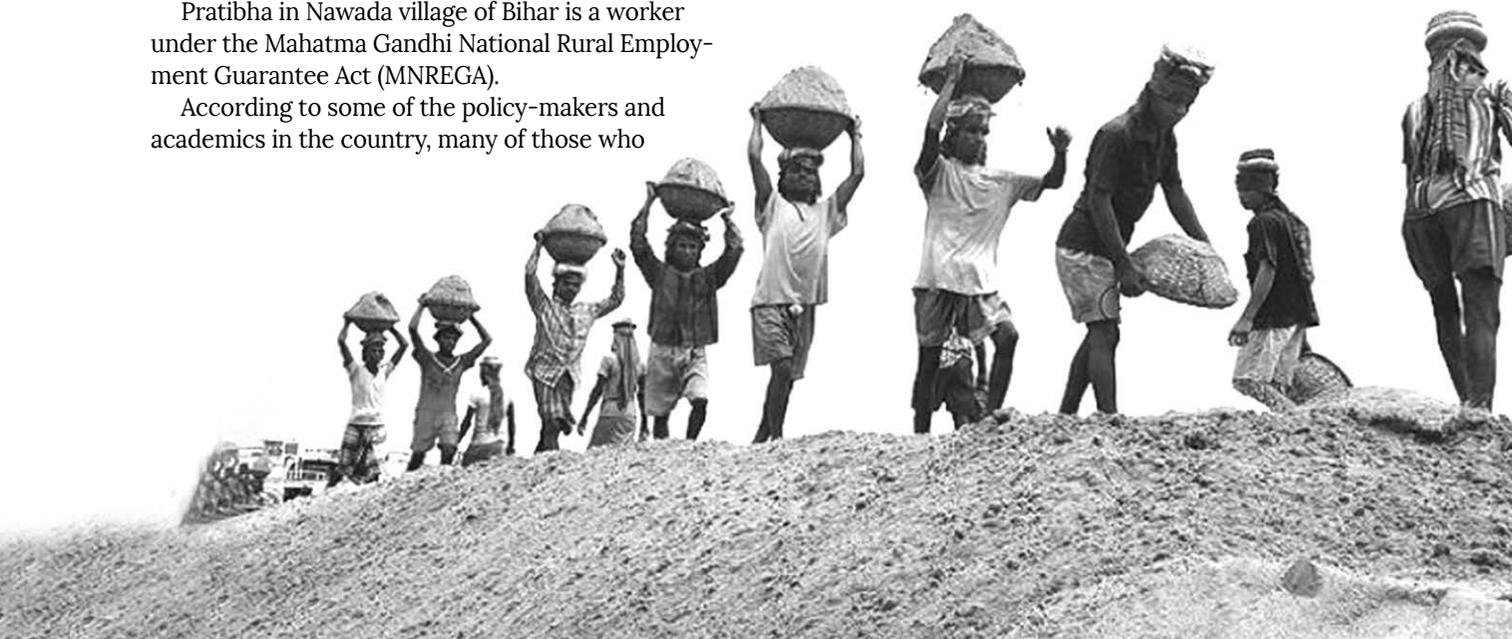
According to some of the policy-makers and academics in the country, many of those who

belonged to informal or unorganized sectors now belong to formal employment groups. It happened because of recording or identifying them by some sort of digitalization.

Recently, a report of SBI said that one of the trends of the Indian economy is the shrinking of informal economy. The report stated that this trend started in 2018; it said that the share of the informal sector in GDP is 15 to 20 percent in 2021 compared to 52.4 percent in 2018.

Besides, reports appear in print and online media about the status of enrolments of unorganized workers in e-Shram portal. According to a report in knnindia.co.in, e-Shram portal registration has crossed 10 crores.

The government has made many initiatives for formalization; almost 36.6 lakh jobs have been formalized till August 2021.



The formalization has been happening via gross value-adding, an increase of digital payments and transactions for consumption, and new employment trends. These different kinds of digitalized documentation could lead one from informal into the mode of a formal or organized workforce domain, the SBI report has claimed.

In the formal sector, employers have to abide by the rules related to salary or wages, health benefits, and defined work hours and work days. However, it is a fact that formalization alone never dignifies a worker in India even though digitalization gives identity.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), formalization of work means that a worker gets opportunities for fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for his or her family, personal development with help of skill developments, social integration, freedom of speech and association, chances to enjoy participation in decisions that impact their lives and to keep gender balance at all levels.

From 1999 onwards, ILO has been focusing on decent work agenda, which was well-accepted globally as UN's one of Millennium Development Goals strategy to fight poverty and foster development.

In the context of the misleading and deceptive notion of formalization of informal workers in India, one should not forget ILO's 204th session in 2015 which gave recommendations concerning transition from the informal to the formal economy.

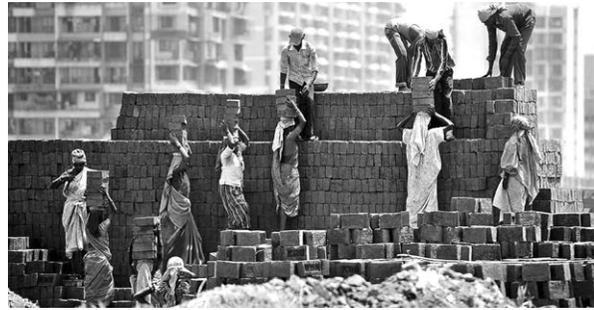
The recommendation of ILO 204 was the first international standard set up to direct the transition of the informal economy into the formal. It had three-fold objectives.

Firstly, it was to facilitate the transition of workers and economic units from the informal to the formal economy; it should be based on respecting workers' fundamental rights and ensuring opportunities for income security, livelihoods, and entrepreneurship.

Secondly, it was to promote creation, preservation, and sustainability of enterprises and decent jobs in the formal economy and to make sure the co-relation among macroeconomic, employment, social protection, and other social policies.

Thirdly, it was to prevent the formalization of formal economy jobs.

To give full support to these three recommendations, the 2015 ILO convention had adopted a resolution to take efforts from the parts of government, employers, and worker unions to facilitate the transi-



tion of the informal economy into the formal economy.

However, instead of acknowledging ILO 204th recommendations concerning the formalization of informality, some studies like that of SBI are confusing and misleading in the pretext of the booming economy towards \$5 trillion by 2024-25.

In another study, Mehrotra and Sarkar cited in *The Hindu* article titled "India's informal economy has not shrunk" on December 1 that the informal sector's share in GDP became low due to the impacts of demonetization, and pandemic. In addition, the study showed that even in the formal sector, informalities increased and new ways of employment started. Currently in all the areas of production, commerce, service like health care, freelance working has increased, leading to informalities.

The Union Labour Ministry in its 2018 data has shown about 9.8 percent of informal workers in the organized sectors as being outsourced. Employing contract workers would allow institutions to pay lower wages; it would also save on expenses such as health-care, pensions, paid leave, etc.

In the case of registration on e-Shram, fundamentally its aim is to build up a data bank of unorganized or informal workers, including migrants. More or less half of the informal economy belongs to the agricultural sector.

Data recording or identification through digitization about the informal economy or workers is not enough for workers' formalization. It also happens as a part of formalities related to rules and regulations of the country in the day-to-day affairs, conducting a business, etc.

But today's system of formalization of workers is decisive, not to guarantee wage and social protection for about 39 crore informal workers in the country. ©

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OMICRON PREPAREDNESS & MITIGATION

The writing on the wall is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over

BY **AARTI**

The sudden emergence of the new variant Omicron which has been spreading across the globe at an unparalleled rate and confirmed in 77 countries is a cause for serious concern.

The World Health Organisation has already warned certain features of omicron, including its global spread and large number of mutations could have a major impact on the course of the pandemic calls for a slew of measures both at the macro and community levels.

The new variant was first detected in South Africa in early November this year when technicians at Lancet Laboratories in Pretoria found unusual features in samples which they were testing for coronavirus. Weeks later on 24 November the matter was reported to WHO and it was declared as a variant of concern on 26 November on account of its characteristics to have increased transmissibil-

ity, besides significantly evading natural or vaccine induced immunity and/or recognized as causing severe health outcomes.

Although health experts are of the view that it is early to conclude on its severity, when compared to the dreaded Delta variant which posed unprecedented challenges, South Africa has reported more Omicron-related hospitalisations among young adults and children. Their hospitalisation has been short, of about one or two days. Notably enough, 44% of South Africa's adult population have received at least one dose of Covid-19 vaccine.

Now with regard to protecting people against Omicron, there have been several debates and there seems to be an emerging view amongst experts that existing COVID-19 vaccines will still work on the Omicron variant, especially in protecting people against severe illness.



With studies in progress to assess vaccine effectiveness for infection and severe disease compared to previous variants, specific information on the variant's biological behaviour is awaited.

Nonetheless there is strong scientific consensus that people ought to take vaccinations and boosters to protect against any existing and future variants of COVID-19 as vaccines can greatly reduce the risk of severe infection, hospitalization and death.

In India, according to official statistics 135.99 crore vaccine doses have been administered so far under Nationwide Vaccination Drive. According to Pune-based Serum Institute of India, vaccines for children will be ready in the next six months.

But vaccine hesitancy, a complex phenomenon, according to reports varies across time, place, context, and vaccines is a big challenge. Among a plethora of factors, it is also known to stem from lack of health awareness. The good news is that vaccine hesitancy has been declining especially in our rural areas.

A number of incentives, from dollars, cars, cows etc., an array of incentives are being offered across the globe to encourage people to get vaccinated. In Moscow, vaccinated people can win five cars a week through a lottery. In Britain, 18 to 30-year-olds can win discounted takeaway meals and free travel to their vaccination centres. In Hong Kong, those vaccinated can win Tesla electric car; in France it can entitle people to a bar or restaurant. In Prague, one can win an iPhone for a vaccinated person.

Similarly, there are also penalties for people who shun vaccination. In Indonesia, fines of up to \$350



can be slapped for people who fail to get vaccinated. In the United Arab Emirates, those without a job are barred from live events including sports, and cultural activities. In Kazakhstan unvaccinated people are restricted access to public spaces such as bars, cinemas and airports. Similarly, the unvaccinated are banned in Saudi Arabia from entering shopping malls. In Maharashtra, where 1.75 crore citizens have missed the interval between both doses of vaccines and failed to turn up could face restrictions according to Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar.

As of now, there are only about 100 cases of Omicron reported in India. But let's ponder over the scenario in the United Kingdom where reportedly the cases of coronavirus are on the rise on a daily basis. More than 11 million people have now been tested positive for Covid out of a total population of 67 million. Such being the highly transmissible Omicron variant, we cannot remain complacent. More so because Omicron is said to be the most infectious of all variants and contains several mutations that allow the virus to escape antibodies. The forecast is that several people, despite being vaccinated, may likely experience breakthrough infections or re-infections.

Preparedness and mitigation are crucial to respond to the Omicron variant. Social distancing and wearing of masks ought to continue without any slackness. Together we can. ©

In Maharashtra, where 1.75 crore citizens have missed the interval between both doses of vaccines and failed to turn up could face restrictions according to Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar



Miss Universe Throws a Boulder..!

As Harnaz Sandhu, with self-assurance and assertiveness, strong voice and spirited speech swept the Miss Universe title, she threw a message, not a bouquet of flowers to a waiting, receptive audience, but a boulder into the midst of the startled men of India!

'I am not a wallflower, just a thing of beauty to be a trophy on a mantelpiece!' her voice echoed, even if her speech ne'er mentioned these words, "I am the new Indian woman!"

Yes, the new Indian woman!

And as she spoke and the rest of the world cheered to see such conviction and belief, here, some men in high places, and some from home and hearth did not cheer. As her voice rang out loud and clear, husbands and fathers who saw wives and daughters peering onto the TV screen shouted, "Don't look! Don't look! You scared, frightened women are not supposed to speak like this, you women are supposed to be petrified and scared!"

"Scared of what?" ask the women.

"Scared of men of other faiths who prowl around trying to win your innocent hearts!"

"But look at her, she does not seem scared even though she is on an international arena!" say their women more boldly, smiling at Harnaz on their TV screens.

"Don't talk too loud, we are men and you are women! Your voices should be kept soft and low!" the men look at them and say.

"If she had spoken soft and low," say the women together, "she would not have won!"

"We are here to carry your voice!" say their men.



"You have carried things we've not said or felt," say their women looking at their men warily, "You have made laws that instead of protecting us have jailed us in our homes! Here is a girl from Punjab who broke those bars you carved and won a victory for us!"

"What victory?" ask the men.

"A victory, saying, we are equal to you!"

"Equal?" squeal the men.

"Not just equal, but unique too!" say the women boldly.

"Your beautiful faces are unique!" say their men lustily.

"Not just pretty faces and wallflowers, hidden behind walls and clothing as you will have us be! With her we have arrived!"

"Arrived?" ask their men frightened by the roar, which comes not just from their homes but from every home in the country.

"Yes!" roar the women looking with new strength at their now timid men!

It was not just a beautiful Indian girl from proud Punjab who won the Miss Universe title, it was a confident, bold, and determined woman whose voice now resonates from Kashmir to Kerala, from Bombay to Bengal, "We have arrived! We are equal! We are unique! And we want to be treated as such!"

The men shiver, as Miss Universe throws a boulder and breaks the 'protective' bars they've so painstakingly imprisoned their woman with..! ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROBERT CLEMENTS is a Newspaper Columnist, with an estimated readership of 6 million. He also conducts a short-term Writer's Course. Contact him on bobsbanter@gmail.com for more details



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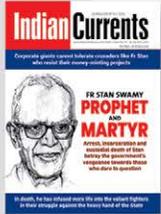
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