

Anti Christian Violence

A background note

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Hinduism as Default State Religion: Sixty years after the People of India gave unto themselves a Constitution guaranteeing a Secular nation with government equidistance from all established religions, Muslims and Christians and even Sikhs have come face to face with a harsh reality – that India does have a “default” state religion, and that it is Hinduism, the religion of the majority. The Hindu ethos and its political compulsions permeate every facet of life – governance, the justice dispensation machinery, public institutions and economic and development processions. The assertion of identities in the complex of the caste matrix, confined not just to Hinduism, but aggressively percolating to Christianity and Islam, have collectively become a short-fuse to the powder keg of this nation of 1.2 billion people on the cusp of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Communal violence trajectory: The starkness of the poverty statistics and inequity is counterpoised tragically with the comparative figures of death and devastation of Muslims and Christians butchered in two major pogroms in the last ten years – in 2002 in Gujarat and more recently in 2008 in the Kandhamal district of Orissa in a manifestation of cultural nationalism and xenophobia not seen since the bloodletting of the partition of India in 1947. The third set of statistics is the abysmal representation of the religious minorities in Parliament and legislative assemblies, in the higher echelons of the bureaucracy and the police, and most tellingly, on the Benches of the Supreme court, the High court’s and the District and Sessions courts, where criminal justice is dispensed.

State Iniquity, Probity and Immunity: The Indian government is always shy of revealing the extent of inter religious violence, and it takes much goading to come anywhere near the truth. Official figures are half or a third of those spoken of by the victims communities or human rights organisations such as the United States Commission for International religious Freedom, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the UN Special Rapporteur and Amnesty international. In a rare answer in the Upper House of Parliament, the Rajya Sabha, India’s junior minister for home affairs, Ajay Maken reported there were at least 3,800 communal clashes rreported in India between 2004 and 2008, marking a steady rise over the years. The highest incidence of such violence in 2008 was reported from the eastern state of Orissa with 180 incidents, all against Christians, followed by the north-central state of Madhya Pradesh with 131, Uttar Pradesh state in the north with 114, western Maharashtra with 109 and Karnataka in the south with 108, half of them against Christians and the rest against Muslims. As per the total number of communal incidents in each state during the last five years, Maharashtra is on the top with 681 clashes, followed by Madhya Pradesh with 654 and Uttar Pradesh with 613.

Gujarat’s anti Muslim violence in February-March 2002 shocked the nation and the world. President and Prime minister called it a blot on the cultural traditions of India. The

government took more than three years to reveal its figures, sanitised most activists said immediately. The federal or Union government told Parliament that 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus were killed, 223 more people reported missing and another 2,500 injured. More than 100,000 people fled their homes. Human rights groups feared the toll to be as high as 2,000 Muslims killed.

The Guilty: The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), an official body, found evidence of premeditation in the killings by members of extremist groups espousing Hindu nationalism, commonly recognised as the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh and its spawn, going by the names of Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal with a large doze of complicity by the State political and administrative apparatus headed by chief minister Narendra Modi. Many Police officers were named in subsequent enquiry commissions for their role in the violence sparked by a fire on a train at the Godhra railway in Gujarat on 27 February 2002 in which 59 Hindu pilgrims. Recently, a police officer said the Gujarat government had authorised the killing of Muslims after the riots, a charge the state government denies. This violence was marked by extraordinary barbarity, especially violence against women. The Supreme Court and special investigative teams are still investigating allegations of mass rape of women, including genital mutilation, the tearing out of foetus from pregnant women's bellies, and burning alive of entire families in their homes. Among the victims was a former Member of Parliament, a Muslim, who was burned alive. Another feature of the violence was the deliberate attempt to economically disempower the Muslim community. Their businesses, big and small, were meticulously targeted for arson.

It is interesting to note that barring the occasional incident of retaliation, the Muslims were the overwhelming target, and yet in the arrests, while 27,901 Hindus were arrested, so were as many as 7,651 Muslims. In firing by the police, again, Muslims were the apparent target -- 93 Muslims were as also about 75 Hindus. Human Rights Watch criticized the Indian government for failure to address the resulting humanitarian condition of people, the "overwhelming majority of them Muslim," who fled their homes for relief camps in the aftermath of the events; as well as the Gujarat state administration for engaging in a cover-up of the state's role in the massacres. The violence spread to 151 towns and 993 villages in fifteen of the state's 25 districts as it raged unchecked between February 28 and March 3, and after a drop, restarted on March 15, continuing sporadically till mid June.

The Anti Christian Violence:

The violence in Orissa between 23 August and 1 October 2008 was comparatively on a much smaller scale, but was historically unique in being targeted against Christians. It differed from earlier anti Christian violence in its intensity and stark severity, sharing with Gujarat aspects of government complicity and an apparent free hand to the Sangh Parivar consisting of the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Almost a month and a half, the district of Kandhamal, on a plateau in the midst of the state of Orissa, was out of bounds even the government's troops while the killer gangs roamed the countryside, killing perhaps as many as a 100 people – **the government acknowledges 37 deaths – burning down 5,500 houses in 300 villages, and – destroying 257 big and small Churches and forcing as many as 55,000 people to flee their houses.**

At the end of 2009, over 20,000 people had still not come back to their homes. They had been barred from their villages by the Hindutva gangs which have openly declared that they will allow the Christians to return only on the condition they gave up their faith and converted to Hinduism. The government has continued to look on rather helplessly, as is

evident to human rights activists and the international media who have seen how in the two fast track courts, a senseless justice is being meted out in which the killers have been let off in most of the cases because the killers have successfully forced all eyewitnesses to their crimes to renege in court.

Orissa chief minister Naveen Patnaik, who was in a coalition with the Bharatiya Janata party during the violence, and has since returned to power after severing relations with that party, has told the state legislature that the attacks were mainly led by right-wing outfits such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and its youth wing Bajrang Dal. The chief minister's indictment of his organisations connected with his former political allies is the first such confirmation of the involvement of these hyper nationalistic groups in violence against religious minorities.

Hinduism has changed, and with it civil society too

There is no doubt that Hinduism has changed, since Partition and Independence in 1947, both in an evolving theological sense, and in terms of popular religious culture. And with it have changed, in a more subtle manner, the national fast expanding middle class, the many civil democratic structures including interpretations of the law in the courts in a subtle but visible manner, the behaviour of high bureaucracy and, perhaps not surprisingly, civil society itself. It was inevitable, as they passed through the buffeting of periodic watershed events such as the Emergency of 1975-79 with its suspension of the Constitution and civil rights, the advent of the SITE [Satellite instruction Television Experiment in 1976 which initiated and made possible a Hindu mass cultural and evangelistic mobilisation fifteen years later, the anti Sikh riots of 1984 which once and for all shattered the myth of the Sikhs being a sword arm of Hinduism meant to protect the Brahmin and the Holy Cow, and above all the events that followed BJP leader and RSS\acolyte Lal Krishan Advani's infamous Rath Yatra culminating in the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992, and all that followed in its wake.

This has led to the classic contradiction of the average Hindu, villager, urban lumpen, middle class, even the billionaires of Indian Inc., feeling vulnerable and cornered on the one hand, and on the other hand increasingly intolerant of religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians which are now branded even in academic circles as "Non-Indic" faith groups, a term unheard of before 1992, and reluctant therefore to concede any further rights or favours to them. Recent cross-border terrorism, the rise of Al Qaeda, the unrelenting vicious circle of military and policies atrocities, disobedience and mass secessionist violence in the Kashmir valley, all tend to reinforce the contemporary Hindu middle class and civil society stance against Islam and Muslims. And by extension it is carried over against Christians whose tenuous linkages with the British Raj are periodically paraded under the sun in a name-and-shame exercise whenever there is a demand for more rights by that micro-minority.

CONVERSIONS: It is also clear that concepts of secularism have changed. The Supreme Court of India under Chief Justice J S Verma said Hindutva was a "way of life" and could not be equated with "narrow fundamentalist Hindu religious bigotry." The Supreme Court's failing to, or refusing to, define religions, especially Hinduism and its differentiation from the ideological aspects of Hindutva has had deep implications. Structured institutions such as the subordinate courts and the National Commission for Minorities thereafter have not been able to reach conclusions on critical issues such as conversions, specially forced conversions to

Hinduism of Adivasi-Tribals and marginalised Christians under the use of Ghar wapsi, a return home.

Social psychologist Ashish Nandy and others raise the fear that minorities will now have to, “for good or worse,” prepare to protect themselves. His worst case scenario is that this is creating a new breeding ground for terrorism with, inevitably, the state crackdown and violence. Most of us do however join Nandy in noting that “almost nothing reveals the decline and degeneration of Gujarati middle class culture more than its present Chief Minister, Narendra Modi. Not only has he shamelessly presided over the riots and acted as the chief patron of rioting gangs, the vulgarities of his utterances have been a slur on civilised public life.” I may add that the titans of Indian industry have lauded Modi as the best administrator they have ever seen, and his Gujarat the best place for economic growth.

III

Solutions and Structures

The established Church and the so called political leadership of the community had felt afraid even to admit to the violence against it. The established Church finds itself cornered, partly because of its need to project the large number of educational and medical institutions it runs and which can be put under pressure either by the majority community or by the state apparatus as Bishops have found in the past sixty years. This also is the reason why the Church has not been able to successfully articulate the development needs of the Christian community, the many ways its progress has been hindered in the past years. In fact, there is no collective statement made by the Church impressing on the government to focus attention on the economic development of a micro-minority which has given to the nation so much in important fields of education and medicare.

This creates a major crisis – the Christian legislators are silent because they have not been elected by a Christian constituency, and the disunited Church finds itself powerless and therefore unwilling to take up issues and rake up controversies. The collective structural silence is deafening.

A small group of Christians has been trying to rouse the Planning Commission of India and the national government on these issues, with very mixed results. The Planning Commission allocates funds and sets yardsticks for the allocation of government resources to various segments of society in the states, and the Christian community fears it has not been given a fair hearing. Some issues are singular to us, because of demographic dispersal and disempowerment in some spheres, especially those concerning Dalit Christians. Even among minorities, governmental action and proactive developmental activity has been uneven. Compared to other minorities – the Muslims are five times as many, and the Sikhs, for instance, are concentrated in Punjab and therefore exercise considerable political power at the national level – Christians have been on the margins of political consciousness of the governments in power over the decades, and especially in recent years.

Test surveys by the All India Catholic Union and the All India Christian Council show that the Christian community in reality lacks an upper middle class other than in Goa, Mumbai and Kerala, does not have an entrepreneurial class, and there is little self-employment amongst our youth, particularly among the Dalits, the rural communities. There is vast under employment amongst educated youth in urban areas. The National Minorities Development Finance Corporation has failed singularly in reversing poverty and unemployment. The

Christian community has done no formal survey to gauge the social and economic infirmity of the people, and particularly of the youth, in the hinterland. Christians have allowed the growth of myths about their economic status based on the images of a few well off people from Goa, Bombay, Kerala or the metropolitan areas of Delhi and Calcutta. The vast majority of Christians amongst the Dalits in Tamil Nadu and Andhra, the tribals in central and East India, and the Dalits and others in the Punjab and Uttar Pradesh are amongst the most economically deprived.

At the turn of the second decade, security of Religious Minorities remains a dominant one. The Christian community had felt itself very safe in India at the dawn of Independence, and the formative years of the democracy under Jawaharlal Nehru, and then under the premiership of Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. But after a spurt of violence in 1998-1999, hate crimes against the Church and the Christian community have been increasing alarmingly since 1997, averaging about 250 incidents a year. But 2007 and 2008 have seen such violence reach an unprecedented level. The violence has not been confined to Orissa. Fourteen other States have been affected, seven seriously. Karnataka is now second only to Orissa in crimes against Christians. Battalions of Central forces are needed to maintain peace, and yet a sense of deep insecurity still permeates the community in Orissa. The situation in Chhattisgarh is also getting out of hand, very rapidly.

The Catholic Union and the Christian Council, which are the two vocal community groups active in human rights, have called on the Union Government that must carry out a full investigation into the nationwide activities of extremist groups accused of the incitement and perpetration of violence against minority groups, including Hindutva groups, their foreign finances, and their penetration into the administrative and police apparatus. Orissa particularly brings urgency to the demand of enforcing rule of law, ending Impunity of state, Police and criminal justice dispensation system in assuring freedom of faith: In State after State, the community has watched in utter helplessness uniformed Policemen accompany assailants attacking institutions, Churches and house Churches. In States such as Manipur, even villages have dared pass laws against Christians, banning conversions and excommunicating people. Pastors and Priests have been arrested on false charges, denied bail, and harassed. Often, the police have stood by while Priests, pastors and Lay persons were beaten up, often in the glare of Television cameras. The Subordinate magistracy and judiciary have often been partisan in their conduct. This impunity must end.

It is only now that the Christian community, again through the AICC and the AICU has started seeking redress of economic deprivation and reversal of unemployment and under-employment amongst Christian youth, stressing the need for a National Commission on the lines of the Justice Rajender Sachhar Commission set up for Muslims to survey and assess the quantum of deprivation, marginalisation and lack of devolution of developmental initiatives, to the Christian community. There is over eight per cent joblessness amongst Christian youth, the highest among minorities. Tribal Christian girls are amongst the most deprived in terms of education and nourishment. Rural employment generation schemes and central special components for marginalised groups do not reach their Christian counterparts in Tribal and rural India There is no real assessment as to what extent institutions such as the National Minorities Financial Development Corporation, or sundry scholarship schemes have benefitted the Christian community even if they may have benefited some other Minorities. Government is at last under some pressure to ensure fair spending on a pro rata basis on the Christian community from schemes meant to benefit the minority communities. Dalits,

Tribals, Landless labour and marginal farmers, coastal and fishery workers and urban youth remain major victims.

The ironically titled Freedom of Religion Bills actually erodes the Constitutional right to Freedom to profess, practice and propagate faith. They have become instruments of persecution, and in fact, provide an excuse for criminal and communal elements to target the Church and Christian workers in particular when they exercise their right to propagate their faith. The community is now demanding that Government must assure there will be no effort in the future to infringe upon, erode, or nibble at Minority educational and other Constitutional rights under any pretext. Activists are also pointing to the shrinking of what they describe as the Secular-Spiritual Space.

In the light of past experience, the community response to the government's proposal to bring forward a bill for an Equal Opportunity commission has been met by some anxiety. The existing institutions such as the national Human Rights commission and the National Commission for Minorities have been seen as not really helping the people, and yet another central body created without community participation can hardly be expected to invoke confidence.

In an overview, it is quite clear that an environment of suspicion marks the relationship between the federal and provincial governments and their insitutions and agencies on the one hand, and the two major religious minorities, the Muslims and the Christians.