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TN NAILS A LIE



CONVERSION BOGEY

As the Sangh Parivar offshoots continue their outlandish attacks on Christian communities, raising the most dishonest and fictional claim of forcible conversions, Tamil Nadu government asserts that there are no forced or illegal conversions in the State



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TIME TO BURY **CONVERSION BOGEY**



There are no forced or illegal conversions in Tamil Nadu. This matter-of-fact assertion is made in an affidavit filed by the State in Supreme Court. It further nails the lie on conversions, being spread by Sangh Parivar forces, stating that such claims are without any basis or proof. The Government made its position clear while the court was hearing a petition filed by a lawyer alleging forced conversion to Christianity as a cause for death of a school-going girl in the State. The Tamil Nadu government's testimony is an assertion of the fact that there is not even an iota of truth in the petitioner's 'claim that incidents are reported every week throughout the country where religious conversion is done by intimidating, threatening, deceiving, and luring through gifts.'

As the Sangh Parivar offshoots continue their outlandish attacks on Christian communities, raising the most dishonest and fictional claim of forcible conversions, Tamil Nadu's assertion should be an eye-opener for all. It should put the 'conversion bogey' to rest once and for all. The argument dished out for legislating the draconian anti-conversion laws in states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Gujarat among others, falls flat. If a State like Tamil Nadu which has a Christian population of about 7 per cent confirms that there are no forcible conversions there, how could the allegation of conversion by states with less than half per cent Christian population stand the test of scrutiny. The negligible and stagnant Christian population in those states, and no convictions in 'alleged conversion cases' filed across the country, bring out the hollowness of the claims of Sangh Parivar.

There is nothing more ridiculous and erroneous than the oft-repeated conversion bogey. The Tamil Nadu government's observations have major implications not only for the ongoing debate over 'alleged conversions' but also for the right to practice and propagate religion as guaranteed in the Constitution. Going a step further, the state government, quoting Article 25 of the Constitution, said that the acts of missionaries spreading Christianity by itself cannot be seen as something against law, provided their acts do not infringe public order, morality or other provisions of the statute.

While a state government sees nothing wrong in the minority community members exercising their constitutionally-granted freedom to practice, preach and propagate their religion, the anti-conversion laws curtail the very same rights given by the Constitution. The increasing number of attacks on Christians, their priests, pastors, worshiping places and institutions on trumped up charges of forcible conversions is nothing but a ploy to clear the road to Hindu Rashtra.

The Supreme Court is already seized of the matter as it is hearing a batch of petitions challenging the anti-conversion laws in five states. The apex court has, in fact, advised the petitioners to compile all the petitions in various states and move a consolidated petition so that the case can be transferred to the top court. The submission of the Tamil Nadu government that there are no forcible conversions in the State goes to prove that the anti-conversion laws are undesirable and offensive as the 'crime' they intend to tackle does not exist on the ground. It is futile to attempt to tackle a presumed crime that does not exist.

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

Happy Reading!

Dr. Suresh Mathew

Editor

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BY **IC CORRESPONDENT**

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POWER QUOTES



The ignited mind of the youth is the most powerful resource on the earth, under the earth and above the earth.

A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

• • •



Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment.

Buddha

• • •



All men are prepared to accomplish the incredible if their ideals are threatened.

Maya Angelou

• • •



There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.

Albert Einstein

• • •



It is very important to generate a good attitude, a good heart, as much as possible. From this, happiness in both the short term and the long term for both yourself and others will come.

Dalai Lama

• • •



Wisdom, compassion, and courage are the three universally recognized moral qualities of men.

Confucius

• • •



The greatest discovery of all time is that a person can change his future by merely changing his attitude."

Oprah Winfrey

• • •



Your attitude, not your aptitude, will determine your altitude.

Zig Ziglar

TAMIL NADU NAILS A LIE NO FORCIBLE CONVERSIONS



Tamil Nadu says citizens should be allowed freely to choose their religion and it would not be appropriate for the government to put a spoke in the wheel of their personal belief and privacy

BY **JOHN DAYAL**

Once upon a time when the redoubtable Dilip Singh Judev ruled over the postage sized former principality, Jashpur, of his cousins in what is now Chhattisgarh, and no one had heard of *gau rakshaks*, there was a little drama in the sal tree-covered hills of that region.

Judev was a tall hulk of a man who often dressed in semi-military dresses and was given to grand gestures. His most famous gesture was to accept a bundle of high value currency notes from a bribe-giver in what he thought was a private meeting.



Unknown to him, someone had a secret camera which caught in pitiless detail the semi-drunk politician plays with the bundles of currency and exult in Hindi, “Money is not god, but by god, it is not less than god”.

It sounds more impressive and lyrical in the Hindi original. It was to be one of several embarrassments his party, the Bharatiya Janata party, had to suffer. It was just a little less than the shame the party faced when its president, Bangaru Lakshman, was caught accepting another bundle of currency

notes. But this is not about corruption in the BJP, of which there are all too many stories to tell.

One of Judev's politically most daring moves was to say he would convert to Hinduism every Adivasi tribal in his area who had accepted Christianity as his or her religion. The Adivasis were never Hindus, and followed myriad modes of nature worship, each subgroup expressing its piety in its own way.

Judev's exercise was impressive. He collected villagers he said were Christians. His men, armed with bows and arrows, and guns, both legal and made in small workshops in Uttar Pradesh, stood in a circle on the hillside around them, menacing and threatening, as they pointed their weapons at the small bunch of men and women in the centre.

Judev organised a purification ceremony for the group, and then initiated them into the Hindu faith with the help of some local priests. The secret camera captured it all. This writer came to know of it when the cameraman confided the secret. Judev had thought that the strapping young man to be a fellow Hindu. And given him full access to the ceremony which was out of bounds to all others.

The point of what the camera captured was not the hapless small group of people "purified", and "converted" by Judev. It was his private army that had guarded the entire ceremony and that had, initially, brought the targeted men to the spot.

Forcible conversions can be carried out by the dominant and the powerful, aided and abetted by those who can enforce their will by a show of force on weaker and lesser human beings. The weak have no agency.

Mr Judev was not arrested by the state government nor was any case filed against him for conversion by force and fraud under the Freedom of Religion law which was even then prevalent in the state.

Forcible conversions can be carried out by the dominant and the powerful, aided and abetted by those who can enforce their will by a show of force on weaker and lesser human beings. The weak have no agency



The cameraman was never summoned by a court to give evidence that he was witness to an act of mass conversion by force. Recent laws, in fact, make conversions to Christianity and Islam by force as a crime, but any conversion to Hinduism is not a crime.

In Uttar Pradesh in recent times, and in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, Christian clergymen and even common people have been arrested on charges of forcible conversion. Those arrested number in their hundreds, many forced to stay in jail for weeks before lawyers finally get them released on bail through the district or high courts. Each case has been meticulously documented by Persecution Relief, the Evangelical Fellowship of India, or the Alliance Defending Freedom which seeks to bring legal aid to the victims.

In most, if not all, cases, the Christians were at prayer in a designated church, a prayer hall, or just a large hut at the edge of a grove when the mob came in and surrounded them. The mob was almost always accompanied by a posse of policemen. And in many cases, by a group of local news and social media persons. The news was always of missionaries arrested for 'forcibly and fraudulently converting innocent Hindus.'

In a perverse way, the hypocrisy has finally been seen in the bright glare of sunlight, and the hearings in the Supreme Court in a slew of writs filed by a BJP-RSS acolyte and advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhaya who wants the Supreme Court to order the Law Commission of India to bring about a national-wide law which will put an end to conversions of Hindus to Christianity, and by association, to Islam.

The suit has invited a spate of writs by Christian and other groups seeking to intervene in the matter and present their side of the picture. One

point is to show that Mr Upadhaya is a habitual presenter of writs and has in fact filed similar writs in the Supreme Court and various high courts. Other points are more serious. They include how any law that curbs freedom of religion of a citizen in effect violates the secular nature of the Indian state as shaped by its Constitution, which in turn is the product of its long freedom struggle to bring justice to all people irrespective of their identity, caste and class.

As it is, many laws severely restrict the freedom of religion of a person, especially if or she happens to be a Dalit. Article 371 (iii) for instance demands that a person be a Hindu if he wants to seek the protection of the law against untouchability, or for being eligible for scholarships, jobs and even seats in Parliament and state legislatures. Conversion to Islam or Christianity can make an employee lose his job. This law has also been challenged in the Supreme court. The government has also appointed a committee under former Chief Justice of India K. G. Balakrishnan to examine if caste prejudices and infirmities carry over if one converts from Hinduism to some other religion. Earlier, Ranganath Misra Commission, in its report, had sated that caste indeed crosses the barriers of religion.

[Though these are cases of freedom of religious choices as an integral part of freedom of life and freedom of privacy, it is in no way linked with another case of freedom of choice and privacy before a constitutional bench of the Supreme Court which relates to a demand that the LGBTQO community be allowed to marry under the Special Marriages Act.]

Recent laws, in fact, make conversions to Christianity and Islam by force as a crime, but any conversion to Hinduism is not a crime

The court has not taken kindly to the BJP lawyer's habit of filing writs of this nature. The Bench has, however, issued notices to state governments to tell it how many cases of forcible or fraudulent conversions (to Christianity) they have documented and therefore acted upon complaints.

Most state governments have sought more time to file their submissions. But Christian lawyers say there is no case in any state where a man or woman has been converted to Christianity under duress. This is an oxymoron and is impossible in the Indian situation where Hinduism is an overwhelming majority religion in most States in the country.

The Tamil Nadu government, now ruled by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, is the first and so far only one to file a detailed affidavit in the Supreme Court recording that the state has not come across any case of forcible or fraudulent conversion. The state government has also painstakingly documented the various writs filed by the BJP lawyer to expose his motives.

The state has sought dismissal of Mr Upadhay's PIL as the BJP leader has attempted to convert the court proceeding into a political fight.

The state also traces the history of anti-conversion laws in the

country. It admits that Tamil Nadu had once enacted such a law, but had withdrawn it under public protest. In 2002, the state, then ruled by the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam of Dr J Jayalalitha, had passed the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Act but it was



repealed in 2006 “due to popular opposition”.

The state said that there is “nothing illegal” about missionaries – it uses this term -- spreading Christianity unless they employ unlawful means to do so, as the Constitution of India gives people a right to “spread their religion peacefully” and “change their beliefs”.

Tamil Nadu says citizens should be allowed freely to choose their religion and it would not be appropriate for the government to put a spoke in the wheel of their personal belief and privacy.

The government was emphatic that no incident of forceful conversion has been reported in its territory .

“The Anti-conversion laws are prone to misuse against minorities and there is no data on convictions under the various anti-conversion laws of the states. It is most respectfully submitted that the citizens are at liberty to choose the religion they want to follow,” the Tamil Nadu affidavit said. Mr Upadhyay, it said, was trying to target Christian missionaries by filing a “religiously motivated petition”.

“Article 25 of the Constitution of India guarantees every citizen the right to propagate his religion. Therefore, the acts of missionaries spreading Christianity by itself cannot be seen as something against law. But if their act of spreading their religion is against public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of Part III of the Constitution (relating to fundamental rights), it has to be viewed seriously. As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, there has



been no incidents of forceful conversion reported in the past many years,” the state affidavit said.

It is no one’s point that the Constitution gives anyone a fundamental right to force another man or woman to one’s own religion. “But it gives a right to any person to propagate his religion. Likewise, the Constitution does not prevent any person from getting converted to the religion of his choice. The citizens of the country should be allowed freely to choose their religion and it would not be appropriate for the Government to put a spoke in their wheel of personal belief and privacy,” the affidavit says.

Tamil Nadu cites Articles 21 and 25 that “every citizen has the opportunity to practice and spread his religion peacefully.” The right to have faith in a particular religion is an inviolable right that the state is obligated to protect.

“Without intimidation, threatening, deception, luring through gifts and without using any superstitious methods, any person has the right to propagate and preach his belief system to other persons.” The task of the state is to maintain a balance between the right to propagate religion and public order.

Tamil Nadu has also denied Upadhyay’s allegations that a minor girl committed suicide when forced to convert by the Christian institution where she was studying. “The Central Bureau of Investigation is still investigating the cause of death of Lavanya and as per the investigation done by the state police, there is no concrete proof or clinching evidence to say that she committed suicide because of compulsion to convert to Christianity,” it said. ©

Christian lawyers say there is no case in any state where a man or woman has been converted to Christianity under duress. This is an oxymoron and is impossible in the Indian situation where Hinduism is an overwhelming majority religion

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN DAYAL is a veteran journalist and human rights activist.

Religious Freedom

Tamil Nadu Shows the Way

The govt.'s assertion in Supreme Court that no illegal conversions take place in Tamil Nadu should be an eyeopener to those States which have legislated anti-conversion laws

BY **DR M. D. THOMAS**

The Tamil Nadu government made a clear-headed and bold statement in the Supreme Court of India on 30 April 2023. The statement in a nutshell says that 'missionary efforts of Christians to spread their religion are legal and valid'.

The larger implication of the statement is that 'every person has the right to propagate his or her religion'. Propagation, in its turn, does not mean converting anyone to one's religion. Everyone has the right to choose any religion or no religion, as well.

This statement is grounded in Article 25 of the Constitution of India which guarantees every citizen the right to propagate his or her religion. The Supreme Court reiterated the right of the citizens without making exception of any person or community.

Problem arises when the act of propagating religion violates the public order, morality and health. The act has to be considered valid when it does not involve intimidation, threat, deceit, allurements, superstition or black magic, obviously so.

The Tamil Nadu government headed by Mr M. K. Stalin was represented by senior advocate P. Wilson. The government affirmed that no government has the right to intervene in this matter against the belief,



privacy and choice of the individual.

Besides, Article 21 of the Constitution guarantees the right to a dignified life, which is an inviolable right. This is the foundation for Article 25, which categorically articulates the right to hold a certain belief or no belief at all as well as switching over to

another belief. The statement of Tamil Nadu was in response to the petition filed by advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyaya, who sought a NIA/CBI investigation into the 'root cause' of the death of a 17-year-old girl in Tamil Nadu, who allegedly was converted to Christianity.

While strongly condemning the false allegation of the affidavit, the State government categorically negated any forcible or deceitful conversion ever taken place in Tamil Nadu.

As a matter of fact, more often than not, there is someone to facilitate any channel of knowledge, religious or other. Parents influence children, seniors inspire juniors, teachers motivate students, religious persons stimulate believers, and the like. This is an accepted truth and cannot be construed as conversion of any sort.



Problem arises when the act of propagating religion violates the public order, morality and health. The act has to be considered valid when it does not involve intimidation, threat, deceit, allurements, superstition or black magic, obviously so

Further, humans are social beings and they are inter-related and their thoughts, sentiments, perceptions, attitudes and decisions are very much a shared reality, though in more or less degrees. When people share certain convictions, it cannot be misinterpreted as allurements or coercion, too.

From this perspective, the statement made by the government of Tamil Nadu is worthy of being saluted for the clarity of thinking and the soundness of logic it reflects. The statement of the TN government in the Supreme Court is a case in point for other State governments as well as the Centre.



No forceful conversion in Tamil Nadu, nothing illegal about missionaries spreading Christianity: State govt to Supreme Court

• 01 May 2023, New Delhi

Tamil Nadu govt has told the Supreme Court that no incident of forceful conversion has been reported in the State in the past many years and there is nothing illegal about missionaries spreading Christianity unless they employ unlawful means to do so. "The Anti-conversion laws are prone to misuse against minorities and there is no data on convictions under the various anti-conversion laws of the states. It is most respectfully submitted that the citizens are at liberty to choose the religion they want to follow," the DMK-led govt further said.

No doubt, it follows logically that the 'Anti-Conversion Laws', along with the 'Freedom of Religion Acts' or 'Religious Freedom Acts' passed by some 10 State governments, do not stand to reason and are objectionable. Those laws and bills clearly violate the spirit of the Constitution of India and smack of foul intentions, in line with the distorted drive of 'Hindutva' and 'Hindu Rashtra'.

Moreover, the practice of placing the blame of conversion mostly on the Christian community is not only an obsession, but also a perversion. It is politically motivated and does not correspond to truth. The allegations of conversion raised against Christians go against the reality on the ground.

As per the 2011 national census, the population of the Christian community is 2.3 percent, consecutively for two times before, too. History has it that there were times when the Christian community counted even 2.6 percent and it steadily declined to reach the current percentage.

Obviously, the above statistics contradicts the foul-intentioned claims of the respective State governments as well as anti-Christian warriors like Ashwini Kumar Upadhyaya. Generalizing exceptions, which take place in almost all communities, is a distortion of truth and it has to be considered a criminal offence.

In addition, I keep meeting persons who have changed their Christian affiliation over to other belief systems like Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Baha'i, Brahma Kumari, ISCON, atheist, and the like, due to marriage or by choice. There are also instances of Christians switching over to other persuasions, though a few.

The above phenomenon reveals the open-ended freedom of affiliation of individuals, in line with the secular credentials of the country. This state of affairs is perfectly fine, in line with the Constitution of India as well as common sense. To manipulate the truth and narrow down the phenomenon of conversion to Christian alone is untruth of the supreme order.

What's more, religious freedom of the country has to proceed further to respecting the freedom, rights, dignity and choice of every citizen, in a spirit of multi-faith good will and fellowship. There is no foolproof boundary around any individual entity, institution or community, including religion or faith. The spirit of learning from each other has to be the logic of being a nation or a society.

The great wisdom of the Creator is that he, she or it has 'showered the divine gifts all over the world', on all individuals, communities and nations. All these gifts are the 'common cultural heritage of the human society'. Therefore, a 'common origin, common existence and a common destiny' has to be the mindset of the humans, necessarily so.

The presidency of G 20 is a golden opportunity for India to make a 'restart' of living the ethos and ethics of 'vasudhaiv kutumbakam'. All violations of the Constitution of India have to end, with immediate effect. Governments of the States and the Centre have to come forward to make affirmative statements, like the heroic government of Tamil Nadu, in favour of unity, integrity, dignity and growth of the nation. ©

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Manipur Unrest

Many Churches Burnt, Curfew Imposed

The tribals are upset over the demand of the Meitei community for ST status. The Sangh Parivar is reportedly trying to create a Hindu nationalist identity for the Meitei community. All these have led to the present grim situation in the North-East State

BY IC CORRESPONDENT

The situation in Manipur is grim and everyone is tensed. Is it the result of some stray fight turned into a full-blown civil unrest or well planned and executed Pogrom?

I was on a work visit to Churachandpur (the locals call LAMKA) district from 25 to 30 April. Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) called eight-hour bandh on 28th April from 8 am to 4 pm to protest against the eviction of Kuki villagers from protected forests.

The bandh was total but after 5 pm the police along with paramilitary and commandos started to gather at New Lamka along with many vehicles and the area was getting tensed.

Shortly, gun shots were heard while shouts of anger also filled the area. Tear gas shells were lobbed; for the first time I experienced burning in eyes and irritation on the nostrils but the youngsters on the street were boldly pushing the forces back. It was like a battle field with well-trained groups advancing and retracting. The mob went back joyous when the police released some of the leaders, who were arrested that evening on suspicion of burning a gym.

On the previous night, an open gym at PT Sports

complex at New Lamka town was set on fire by miscreants and the District Magistrate ordered IPC 144 and imposed Public Curfew prohibiting the movement of any person.

On 3rd March, a Tribal Solidarity March was announced by student organizations in all the 10 hill districts of the State and thousands of tribals participated, singing “we shall overcome”.

The main grievances of the protesters are the following:

- 1) The demand for Scheduled Tribe status by the dominant Meitei community and the recommendation of the Manipur High Court.
- 2) The declaration of the tribal lands as reserved and protected forest without the information and consent of the hill tribals.
- 3) The abuse of government machinery by elected leaders to coerce the masses to fulfill communal purpose.

There are several reasons why the protesters oppose the Meitei demand for ST status. Some of them are the following:

1. If the dominant community of Meitei is granted ST recognition, the Constitutional provision of Article 371 C that safeguards the interest of the present Scheduled Tribes can be rendered null and void. The



When a tribal person posts anything against the state, he is arrested, but this never happens when Meitei people make inciting and communal comments against the ethnic minority/tribals

category of 'Scheduled Tribe', meant to safeguard the hills' tribals from the dominant community, will be rendered meaningless.

2. All the constitutional provisions meant to safeguard the tribals from the dominant Meitei community will be rendered useless. This includes: The Hill Areas Committee order 1972; the Manipur Land Reform and Land Revenue Act 1960; the Manipur Hill Areas Village Authorities Act 1956; and the Manipur Hill areas District Councils Act 1971.

The state claims that tribals are encroaching on reserved and protected forest. But the protesters counter it on many grounds:

1. The Hill tribes have always inhabited the hills, even before the formation of Manipur as a state. They are indigenous to the hills which were only put together as part of Manipur by the British.

2. The declaration of reserved and protected forest was not made with the informed consent of the tribals. The tribals, who are the first stakeholders, must first and foremost be made to understand the implications of declaring reserved forest.

3. There are ongoing law suits by Tribal Chiefs and Human Rights Organizations against the declaration of reserved forests. The state is bulldozing overdue constitutional procedure.

4. The Hill Area Committee (HAC) has not been consulted regarding these declarations. This is a breach of the Hill tribals constitutional safeguards.

The state claims that the hills are hotbed of drug cartels. But the protesters argue that the state is not



taking action in this regard. They make the following counter-claims:

1. There are many insurgent groups in Manipur. Many of them rely on such drug trade. Who, however, really profits from this? A few rich and powerful people, some in the hills, but most of them in the valley with connections to politicians.

2. They can catch drug peddlers in the hills anytime. The state should answer why it is not arresting the Kingpins.

The protesters point out that the Manipur Government is communal. They substantiate their claim by pointing out the following points:

1. The construction and opening of Chandrakirti statue in Behiang, where a renowned tribal chief was deceived by two Meitei generals.

2. The imposition of section 144 Cr. P.C. whenever the tribals mobilise to demand their rights. This law is only supposed to be used when there is threat of violence.

The previous SP of Churachandpur was transferred immediately after the people demanded their rights on 10th March because he allowed them to march peacefully.

3. When a tribal person posts anything against the state, he is arrested, but this never happens when Meitei people make inciting and communal comments against the ethnic minority/tribals.

Christians Insecure in Manipur, says Archbishop Machado

It is distressing to hear that the Christian community in Manipur, which constitutes 41 per cent of the State's population, is being persecuted, said Rev. Dr. Peter Machado, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Bangalore.

In a press statement, the Archbishop said despite having a sizable Christian population in Manipur, the community is being made to feel insecure. Referring to the burning down of churches and the attack on Jesuit Fathers, he said people are being targeted for their religious beliefs and practices.

"It is the responsibility of the government in power to ensure the freedom of religion, especially as the people have entrusted the party with power believing in its capacity for good governance," Archbishop Machado said.

4. The government servants, district employees and Job Card holders are always forced to join various programmes that have no relation with their job or designation. This happened when Chandra-kirti park was opened, during the Sangai festival, and then again when the open gym was to be inaugurated. Those Job holders are often given show cause notices, get transferred or given some other punishment for not complying with the orders.

Jesuits Attacked

On the fateful 3rd May evening, in the district of Bishnupur, a Jesuit team was attacked by a mob near Moirang.

The team was returning, after house blessings, to their residence in Moirang, some 45 km south of the state capital of Imphal, when an angry mob stopped their vehicle.

They were allowed to go ahead as some persons in the crowd recognized the vehicle but some drunken people who were ahead of the crowd misunderstood that the Jesuit team had ignored the people's demand to stop.

They forced the vehicle to stop, broke its windshields and assaulted those inside – priests, seminarians and a lay teacher. The priests and seminarians were wearing the cassock. The mob also burned the vehicle.

However, some local people took the Jesuit team to their homes and protected them. Later, they took the team to the police station, where they spent the night. Two seminarians in the team were injured and given first aid in a hospital. They returned to their friary safely.



Some people with vested interests seem to give the issue a communal colour. They go round destroying churches in the Imphal Valley. A few churches have been destroyed even in the Moirang area under Bishnupur district.

Until now, as many as 24 churches belonging to different Christian denominations have been destroyed since the trouble began, according to a list circulated among Christian groups in the region.

It was shocking to read the names of 16 people allegedly killed by the Meiteis and 27 villages where houses were burned down.

Those causing trouble seem to be outsiders who have come with a mandate to destroy churches. Even the attackers of the Jesuit team were apparently outsiders.

Church expresses anguish

A forum representing Christians of all denominations in north-east India expressed anguish over the ongoing unrest in Manipur where the government has issued "shoot-at-sight orders in extreme cases."

The order was issued by T Ranjit Singh, the state's Commissioner of Home, in the name of the Governor of Manipur.

The administration has suspended internet for five days to prevent rumors from spreading. But it has severely affected dissemination of news from the troubled areas.

Primarily based in Imphal Valley, a region which includes capital, the Meiteis have dominated the state's political and economic landscape. Tribal communities make up around a third of the population (35.4%) and are mainly concentrated in the



hills surrounding the valley, 90 percent of the state's geographical area.

For decades, the issue of land ownership and control has been a source of conflict between the two groups. But in recent years, these tensions have been exacerbated by the political influence of organizations like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which have sought to promote their faith as the dominant religion in India and have used the Meitei community to advance their political agenda in the state.

While area leaders believe that the violence was largely a reaction to this political decision, they see its viciousness and severity, particularly the attack on churches, as the growth of the influence of the BJP and the RSS. Radical Hindu ideology historically has struggled to find a foothold in Manipur, because of its mix of tribal, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities.

"In this pogrom, the Hindu Meiteis not only burned down churches belonging to tribals but also churches that exclusively belong to Meitei Christians," said Ngaineilam Haokip, an academic at the University in Kolkata, who grew up in Manipur. "They targeted their own brethren who follow Christ by burning their churches."

"If this is not a pogrom, what is it? They are burning churches when the protest rally was simply against the inclusion of Meiteis as Scheduled Tribe by All Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM). There is definitely a religious angle here," said a Christian leader in the area, who asked to be identified by the name Lien.

After the BJP came to power in 2017, it sought to create a Hindu nationalist identity for the Meitei community. This encouragement to see themselves as part of the Hindu-fold has come even as nearly



"My state Manipur is burning": Mary Kom makes emotional appeal to Centre for help

In the wake of clashes in parts of Manipur, boxing champion Mary Kom on Thursday made a heartfelt appeal urging the Centre to help her state which she said is "burning".

"My state Manipur is burning, kindly help," the veteran boxer tweeted in the early hours today, sharing photos of violence. She tagged Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and Rajnath Singh in her tweet.

Speaking to ANI, Mary Kom appealed to both state and central governments to take immediate steps to restore peace in the State and said that the situation in the State must get normal at the earliest.

"I am not feeling good about the situation in Manipur. Since last night, the situation has deteriorated. I appeal to State and Central governments to take steps for the situation and maintain peace and security in the state. It is unfortunate that some people lost their family members in this violence. This situation must get normal at the earliest," she said.

10 percent of the community practice an indigenous religion known as Sanamahism. After the court's April 19 directive, the state government was given a four-week deadline to review the Meitei community's request and make a recommendation to the federal government for its consideration.

The Evangelical Fellowship of India expressed sadness and concern over the violence, though it did not link the event to religious extremism or suggest that Christians had been targeted because of their faith.

"We call upon all parties involved to exercise restraint and work towards a peaceful resolution of the issues. We urge the people of Manipur to avoid forces that instigate division and cause polarization," said Vijayesh Lal, the general secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India in a statement.

The North East Students Society of Delhi University, a group that represents the Christian tribal community, condemned what they described a "division along the lines of religious faith and communal identity fueled by political propaganda." Representing a similar constituency, the Naga Students Union Delhi urged the government to "address the underlying issues that have led to these events by wider consultation with the various stakeholders." ©

Karnataka Can Do It

The Karnataka Assembly Election is about the Constitution of India...it is about the soul of India... it is about the future of India

BY CEDRIC PRAKASH

Karnataka Assembly Elections 2023. Many refer to it as the 'mother-of-all-elections'. In several ways it could be the defining moment of India's political history: a watershed. Serious students of political sciences and of politics in general do not hesitate in asserting that a defeat for the BJP in the Karnataka elections would mean that the doors of democracy are still wide open for the overthrow of the fascist regime in the 2024 General Elections. On the other hand, a win for the BJP could be a roller-coast ride for them towards winning the stakes at the 2024 hustings and would, in all probability, hasten the realisation of their ultimate goal: Establishment of a nation-state based on the 'Hindutva' ideology.

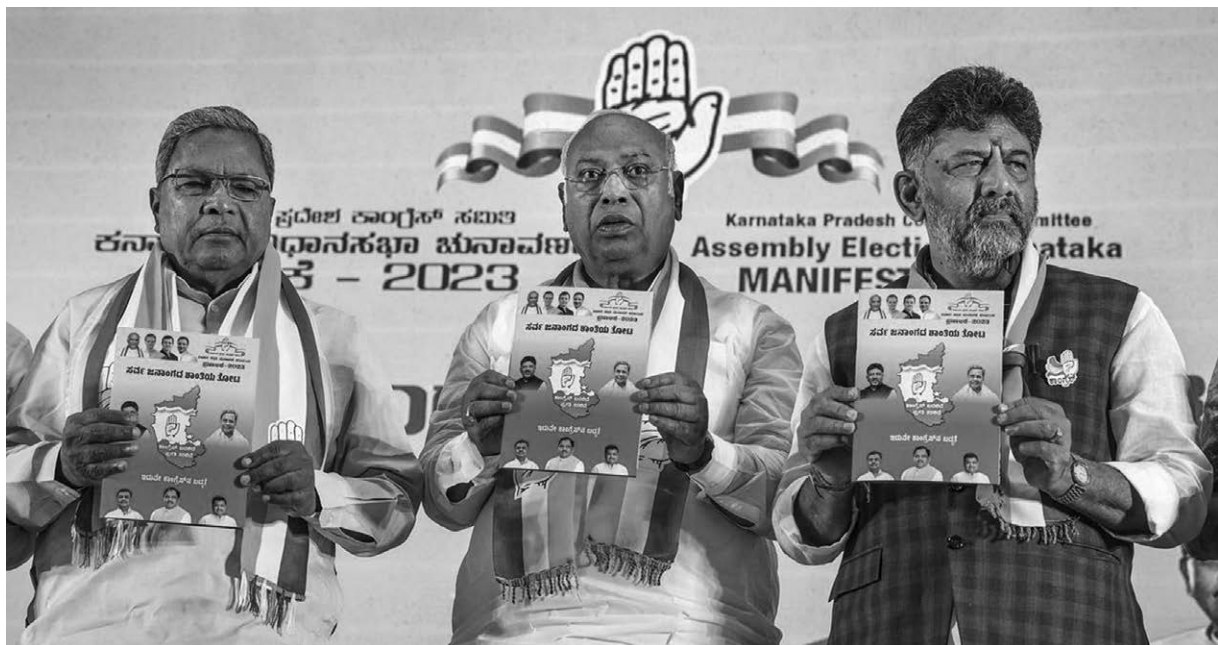
It would then be the coronation, as the rulers of India, of their parent body the Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh (RSS) in their centenary year 2025; an aspiration they have been hankering for, even during the days of the British Colonial rule. It is no state secret that the RSS had no qualms of conscience



in supporting colonial rule; none of them apparently participated in the freedom struggle movement that gave India her independence in 1947.

There is much at stake in the Karnataka Elections. From the way they have been campaigning, the BJP is without doubt in despair-mode. Besides anti-incumbency there are a whole range of issues and factors ranged against them. Their star-campaigner, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, visited Karnataka almost 10 times before the elections were announced, engaging in a slew of inaugurations (of roads, bridges and what-not) and ribbon-cutting ceremonies. Ever since the State elections were announced, he has gone full throttle with rallies and road-shows; and this is expected to continue right up to the period of 'election silence' about 48 hours before polling day on May 10.

There are poll surveys and forecasts aplenty; most of them predict a victory for the Congress. These surveys however, are sometimes wrong; there is



many a slip between the cup and the lip. For the BJP, the last few days before elections are normally very important: they have mastered the art of galvanising crowds (at the cost of the State exchequer) and even in door-to-door contact. They have money, muscle, and media with them. They stop at nothing. So, till the last vote is counted and the final results are declared, the average citizen will have to keep one's fingers crossed.

There are several critical issues which are bound to influence the voters' decision in the elections. Many of these issues are inter-related but no one can deny that fundamental to all of them are the issues of survival: *roti, kapda aur makaan* of the ordinary people; of their lives and livelihood. The cost of living has spiralled upwards as never before. Pathetic governance by the ruling party has made it impossible, if not extremely difficult, for the poor to make ends meet. They have particularly no purchasing power: they eke out a hand-to-mouth survival. Unemployment is at an all time high. It is also a fact that at the very last moment the BJP has the money to 'buy up the poor' – as they have done in several elections across the country in the recent years. No one is sure, though, if that money power will translate into votes at the end, this time too.

Yogendra Yadav is one of the country's best known political scientists, psephologist, activist and much more. He has his ears to the ground. For the last weeks he has been in Karnataka with grassroots individuals and groups monitoring the run-up to the elections. He has been providing insightful analysis on the ground reality through his many articles and interactions. In his latest article in *The Print* (dated May 4) titled "Congress 'hawa' to class divide -- four observations in the run-up to Karnataka election",

There is much at stake in the Karnataka Elections. From the way they have been campaigning, the BJP is without doubt in despair-mode. Besides anti-incumbency there are a whole range of issues and factors ranged against them



Yadav is very clear about which party will be given the people's mandate.

Mr. Yadav asserts, "The lower you go, the stronger is the hawa. No poor voter had a good word for the BJP. As I mentioned in my article last week, there is a clear rich-poor divide among the voters of Karnataka. The richer the voter, the lower the lead for the Congress, and vice-versa for the BJP. This was starkly evident on the ground. As soon as you speak to a poor person, they begin to rattle off everyday consumption items that are unaffordable now. Gas cylinder prices top the chart. "Earlier, we were making do with firewood. They gave us gas. Now we can't go back to firewood. Nor can we afford the gas cylinder," said one." He goes on to add, "Almost everyone complained about the cut in free rice from 10 kg per person per month during the Congress' time to 5 kg now. Petrol and diesel prices come next. Farmers complained about fertilizer prices. They mock the Kisan Samman Nidhi: 'They give us 2,000 but take away more than that from our pocket.' More ordinary people know about GST and blamed it for the higher prices than you might imagine."

Corruption is another issue which is today systemic and has plagued the people of Karnataka. It is common knowledge that the BJP has been demanding a forty percent commission for every Government work awarded to anybody. In fact, some time ago a contractor from Belagavi, Santosh Patil, committed suicide. Before taking own life, he had accused BJP Minister Eshwarappa and his associates of not releasing payments for road work worth Rs 4 crore that he had done at Hindalga in Belagavi, and of demanding a commission of 40 per cent.

Several religious seers have also accused the BJP of polluting religious sanctity by demanding a 30 per



cent commission from mutts and 40 per cent from temples. Several ministers have been accused of amassing mind-boggling amounts of wealth through corrupt practices. There is no doubt that corruption is mainstreamed in the country, and exists across the board in most political parties; but no one can compete with or reach the levels of corruption of the ruling regime. That the Prime Minister so blatantly uses his office to campaign for his political party is a clear case of corruption entailing huge expenditure to the Government coffers. His roadshows have put the ordinary citizen to great inconvenience and denied the daily wagers of their day's earnings.

Communalism is certainly high on the agenda of the BJP. Karnataka was once a haven of communal harmony, but over the years through a meticulously divisive campaign, denigrating and demonizing minorities, the BJP has succeeded in polarising communities on religious lines and have kept the communal cauldron boiling. In September 2008, they attacked Christians and their institutions in Mangalore. The perpetrators were never brought to book. They continued spewing their hate and slow-fire violence across the State.

Then on 24 January 2009, a group of goons belonging to the extremist outfit, Sri Ram Sene, barged into a pub in Mangalore, beat up young women and men, screaming at them for having "loose morals". The group claimed that the women were violating traditional Indian values. Two women were hospitalized for the injuries they sustained. However, after more than nine years, a lower court in Karnataka, on March 13, acquitted 26 of the attackers including the founder of the group, Pramod Muthalik, for 'want of evidence'. This was indeed a travesty of justice. There is ample amount

of video evidence to show how blatantly the goons had carried out the attack. Muthalik continues with his viciousness; this year, on February 19, he incited his audience saying "I am instructing our workforce, if we lose one Hindu girl, we must trap 10 Muslim women ...", adding "every Hindu must keep a weapon at home for the protection of cows, women and temples."

As part of their communal agenda, the BJP has brought in through the back-door, a draconian anti-conversion law; stoked emotive issues like 'love jihad', 'use of hijab', and 'Tipu Sultan'; consistently attacked Christian and Muslim places of worship and their adherents. Just before the Assembly elections, the Karnataka government decided to scrap the four per cent Muslim reservation quota. The Supreme Court said that the decision was 'flawed' and currently the execution of that decision is on hold. The BJP manifesto says it will bring in the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) which is a clear sign of what they intend to do should they regain power in the State. Incidentally, thousands of names from the minority communities (specially Muslims and Christians) have apparently disappeared from the electoral rolls and they will be unable to exercise their franchise despite written protests to the Election Commission.

One has to realise that the Sangh Parivar, with all its affiliates, is a fascist organization. They are out to destroy the secular fabric of the country. Time and again the likes of Anant Kumar Hegde, a BJP leader, has been saying "we are here to change the Constitution". A victory for the BJP in these elections would be a significant step closer towards the realization of this objective. The Sangh Parivar does not represent the vast majority of the Hindus of the country. Sometime ago, a BJP legislator from North Karnataka amplified the agenda of his party when he vociferously proclaimed, "This election is very important. It is not about roads, drinking water or gutters. This election is about Hindus and Muslims. Those who want to build the Babri Masjid, those who want to celebrate Tipu Jayanti, let them vote for the Congress. Those among you who want Shivaji Maharaj, those who want Sambhaji Maharaj, those who want to pray at a Lakshmi temple, you must vote for the BJP."

Freedom of speech and expression has taken a severe beating in Karnataka too. The fascist forces have left no stone unturned to throttle anybody who

takes a stand for justice and truth or for that matter thinks differently. On 30 August 2015, eminent intellectual Prof. M. M. Kalburgi was brutally murdered in Dharwad. On 5 September 2017, journalist-activist Gauri Lankesh was gunned down in Bangalore. Both Kalburgi and Lankesh were highly critical of the Sangh Parivar. On 21 March this year, Kannada actor and activist Chetan Kumar was arrested for allegedly hurting religious sentiments with his tweet on Hindutva. Kumar was arrested by the police after a Bajrang Dal activist filed a complaint stating that the actor has hurt the sentiments of 'Hindus'. He was booked under 295 (a) and 505 (b) of the Indian Penal Code. In his tweet on March 20, the actor had allegedly said, "Hindutva is built on lies," and listed out "examples of lies" – Hindutva ideologue V D Savarkar's statement on the Indian nation; Babri masjid site as the birthplace of Rama; Uri Gowda and Nanje Gowda killed Tipu Sultan. He further shared that "Hindutva can be defeated by truth ... truth is equality". No one can debate these facts. Interestingly enough, when BJP leaders indulge in hate speech and incitement to violence like Amit Shah saying that "if the Congress comes to power in Karnataka there will be communal riots" nothing happens to them.

There are several other issues in Karnataka; these include rampant and wanton destruction of the environment; the division of society on the lines of caste and the criminalisation of politics. The campaigns of the major parties have not touched seriously and objectively most of the key critical issues. There has been on the other hand slew of promises of all kinds of 'freebies' if elected to power. Above all, mud-slinging and naked populism have been high on the anvil.

There is the danger of complacency, particularly on the part of some national political parties.



As part of their communal agenda, the BJP has brought in through the back-door, a draconian anti-conversion law; stoked emotive issues like 'love jihad', 'use of hijab', and 'Tipu Sultan'; consistently attacked Christian and Muslim places of worship and their adherents

For absolutely no reason, when the going is in their favour, some political parties have shot themselves in the foot, have scored self-goals by targeting individuals and using distasteful rhetoric and symbols. Hopefully, these will not have a decisive bearing in the final results. The last few days are important. It is imperative that all those who cherish democracy and the pluralistic fabric of the country must come out and vote decisively. Yes, there is hope. Karnataka has a vibrant civil society of deeply concerned citizens and even some highly committed ex-civil servants who have been leaving no stone unturned to make this election a mandate of the people. The 'Bahutva Karnataka' campaign is one such laudable campaign that has reached out to thousands all over and will hopefully help bring the change which the State so desperately needs.

Yogendra Yadav, concludes the article mentioned above with the words, "Yet, an invisible hand -- or perhaps four of them -- is fanning a *hawa* that feels like Bengaluru's cool evening breeze after a day of scorching sun. All signs point to an electoral mandate that can counter the hegemonic power. As they say, dissent is like water. It finds its way". The Karnataka Elections is about the Constitution of India...it is about the soul of India... it is about the future of India. And as one moves towards Election Day on 10 May 2023, the only narrative and slogan that must be uppermost in the hearts, minds and lips of every single concerned citizen of this country is: "Yes, Karnataka can do it." ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Statue of Unity Wastage of Resources

BY A.J. PHILIP

When I first heard about the then Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi's plan to build the world's largest statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to overlook the Sardar Sarovar Dam at Kevadia on the banks of the Narmada, about 100 kms from Vadodara, I really admired him. My admiration was for two reasons.

One, it showed Modi thinking big. To plan a statue, almost double the size and height of the Statue of Liberty, a colossal neoclassical sculpture on Liberty Island in New York Harbour in New York City, in the United States, was indeed courageous. It required a huge investment which the state could ill afford.

To make it palatable to the Gujaratis and to involve them in the process, Modi appealed to all of them to donate whatever steel they had in the form of used agricultural implements and industrial tools to be melted and used in the construction of the statue.

During the Second World War, Japan made such an appeal to the people and that is how the statue of the famous dog Hachiko was melted to make bullets for the Japanese Army.

The Gujaratis responded like they responded when the Vishwa Hindu Parishad asked them to bring



at least one brick from every mohalla and village in the state for the construction of the Ram temple at the spot where the Babri Masjid once stood at Ayodhya.

The response was indeed overwhelming. A large quantity of steel was obtained, which was melted and used in the

construction of the statue. The point of reference at that time was the Statue of Liberty.

The tallest statue at that time was the one of Lord Buddha in China. In fact, there were many Buddha statues taller than the New York one.

The problem with building the tallest is that it can be overtaken easily. If China decides to build a statue of, say, Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping or its current leader Xi Jinping, they can do it in no time. Even the North Korean leader is capable of building one to perpetuate his own or his father Kim Il Sung's memory.

Since many components of Patel's statue came from China, the Chinese know better than us about the Statue of Unity, built by the Danish company Larsen and Toubro (L&T). The point is that the uniqueness of the statue can disappear if a megalomaniac decides to build a taller statue.

The second reason why I admired Modi was that he decided to build a statue of Sardar Patel, who was born, lived and died a Congressman. He was the Home Minister when Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Godse. I won't reveal the assassin's political identity for fear that someone might drag me into a case.

What is incontrovertible is that Patel had the courage of conviction to ban the RSS. Not only that, in a communique issued on February 4, 1948, the Centre said it was banning the RSS "to root out the forces of hate and violence that are at work in our country and imperil the freedom of the nation and darken her fair name."

I wondered how Modi could even think





of perpetuating such a person's memory. In fact, every time I remember Patel, I remember the strong words he used to justify the ban on the RSS. The statue project would have been a non-starter if Modi remained confined to Gandhinagar. It got a boost when he became Prime Minister in 2014. Otherwise, how would he have found Rs 3500 crore to build it?

In contrast, the Statue of Liberty was donated to the people of America by the city of Paris. The pedestal and the park around it was built by a journalist, Joseph Pulitzer. He raised money for the project by making an appeal to his readers to contribute liberally. And they did not disappoint him.

Pulitzer chose the spot because he could see it from his office in New York. In other words, the Statue of Liberty was a people's project.

Once, while I was on a flight, I heard the pilot's announcement that the Statue of Unity could be seen from the plane. I was occupying an aisle seat on the wrong side of the aircraft. Hence I could not see the statue. However, the desire to see it did not leave me.

I also knew the role Patel played in the reconstruction of the Somnath temple. I wanted to club the statue and the temple in a single trip. And when our friends Ravindran Mannodi and Sarada agreed to

When we reached Kevadia, I saw a senior secondary school on the roadside. If the jailed AAP Minister Manish Sisodia had seen it, he would have made fun of Modi's claims vis-a-vis Gujarat's education scene

play ball, the trip became a reality, though more than 400 km separated the two places.

That is how we landed at Vadodara, located on the banks of the river Vishwamitri. It derives its name from the Sanskrit word "Vatodara" which means the heart of the Banyan (data) tree. When I first visited Vadodara in the late seventies, it was known as Baroda.

I have fond memories of visiting the Maharaja Sayajirao University, founded by Sir Pratapsingh Rao Gaekwad, in memory of his grandfather. It was a fully residential university with English as the medium of instruction. I visited the English Department where one of my relatives eventually became professor.

It was Maharaja Gaekwad who funded Dr B.R. Ambedkar's studies in Bombay, London and the US. He was given a monthly scholarship of Rs 25 that enabled him to study in Bombay. He was also given a job in the state of Baroda, where he also faced discrimination of the worst kind.

Vadodara is a much changed city. Flyovers have replaced congested road junctions. It is still a city of education as huge billboards advertise private UGC-accredited universities and coaching institutes. I wish we had the time to visit the Laxmi Vilas Palace and the tree-lined MS University.

After a night of rest and early breakfast, we left for Kevadia by car. First, we saw a tiny statue of, probably, Sivaji Maharaj at a junction close to our hotel. One thing we all noticed conspicuously was that no motorcyclist or scooterist wore the helmet. Those who wore the helmet were few and far between.

On the way, we had tea at Tea Point, a kiosk. We



A CLOSE LOOK



wanted to order tea without sugar. We tried in vain to explain to the tea-seller in Hindi, as grammatically correct as taught by Dr Samuel Henry Kellogg's Grammar of the Hindi language, first published in 1875. Finally, it required an interpreter's help to know that he sold tea in three cup sizes – tiny, tinier and tiniest – and the tea remained the same.

I wish Home Minister Amit Shah, who has been promoting Hindi in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere, took similar interest in promoting Hindi in his own Gujarat so that tourists like us could communicate better. He won't do it for it would mark the finis of Gujarati.

The national highway was broad, well-maintained with little traffic. On the way, we saw huge blades of windmills being transported by truck. Windmills dot the Gujarat coastline. When we reached Kevadia, I saw a senior secondary school on the roadside. If the jailed AAP Minister Manish Sisodia had seen it, he would have made fun of Modi's claims vis-a-vis Gujarat's education scene.

We passed through huge gates on the way that announced that we were nearing the Statue of Unity. As we neared the destination, we could see the statue like a speck in the hills. There were many hotels, restaurants, food courts and recreation centres on the way but most of them were either closed or had no business.

At Kevadia, we had to buy tickets at Rs 380 per person to visit the statue and three more locations, the Valley of Flowers, the Glow Garden and the Sardar Sarovar dam. Cash had no value there as tickets could be bought only electronically or through debit or credit cards.

From the ticket point to the statue is a short distance. Free, air-conditioned buses are available

for the tourists. There were two pick-up points. One was deserted with a dog luxuriating on the bench meant for tourists. The infrastructure developed is enormous but the traffic was inadequate. There were electric Autorickshaws, driven by women. I asked one of them how much money they made.

The vehicles belonged to the government. The driver had to pay Rs 700 per day to the government. Any amount they received above this amount was theirs. They can charge only the fixed rates. No, they don't get any benefits like bonus, provident fund, gratuity and pension.

On the way to the statue, I saw on the left side houses that had tarpaulin as roof. Huge stones are kept on the tarpaulin so that it does not fly off. There are hundreds of such houses which suggest that they are permanent settlements there. Thank Goodness, the administration did not think it necessary to build a wall as was done when Donald Trump visited Gujarat to keep the sight of poverty away from the eyes of the distinguished visitor.

It must be said to the credit of Modi that he has built infrastructure around the statue that would redound to his credit. When we reached the point of disembarkation, we realised how large the bus stand was. Not even 10 percent of its capacity was being used.

A short walk from the bus stop is all that is required to reach the statue. In fairness, one does not have to walk much. The pathway is interspersed with auto-walks or moving paths. The statue is misleading. One does not realise how tall it is till one reaches the pedestal.

The toes were taller than a six-foot person. The visitor does not have to strain as elevators are convenient and enticing. The ticket included the



A CLOSE LOOK



journey by lift inside the statue. Our ticket allowed us to reach the chest level of the statue. As the lift-operator told me, the height up to the chest level was equivalent to a 45-storied building.

No, we did not find any heart or lungs. Instead, we saw huge steel bars securing the statue against all possible tornadoes and cyclones. We could see the Sardar Sarovar dam from there. In fact, Patel was sculpted to be looking at the dam!

A state-of-the-art washroom awaited the needy there. The lift brought us back as quickly as we were taken there. At the basement was a large hall where the history of the statue was provided in different forms – pictorially, orally and audio-visually. A large statue of Patel's head and the replica of the big statue provided the visitors selfie opportunities.

There was a section where the integration of over 560 native states into the Indian Union was depicted.

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There were pictures of the rajas and the ranis with Patel and Mountbatten. However, I could not find any reference to V.P. Menon, who as Patel's right-hand man actually negotiated with the rulers and cajoled them, blackmailed them and forced them to sign the Instruments of Accession.

The heavens would not have fallen if Menon's picture was included among those dangling from the roof. From there, we took an autorickshaw to visit the Sardar Sarovar dam. Photographers did not face any restriction anywhere.

There are in all 19 tourist spots created to attract visitors. We visited the Glow Garden where plastic flowers and plastic plants beckoned the tourists. There were other tourist spots like the Garden of Cactus plants, not to mention a museum of wild animals and another for dinosaurs.

To visit all of them would take three days. Since we had no plan to waste time admiring plastic flowers, we took an auto to reach the bus stand where an air-conditioned bus awaited us. On the way back to Vadodara, we again saw star hotels, restaurants, and recreation facilities that had no takers.

I do not have the statistics of the visitors but one thing is certain that the huge infrastructure created at Kevadia is being grossly under-utilised. Unless the statue fetches income commensurate with the huge investment of Rs 3500 core, the Statue of Unity will be described as a white elephant. Or, a Statue of Vanity! ©

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The Heroic Fight by Media One A Victory for Press Freedom

BY JOSEPH MALIAKAN

On May 1, 2023, Media One, the Malayalam television channel which was banned by the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) on January 31, 2022, has organised a special meeting at the Constitution Club at the Vithalbhai Patel House in New Delhi to celebrate its victory in the Supreme Court of India.



Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and had taken a series of steps to restore press freedom, including restoring the Press Council of India which was abolished during the emergency.

For several years after the emergency, people thought that freedom of the press would never be in peril in the country. However, to everyone's shock and surprise, Indira Gandhi's son Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister in 1988 passed a Defamation Bill in the monsoon session of the Parliament to curb the press in the name of preventing "scurrilous writing" and "criminal imputation."

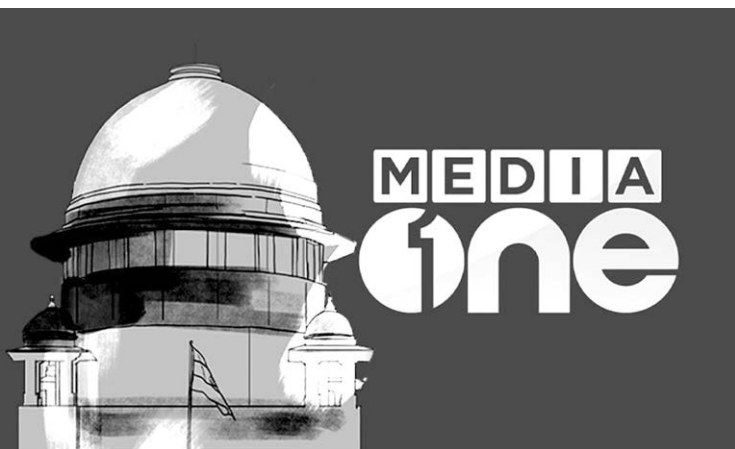
The meeting reminded this reporter of a meeting at the same venue 47 years ago, in 1976, to protest against the internal emergency imposed by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the name of 'national security.' Many opposition leaders including Jayaprakash Narain, Atal Behari Vajpayee, L.K. Advani, George Fernandes, Madhu Limaye and Raj Narain were still in jail and the Press was under strict censorship. Nothing, even Rabindranath Tagore's poems could not be published without the approval of government Censor!

The Defamation Bill was brought after the media in the country published reports after reports accusing the Rajiv Gandhi government of accepting bribe of 65 crore in the Bofors gun deal. (Sixty-five crore was a huge sum those days! Of course, peanuts compared to the amounts involved in corruption in preset day deals).

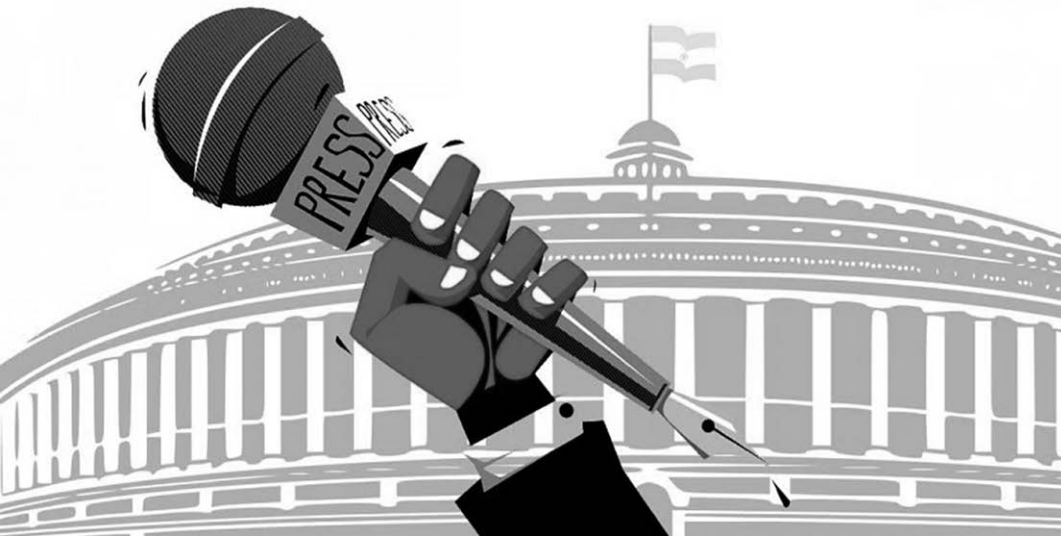
Addressing the gathering then, Mr. K. G. Kannabiran, a leading human rights activist and lawyer from Andhra Pradesh, reminded everyone that 'what is anti-national today will be national tomorrow and what is national today will be anti-national tomorrow.' It was the time when the government had moved the infamous 42nd amendment to the Constitution, which has since been repealed. In the Janata Party Government, Mr Advani took charge of the

Following nation-wide agitation, specially led by newspaper managements and journalists, Rajiv Gandhi, on September 22, 1988, unconditionally withdrew the Defamation Bill and expressed his support for press freedom.

After Gandhi's attempt to curb the press, the Modi government's ban on Media One is perhaps the most serious and dangerous action to censor the press in India. Ironically, the ban was imposed by followers of Vajpayee and Advani, two stalwarts of the anti-emergency and press freedom move-



After the emergency era, Advani famously said that the "journalists were only asked to bend, but they crawled." But then who in the ruling BJP takes Advani's advice seriously anymore?



ment in independent India. In fact, after the emergency era, Advani famously said that the "journalists were only asked to bend, but they crawled." But then who in the ruling BJP takes Advani's advice seriously anymore?

Now coming back to Media One ban, the first response issued by its then Editor-In-Chief, C. L. Thomas, said: "... This is a blatant attack against free and fair reporting. The order issued by MIB is for criticising the RSS and the Delhi Police. The order also states that Media One has referred to hate speeches made by Kapil Mishra, the BJP leader from Delhi, as a reason for igniting violence in Delhi.... This is nothing but an order to stop free and fair journalism. Media One will fight legally against this unprecedented and undemocratic action imposed by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry."

However, the ban order on January 31 on Media One was issued by the MIB without mentioning

The order pointed out that mere involvement of issues concerning national security would not preclude the state's duty to act fairly. If the state discards its duty to act fairly, then it must be justified before the court on the facts of the case

any reason. Though a single judge bench of the Kerala High Court granted stay on the ban the same day, the ban was upheld by the single judge on February 8. A writ petition was filed before Division Bench of the Kerala High Court on February 9, but on March 2, it held that there was nothing illegal about the MIB ban order against Media One.

On March 4, Media One filed an appeal in the Supreme Court and on March 15, Justice D Y Chandrachud stayed the Kerala High Court order upholding Media One ban and allowed the channel to continue its operations. On April 5, the Supreme Court set aside the Kerala High Court order and directed MIB to renew the licence of Media One within four weeks.

Chief Justice Chandrachud's verdict covers several basic issues that affect the life of the common people, freedom of speech, natural justice, national security and sealed cover jurisprudence which is against the principle of rule of law.

Writing the judgement for himself and Justice Hima Kohli, he held that taking evidence in a sealed cover causes serious prejudice to the rule of law. The court further held that the Union Government could not prove that the material based on which the ban was imposed could not be disclosed because most of material it relied on was in the public domain.

The Supreme Court order said that the non-disclosure of reasons for the denial of security clearance to the appellants and the disclosure solely to the court in a sealed cover has restricted the core of the principles of natural justice -- the right to a fair and reasonable proceeding.

The order pointed out that mere involvement of issues concerning national security would not preclude the state's duty to act fairly. If the state discards its duty to act fairly, then it must be justified before the court on the facts of the case. ©

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Weaponizing FCRA

Last year, the government cancelled FCRA licenses of 6,000 organizations which included Oxfam India, Azim Premji Foundation, Common Cause and Jamia Millia Islamia

BY **JACOB PEENIKAPARAMBIL**

The latest victim of weaponization of Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) is environmental lawyer Rtiwick Dutta and the NGO promoted by him, Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE), as the Ministry of Home Affairs has initiated a CBI enquiry against it. The case against Dutta, according to an article published in *The Wire*, is that an overseas-based organization has funded LIFE's legal activism to "take down India's existing and proposed coal projects". It appears that the CBI is not aware that it is civil society's right to question the executive decisions in a democracy and to seek judicial intervention with the help of legal counsel.

The government doesn't seem to be happy with Dutta's legal support to the people affected by the projects that cause environmental damage and loss of livelihood to the affected people. He had supported the Dongria Kondh tribals who sought a ban on bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri hills in south-west Odisha. Displacing Dongria Kondh Adivasis, recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), was a blatant violation of the provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) {PESA} and the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Dutta took the case of the Dongria Kondh tribals to the Supreme Court and the court stopped the Vedanta Group from carrying out bauxite mining on Niyamgiri hills, as the Adivasi Gram Sabhas consistently expressed their opposition to it.

The second case that could have displeased the government is his legal intervention on behalf of the fisher-folk against a private company that planned to set up a highly polluting thermal power



plant in a unique wetland in Srikakulam district with the support of the state and the central government. Dutta helped the fisher-folk to put forward their case at different judicial forums, including the National Green Tribunal (NGT) which pronounced its judgement upholding the local communities' case and protecting the wetland.

It was also reported in the media a few days ago that the Ministry of Home Affairs had recommended a CBI inquiry against Aman Biradari, an NGO, established by writer and human rights activist Harsh Mander, for alleged violation of FCRA. Aman Biradari Trust has been doing excellent work, according to reports, towards promoting fraternity and a secular attitude among people.

The other organizations harassed and haunted by the government on the allegations of FCRA violations in recent years are Centre for Promotion of Social Concerns (CPSC) Sabrang, Lawyers' Collective, Green Peace, Amnesty International India and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI).

Ever since the BJP came to power at the Centre in 2014, the government has adopted a policy of punishing NGOs through various means. One of the means is to squeeze funds to them, and the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act has been liberally used for this purpose. The amendments to the FCRA in 2018 and 2020 made receiving and using foreign contributions an uphill task for the NGOs.

In December 2016, the government announced that it had cancelled the FCRA licence of close to 20,000 of the 33,000 NGOs operating in India after they were found to be flouting certain norms laid out in the



Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment



Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 2010. On January 1, 2022, the government cancelled FCRA licenses of 6000 organizations which included Oxfam India, Azim Premji Foundation, Common Cause and Jamia Millia Islamia.

Along with the four pillars of democracy -- Legislature, Executive, Judiciary and the Media -- Civil Society Organizations are also deemed as an important pillar. Like the media, the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) educate people about their rights and duties and the responsibilities of the government in safeguarding human and fundamental rights of each individual.

Another term used to describe the organizations working in the development sector mainly through awareness generation, self-help and organizing them as people's movements is called Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). There are many organizations involved mainly in charitable and welfare activities like running orphanages, old age homes, homes of the disabled, homes for the children of people infected with HIV, AIDS etc. They are generally known as welfare organizations. All three categories come under the nomenclature of Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs).

The governments, except the BJP, tolerate and often support the third category i.e., welfare and charitable organizations; but all governments are suspicious of the CSOs and NGOs because they critically assess the policies of the government from the perspective of people's rights and needs. They create awareness among people about various issues related to human rights, mega developmental projects, the environment and the failure of the government in meeting the basic needs of people. When the policies and actions of the government go against the interests of the people and violate their rights, CSOs/NGOs motivate people to protest.

These activities of CSOs or NGOs are often interpreted by the governments as political actions and they are targeted.

According to the latest amendment to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, the NPO sector can undertake only welfare activities. As per the FCRA rules promulgated by the government in November 2020, the NGOs which may not be directly linked to a political party but engage in any action like bandhs, strike or road blockades will be considered of political nature and they may lose their FCRA registration.

The BJP governments both at the centre and in the states are harassing and even cancelling registration of all types of Non-Profit Organizations managed by the Muslims and Christians because the Sangh Parivar organizations are propagating the view that the aim of all these NPOs is religious conversion. That is why the FCRA registration of the Missionaries of Charity (Mother Teresa's Congregation) was cancelled on December 27, 2021. Because of widespread backlash from within India and outside, their FCRA registration was later restored.

There are various ways a government can harass and paralyze NGOs. An NGO needs certain legal requirements like renewal of registration under Societies or Trust Act, renewal of registration under 12 A of the Income Tax Act, registration and renewal under Foreign Contribution Registration Act (FCRA) if it has to receive foreign aid etc. The government can harass or kill the NGOs by denying the renewal of any one of the above-mentioned registrations or even cancelling them.

Civil Society Organizations and NGOs, by their very nature of being non-profitable, depend on government grants and contributions from the

Ever since the BJP came to power at the Centre in 2014, the government has adopted a policy of punishing NGOs through various means. One of the means is to squeeze funds to them, and the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act has been liberally used for this purpose

general public. They have a very limited source of their own income, as they are not expected to be involved in any business activities. Donations from funding agencies from abroad have been a significant source of income for many NGOs. It is a fact that some of them misuse funds and the government has put in place systems and processes from time to time to check misuse of funds and punish the deviant organizations. But what is being done today by the BJP government is to make the NGOs starve of funds and gradually kill them.

As per the FCRA rules promulgated by the government in November 2020, the NGOs which may not be directly linked to a political party but engage in any action like bandhs, strike or road blockades will be considered of political nature and they may lose their FCRA registration

From the time of Indira Gandhi onwards, restrictions have been imposed on the Non-Profit Organizations and one of them has been trying to control the receipt and use of foreign contributions by the Non-Profit Organizations. The governments, in order to divert the attention of people from their failures in various areas of governance, have a tendency to make allegations of “foreign hand” i.e., involvement of foreign countries in the internal affairs of India through the NPOs working in India.

Since the BJP came to power at the centre under the leadership of Narendra Modi, CSOs and NGOs, especially those related to human rights and the environmental issues, began to be targeted. Why are they targeted by the government? First of all, as the CSOs/NGOs have a role in creating awareness among people about human rights, democracy and secularism, they are obstacles in the implementation of Hindutva ideology of the BJP and therefore, the government cannot tolerate their existence and activities.

Secondly, the economic policies of the BJP govern-

ment are in favour of the rich and the corporate sector, and these policies often come into conflict with the interests of the workers and farmers, tribals etc. who are often supported by the NGOs. The three controversial farm laws passed by the BJP without any consultation with the farmer-organizations were not in the interest of the farmers, but in the interest of the corporate sector. Large number of CSOs and NGOs supported the struggle by the farmers against the three laws.

Thirdly, the BJP government under the guise of development wants to give away the natural resources liberally to its favoured companies. Hence the government wants to paralyze or even eliminate the NGOs that work for the protection and promotion of the environment.

Fourthly, the BJP has an agenda of handing over the whole Non-Profit sector to RSS-affiliated organizations in view of implementing its agenda of Hindutva. Therefore, weakening and eliminating the NGO sector is a need and stringent FCRA rules are used to annihilate the NGO sector. The RSS has a huge umbrella organization called Rashtriya Seva Bharati (RSB) with more than 1000 organizations affiliated to it. These NGOs largely work in the fields of health, education, and livelihood. The RSB also provides them support and guidance in social activities and disaster and relief works.

It is a contradiction that on one hand the government is putting severe restrictions on the NGOs on receiving foreign funds, and on the other hand it invites foreign investment in arms and ammunition, bombs and guns, alcohol and tobacco, etc. When the FCRA was first introduced in 1976, it was primarily aimed at political parties and journalists, whereas the amendments to the FCRA in 2010 and 2020 shifted its focus squarely to NGOs. Now the political parties are allowed to receive foreign funds in the form of electoral bonds. The electoral bonds are purchased by both Indian and foreign companies that become subsidiaries of Indian companies.

The NGOs/CSOs have to accept the weaponization of FCRA as a challenge and find out ways and means to raise funds from the public, especially the people with whom and for whom they are working. ©

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Bishop Isidore Fernandes

A Visionary Shepherd

BY MANOJ STEPHEN

Bishop Isidore Fernandes, the Bishop of Allahabad from 4 August 1988 to 31 January 2013, passed away on April 26 due to massive heart attack.

Bishop Isidore was born on 2 January 1947 in Shirva (Our Lady of Health Church), Karnataka, formerly in the Diocese of Mangalore and presently in the Diocese of Udupi. His parents were Mr. Casmir Fernandes and Mrs. Lucy Fernandes. He was the eldest among the five siblings. His sister Florin Fernandes is a nun in the Congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. His parents were devout Catholics who brought up their children deeply rooted in Catholic faith and morals.

He completed his school studies at St. Mary's High School in Shirva, Udupi. He then joined the St. Paul's Minor Seminary in Lucknow on July 1, 1963. His major seminary formation, both philosophy and Theology, took place in the Papal Seminary, Pune.

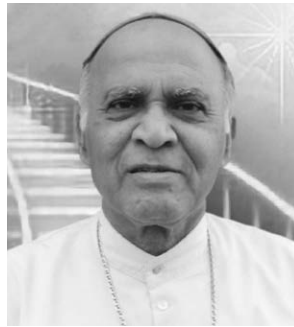
Deacon Isidore was ordained to the priesthood for the Diocese of Allahabad by late Bishop William Gomes, the then Bishop of Pune, on 29 October 1972.

After his ordination, he was appointed curate in Holy Rosary Church, Pratapgarh. Thereafter, he was appointed Vice Principal at St Joseph's College, Allahabad. He was the pioneer Director of the Nazareth Hospital, Allahabad, now Prayagraj. Besides, he held the post of Diocesan Procurator. From 1980, he was appointed the Vicar General.

After the retirement of then Bishop Baptist Mudartha, a veteran Bishop to promote Hindi Apostolate and Dialogue ministry, Rev. Fr. Isidore Fernandes, the principal of St. Joseph's College, was appointed as Bishop by Pope John Paul II on 5 May 1988. He was consecrated Bishop on August 4, 1988, by Most Rev. Cecil D'Sa, the then Archbishop of Agra.

His Role as Shepherd of Diocese

Rt. Rev. Isidore was one of the youngest Catholic bishops in India at the time he was consecrated. He was only 41 years. He exhibited his leadership role with his many God-given qualities, both in Agra Regional Bishops' Conference and at National level. He was a member



Bishop Isidore Fernandes

of the National Youth Commission (CBCI), the National Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism (CBCI) and the CCBI Commission for Evangelisation. He was appointed the Regional Chairman of the Youth Commission. He was the Chairman of St. Joseph's Regional Seminary, Allahabad for three consecutive terms of five years.

He paved the way for handing over Sangeet Sadhana Mandir, a diocesan institute in Pachmarhi, M. P, a summer school, to promote Hindusthani music, with an agreement signed by four Bishops to the

CCBI Commission for Evangelisation. At present it functions as Suvartha Kendra, Pachmarhi, under CCBI.

Leader of Church in North India

His painstaking long 24 years witnessed many bold and dynamic initiatives. He made use of Hindi in every area of the Diocese to promote ministries. He dedicated his life as 'a charismatic leader'. He was a visionary and led his flock as a true Shepherd. He was very pastoral and inter-religious in his approach to multiple ministries in the Church.

Under his leadership, he renovated many old buildings, constructed presbyteries, Churches, School buildings, Convents, houses for the poor living in the village areas and created new infrastructures for better functioning of the ministry in the diocese. He organized a number of diocesan and regional programmes - i.e. educational and pastoral. His regular visits to Mission Stations, Parish houses, Educational Institutions, Convents, the poor and marginalized were very significant and remarkable. He showed his concern for the aging senior citizens by conducting many charitable programs.

On 31 January 2013, Pope Benedict XVI accepted the resignation of Bishop Isidore Fernandes, from the pastoral care of the Diocese of Allahabad, according to Canon Law 401 § 2. Bishop Ignatius Menezes was appointed as the Apostolic Administrator till Most Rev. Raphy Manjaly, the then Bishop of Varanasi, assumed the office of the Bishop of Allahabad on December 3, 2013.

The Lord called him to his eternal home on April 26. May his soul rest in peace! ☪

When Sugar Tastes Sour

The WHO recommends a daily intake of utmost 25 grams (5.75 tea spoons) of sugar per person for improved health

BY **AARTI**

Across the globe, a great deal has been researched, written and regularly debated about sugar -- a significant percentage of which is consumed in foods, beverages, energy drinks, juices etc.

Is sugar the prime suspect in poor health?

Well, last month, social media influencer Revant Himatsingka had reportedly posted a critical review in a minute-long video on his Instagram where he had criticised the endorsement of popular beverage Bournvita as a "health drink".

Soon after his video went viral, with a whopping 12 million views, Mondelez India International, the country arm of Bournvita, asserted on their Instagram that Bournvita contains nutrients -- namely Vitamin A, C, D, Iron, Zinc, Copper and Selenium which help build immunity -- which have been part of their formulation for several years. The company further said that Bournvita is best consumed with a glass of 200 ml of hot or cold milk as highlighted on the pack. Every serving of 20 grams of Bournvita has 7.5 grams of added sugar, which is approximately one and a half teaspoons, which is much less than the daily recommended intake limits of sugar for children.



What we know so far is that the company thereafter issued a legal notice to Revant after which he deleted the said Instagram post and also apologised. More recently, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights is said to have sought a response from Mondelez on the allegations raised about Bournvita and also withdraw its misleading advertisement.

The US tops the 5 biggest consumers of sugar on the globe with a per capita sugar consumption of 126.4 grams daily, followed by Germany (102.9 grams), The Netherlands (102.5 grams), Ireland (96.7 grams) and Australia (60 grams). World over, countries are finding ways and means to deal with the sugar content in processed food. Free sugars are those added to food (e.g., sucrose - table sugar glucose) or those naturally present in honey, syrups and unsweetened fruit juices, but exclude lactose in milk and milk products.

For instance, in 2015, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (an independent body of expert nutritionists) advised the Government in the United Kingdom to halve the recommended intake of free sugars in order to help address the growing obesity and diabetes crises and to reduce the risk of tooth decay. SACN recommended free sugars should not account for more than 5 percent of daily energy intake. This is, 19 grams or 5 sugar cubes for children aged 4 to 6; 24 grams or 6 sugar cubes for children aged 7 to 10; 30 grams or 7 sugar cubes for 11 years and over, based on average population diets.

According to the American Heart Association's recommendations for sugar intake, while men should consume no more than 9 teaspoons (36 grams or 150 calories) of added sugar per day, women mustn't exceed 6 teaspoons (25 grams or 100 calories) per day. The per capita sugar consumption in India at 19 kg/year in 2020 (from 4.8 kg/year in 1960-61) is much lower than the world average of 23 kg.

In India, any food business, meaning any undertaking, whether for profit or not and whether public or private, carrying out any of the activities related to any stage of manufacture, processing, packaging,

storage, transportation, distribution of food, import and includes food services, catering services, sale of food or food ingredients have to comply with the Food Safety and Standards (Advertising and Claims) Regulations, 2018.

Notably in respect of nutrition claims for sugar under the said Regulations, any food product which claims to contain low sugar means the product ought to not contain more than 5 grams of sugar per 100 grams for solids or 2.5 grams of sugar per 100 ml for liquids. Similarly, free sugar means the product ought to not contain more than 0.5 grams of sugar per 100 grams for solids or 100 ml for liquids.

So, how to reduce the consumption of sugar?

According to WHO, regular consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) including soft drinks, flavoured milks, energy drinks, vitamin waters, fruit juices and sweetened iced teas, is associated with an increased risk of dental cavities, type 2 diabetes, weight gain and obesity in both children and adults, heart disease, stroke and cancer. WHO's first-ever global tax manual for SSBs, released last December states that taxes on SSBs can be a powerful tool to promote health because they save lives and prevent disease, while advancing health equity and mobilizing revenue for countries that could be used to realize universal health coverage. It can also encourage companies to reformulate their products to reduce sugar content.

A one-time global SSB tax increase that raised prices 50 percent could generate additional revenues of US\$1.4 trillion over 50 years. While some 85 countries world-wide implement some type of taxation on SSBs, such initiatives in Mexico, South Africa, and the United Kingdom have been successful. For instance, WHO found that a 10 percent tax on SSBs

The US tops the 5 biggest consumers of sugar on the globe with a per capita sugar consumption of 126.4 grams daily, followed by Germany (102.9 grams), The Netherlands (102.5 grams), Ireland (96.7 grams) and Australia (60 grams)



produces a significant 15.9 percent reduction in taxed beverage purchases.

What's the way forward?

At the macro level, there are a number of ways through which the consumption of added sugar in processed foods can be reduced if the consumer is educated through front-of-the pack labelling, clearly highlighting its health consequences. Notably the social influencer market in India (which is growing with a compound rate of about 19-20 percent and valued at Rs 1,275 crore currently and expected to rise to Rs 2,800 crore by 2025) can also be tapped.

To curb misleading advertisements as well as protect the interests of consumers, the Government of India, this January, notified the guidelines applicable to social media influencers which makes it mandatory for them to disclose their 'material' interest in endorsing products and services. For misleading advertisements, under the Consumer Protection Act 2019, the Central Consumer Protection Authority can impose a penalty of up to Rs 10 lakh on manufacturers, advertisers and endorsers. For subsequent offences, the penalty can go up to Rs 50 lakh. Besides, the endorser of a misleading advertisement can be banned from making any endorsement for up to 1 year and for subsequent contravention, the prohibition can extend up to 3 years.

At an individual level, for the sake of our health, we need to ponder, how little sugar is still too much? ©

A Muted Church

Many would like the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) to once again regain its voice, and speak against the atrocities against Christians

BY **JOHN DAYAL**

The ignorant in the media and the more ignorant on social media have presumed that it was a delegation of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, or a representative delegation of Catholic prelates who met Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently in his hotel room in Kochi during the political leg of his visit to Kerala. The presence of two senior Catholic cardinals and an archbishop among the eight may possibly have conveyed this wrong message.

The apex body of Catholic Bishops, indeed, has been remarkably quiet on Christian persecution in the country, and other burning issues that beset India. Its silence has intrigued civil society, and disheartened human rights activists among the clergy, men, and women, religious, and the laity, especially outside Kerala.

With Parliament muted, if not enslaved and overwhelmed by an extreme right-wing religious nationalist ideology – worse, violent, and often armed cadres roam the cities and countryside as if on patrol – it is civil society that has stood guard against dictatorship.

Civil society reaches out to the more concerned among citizens, and in fact is at the heart of the alternate media that is holding aloft the banner of a free media though its most rich and powerful TV and newspapers have become lapdogs, or Godi Media, as they are now called.

The Church, irrespective of faith or denominational identity, has been an important pillar of civil society. It was integral to the struggle against social evils and political tyrants, colonial forces among them.

The Christian church and individual Christians have been at the heart of movements in education, health, emancipation of women, and in sparking the renaissance in the subcontinent. This has been forcefully brought out in an important recent book, “Christianity’s Contribution in the Shaping of Modern India,” authored by Joseph Gathia and Sanjay Gathia and distributed on Amazon and other platforms.

It is not for nothing that a priest, in the cassock of an Anglican parson, is immortalized in the statues of Gandhi’s Dandi March in the Indian freedom struggle. The Catholic Bishops Conference of India, famous with its acronym CBCI, as the supra ritual organization is correctly looked upon as the representative of the Catholics of the country in articulating their views on matters of freedom of faith, and important social matters as they arise.

Its voice was listened to by the government in the early decades after independence. So much so that it has often put into the shadows its Protestant equivalents, the National Council of Churches, an omnibus clutch of “mainline” ecumenical, Presbyterian, and orthodox churches, and the Evangelical Fellowship of India, the collective of the independent, evangelical, and others that do not fit into any group.



CBCI President Archbishop Mar Andrews Thazhath with Prime Minister Narendra Modi

The CBCI fulfilled a major, even historical, role in the nineties and the first years of the 21st century in reviving the movement of the Dalit Christians to regain their constitutional rights, which had been snatched from them by the notorious Presidential Order of 1950.

The CBCI president, in fact, was at the forefront of the movement to assert the personal laws and call for their updating, and in challenging the government when it talked of bringing forth a Common Civil Code. This code is at the core of the BJP and its parent Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's political plank as they see it as the only way to negate the Islamic laws. In passing, they also want to over-ride Christian personal laws.

All that, alas, is a thing of the past. Many in civil society, and among the Catholic community, fear that the CBCI has not only lost its observation and vocal faculties but has been more inward-looking and insular than ever in the past. Is it fear, many ask. Or is there some other reason, they wonder?

Everyone is of course aware of the power that is being wielded, almost in an extra-legal manner by central agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigations, the National Investigation Agency, the Intelligence Bureau, the Enforcement Department, and many other organizations that are controlled by the Prime Minister's Office, and the ministries of Finance and Home affairs. Civil society is itself a major victim of the pack of government hounds, and they will therefore not hold this against the Church.

Many in civil society, and among the Catholic community, fear that the CBCI has not only lost its observation and vocal faculties but has been more inward-looking and insular than ever in the past. Is it fear, many ask. Or is there some other reason, they wonder?



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF INDIA

It also does not have too much to do with the creation of the two sui juris oriental Rites with their own Code of Canons. The fact that laity, gender issues and similar arms are now being managed individually by the three Rites, has indeed weakened the collective strength of the Catholic Laity, and with that of the entire Christian community. There

seems no mechanism to bring lay and clerics of the three rites together on common national issues.

The CBCI has done away with the powerful office of the official spokesman, once held by men such as Father Dominic Emmanuel SVD, a consummate communicator, and his successors. The CBCI secretary-general, a bishop or archbishop, is ex-officio the spokesman. It is not the same thing at all, as anyone in the realm of communications will affirm.

And the CBCI has done away with its legal wing, CLAP as it was called till about five years ago. The legal consciences, and interventions, have been outsourced. Various business models of law organizations do not have the clout or coverage that the CBCI could have had.

Above all, the CBCI keeps no data at all on the persecution of the Christian Church in India. This involves not just violence against churches and education and health institutions, the rape of nuns, or the imprisonment of Catholic clergy on fake charges of sexual abuse, but the dark cloud that is now choking religious freedom in the country.

With its system of parishes and dioceses, the Catholic Church was in fact the best equipped to collect and collate social data, including persecution and violence. It has not done so. If it were not for the work of some of the religious congregations working in matters of labour, education, and health, and groups agitating with the fishermen, there would be no social data either.

Many would like the CBCI to once again regain its voice, as also its eyes, the ears that could be close to the ground and listen to the murmurs and loud explosions when human rights are trodden upon and constitutional rights are snatched or smashed. Not doing so is leaving the victims to their fate. Not very Christian. ©

(Courtesy: UCANEWS)

Pastors arrested, released over 'conversion' allegation

Ten pastors in Chhattisgarh state have been released after they were arrested following allegations by a radical Hindu outfit that they were involved in religious conversion activities.

Around 25 Christians along with 10 pastors had assembled for Sunday prayers in Amleshwar village on April 30 when nearly 100 men belonging to the Bajrang Dal, barged in and stopped them, Arun Pannalal, president of the Chhattisgarh Christian Forum, told UCA News on May 2.

The place they had gathered for prayers is the residence of a Christian dentist. Still, the police arrested the pastors and released them in the evening on the same day, Pannalal added.

The pastors were accused of indulging in religious conversion and threatened inside the police station by the Bajrang Dal activists, Pannalal added.

Ankush Barayiekar, who attended the Sunday prayer meeting, told UCA News, "This is not the first time Christians were being attacked by the Bajrang Dal." He said that Hindu neighbours of the dentist had objected to the prayer service in the past and seemed to have sought the services of the Hindu radicals to achieve their objective.

"Police asked the pastors why they were holding prayers at a private residence and even beat up some of the pastors who had to be treated at a local hospital," Barayiekar alleged.

Vinay Sahu, the dentist in whose house the prayer meeting was held, told the local media that "the Bajrang Dal had carried out a similar attack in 2021."

"We do not use loudspeakers and caused no noise pollution, but fail to understand the reason behind the animosity of some people toward us," Sahu reportedly said.

Abhishek Pallava, superintendent of police of Durg district, in whose jurisdiction Amleshwar village is located, termed it "a small incident" and said the issue has been resolved.

However, Pannalal said he was thinking of moving the court seeking a directive to the police to take action against the Bajrang Dal for disrupting and attacking Christians while they were praying.

He said that attack was part of the ongoing campaign by radical Hindu outfits to force Christians in Chhattisgarh to give up Christianity and adopt Hinduism. ☹

(Courtesy: UCANEWS)

Infant, mother granted bail in conversion case

An 18-month-old girl and her mother were on May 2 granted bail eight days after they were jailed for indulging in alleged conversion activities in Uttar Pradesh.

The District Sessions Court of Ghazipur granted the bail to Manju, wife of Pastor Kirubendran of the India Mission, and her daughter.

They were in judicial custody since April 24 along with four others, including two pastors, for allegedly violating a state law that restrains religious conversion.

The child was not charged but had to go to jail with her mother.

The accused are residents of Kasimabad town in Ghazipur district. The police arrested them on April 23 after some rightwing activists alleged the Christians' Sunday prayer meeting was for religious conversion.

Bupendra Singh, the complainant, who claimed to be in charge of Akhil Bharatiya Kshetriya Mahasabha, said the accused allegedly offered 50,000 rupees to each villager who attended the prayer gathering if they converted to Christianity.

The accused allegedly also promised employment and miraculous healing of the sick besides making objectionable comments against those following Hinduism.

Police charged them with relevant provisions of the state's stringent anti-conversion law.

Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in India, recorded 149 incidents of persecution against Christians in 2022, according to the latest report of the ecumenical United Christian Forum.

The state topped the list of states where Christians witnessed violent attacks. ☹

(Courtesy: Matterrsindia)

Church leaders discuss ways to combat human trafficking


The Commission for Migrants of the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India on May 1 drew plans to combat the issues of forced labor and human trafficking in its Agra region comprising 10 dioceses. Some 30 delegates from these dioceses attended a workshop at Gyandeeep Bhawan Jaipur, capital of Rajasthan, to celebrate the International Worker's Day and address human trafficking and bonded labor that are rampant in the agricultural field, brick kilns and factories of the region.

The participants decided to form a resource team equipped with legal knowledge and adequate skills to effectively address human trafficking which has become a serious issue after the Covid-19 pandemic in region. They stressed the need for educating Christians on the Church's social teaching to end injustice against workers.

They noted that the pandemic and the subsequent economic slowdown have worsened migrant workers' situation. The number of unemployed youth in the country is on rise. Some states have failed to create enough jobs forcing workers to flee to metro-

politan cities for livelihood leaving behind their families. Nirmal Gorana, a human right activist, told the participants to use the provisions of Bonded Labour Abolition Act, Immoral Traffic (prevention) Act, 1956, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 to ensure justice to the victims of human trafficking and bonded labor.

Gorana, who has rescued 400 children and 1,000 bonded laborers from Rajasthan in the past five years, said the Church should take the lead in collaborating and coordinating the rescue of the victims and get them justice as state governments have failed to implement the laws.

Bishop Emeritus Oswald Lewis of Jaipur said migrant workers in India are generally poor and they need to be accompanied and assisted in availing the government welfare projects and policies. They are not paid the minimum wage either, the prelate regretted. Father Jaison Vadassery, the executive secretary of the Commission for Migrants, stressed the need to address the pastoral care of migrants in all dioceses in the region.  (Mattersindia)



Syro-Malabar Church opposes same-sex marriage legalization

The Syro-Malabar Church, a prominent Catholic group in India, says it opposes legalizing same sex marriage, as it is "a denial of human nature and an injustice to the family system and society."

"Legalizing same-sex marriage could lead to calls for the legalization of sexual perversions such as attraction to children, attraction to animals, and attraction between blood relatives," says a May 4 press note from the Church's Public Affairs Commission, based in Kochi, Kerala.


The commission was responding to the Union government that has sought public responses to a petition in the Supreme Court on same sex marriage.

The apex court has requested for the government position on the matter.

The press note, signed by commission secretary Father Abraham Kavilpurayidathil and assis-

tant Father James Kokkavayalil, says the Church has communicated to the Indian president its position on the matter.

The Kerala-based Oriental Church says it appreciates the Union government stand in the Supreme Court that in Indian culture marriage is a relationship between two persons of opposite sex and family consists of a biological man, a biological woman and the children born to them.

"The church, which adheres to scripture, tradition and church teachings, holds the same moral view and opposes efforts to legalize same-sex marriage. Because same-sex marriage violates the right of children to be born and raised within a marriage. It is a denial of human nature constituted as male and female. It is also an injustice to the family system and society," the press note says.  (Courtesy: Mattersindia)

Christian women, journalists support protesting wrestlers



Christian women have joined groups supporting the Indian wrestlers who are seeking justice against sexual abuse within the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI).

“It is with deep concern that we, women from the different Christian Churches in India, see the long struggle of our award winning wrestlers to get their situation of sexual abuse and harassment addressed,” says a joint statement from the Sisters in Solidarity (SIS) and the Indian Christian Women’s Movement (ICWM).

The May 4 statement applauds the wrestlers’ courage to voice their experiences of abuse and their tenacity to fight the system that shields abusers.

“We pledge our support for the wrestlers ...commit to being part of seeking for a solution to prevent, protect and restore the dignity of girls, women and vulnerable adults even as we demand that the political leaders of the country and leaders of the Churches in India to address the evil of sexual abuse that takes place with impunity, streamline the processes and systems of redressal to ensure that justice can be easily sought and obtained,” they assert.

Presenta- tion Sister Dorothy Fernandes, national secretary of the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace, an advocacy group formed by Catholic nuns, brothers and priests, described as “really disgusting” the serial abuse of women who brought laurels to the country in wrestling.

“More frightening is the blatant refusal to register a First Information

Report,” Sister Fernandes told Matters India May 4.

The solidarity and Christian women movement too decried the “impunity enjoyed by the abusers in such situations as they will continue to be perpetrators of sexual violence against children and vulnerable adults, fully confident of the systems that protect them.”

Describing the Delhi police’s apathy and inaction as “indeed appalling,” the Christian women condemned the use of force against the protesting wrestlers. “We condemn such moves on the part of those who are expected to protect those who are resisting violence,” added the statement.

Sister Fernandes lamented that the authorities do not adhere to orders of the highest court of the land. “It’s clear now that women’s lives, women’s demands do not matter in a patriarchal world,” regretted the Patna-based social activist.

She termed it heartening to see men coming forward to support the wrestlers. “It’s a grave violation of human rights and we should hang our heads down in shame because it is a collective flaw. Who will restore thus disgrace?” she asked. ☪

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)

Being Orphaned in Modern Time

We have become victims of speed and in a way one can say that speed matters and controls everything

BY P.A. JOSEPH

When I look into my experience in the modern time, I am worried of being orphaned and out of place. We are living in a fast changing context, changing surroundings, diversifying milieu, innovative approaches, facing continuous U turns, replacing systems, fluctuating moments, hidden-under currents, totally unpredictable periods and insecure ways.

Everything is moving fast, material or immaterial. What is material is losing its space and relevance, as though it has no value at all. Even the vehicles have to be in top speed, from cities to cities the movements have to be superfast. Road accidents multiply day by day, and naturally all slow-moving vehicles are losing their need and relevance. We are caught up fully in the present, what is gone is gone and nothing to think of it. We are in the time of mobile communications. Mobile phones have become the oxygen of even infants. Continuous incoming of messages, WhatsApp news, official information, advertisements, reports, etc. keep one in touch with the gadgets constantly. All the official communications are done online and practically little of paper reporting. We have become victims of speed and in a way one can say that speed matters and controls everything.

Another area to be reflected is the rapid change of moving to the flats in cities against the traditional villages or colonies. Here the social life is reduced to zero. One cannot think of social life among the flat

We are in the time of mobile communications. Mobile phones have become the oxygen of even infants. Continuous incoming of messages, WhatsApp news, official information, advertisements, reports, etc. keep one in touch with the gadgets constantly



dwellers. Living in the sky scraper, and even using the same lift mean nothing. No two persons or families know each other. There are no real neighbors. When/where there is social isolation, the mental stress is the natural consequence. In such context the humans function like automatic machines or like modern vehicles without a driver.

Our brains have not evolved sufficiently for us to live in overcrowded cities and this has resulted in all kinds of anxiety-related disorders and problems. All these factors do not make us comfortable. We are cut off from the nature with all its traditional and unique values. In a way we are orphaned in our own quarters and are terrifically lonely in spite of the conveniences. We miss what we have to get from life, and we cease to enjoy living.

This culture of the modern age has left people as though cogs in the wheel. Whether one likes it or not, one has to move and function automatically, and it has reduced the persons in his/her dignity. The individuals have no function, no time or role to reflect, to select, to question or for going for alternatives. What to say of team evaluation, the system will run by itself, no question disagreeing. Activities of the past are junk. Even great plans are not to be looked into again. Titanic with numerous millionaires has sunk deep in the Atlantic Ocean. There is nothing to think of it. What is over is over how big the project or movement be. This is not a helpless cry, but a critical observation. ©



Bob's Banter » BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

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ChatGPT, Chanakya and Compassion..!

They were exceptionally good skits, all done using ChatGPT! I watched the actors working on their dialogues and noticed their lines were all geared towards solving addiction problems. ChatGPT had done an excellent job of giving solutions through clever discourse and rational thought, but as I continued watching, I noticed one major ingredient missing...

Over two thousand years ago, Jesus delayed a visit to a close friend who was dying. His delay was on purpose, which was to reach the residence and work a great miracle, so that many would see the power of God. When he reached Bethany where Lazarus lived the sisters ran out to tell him their brother was dead. They cried in deep agony, saying if the Lord had

designed. Awed by the decorative fittings of the theatre, I turned to him and whispered, "Look at the beautiful marble they've used!"

"That's not real marble Bob," he said simply, "That's imitation marble! Real marble has faults which run through it!"

Those so-called faults revealed perfection!

What we see today is the use of Chanakya strategies by most everyone. We even have poll strategists who work out winning poll formulas.

Are we playing a game of chess with people as pawns? Remember, in the middle of one of Christ's greatest miracles he broke down, feeling the sorrow around, and in that breaking down, revealed the character of God; a God who could show compas-



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come earlier, Lazarus could have been healed.

Jesus knew what was going to happen. He knew soon there would be laughter and rejoicing as the dead man walked out of his grave. Yet, on seeing the grief of those around, Jesus wept.

In the scriptures, it is the shortest verse, but I think the most revealing and powerful!

A powerful healer, though he would soon see a man resurrected, still allowed himself to become vulnerable to feel with his heart the emotions of sorrow around him.

That heart of compassion, that slipping from clever speech and Chanakya strategy, was not there in those scripts.

ChatGPT I noticed was clever, but could not move from perfection to humanness!

Many years back my late dad and I went to a newly built theatre. He was an artist and interior

sion even before strategizing a miracle.

Likewise, there's a chance today for our own leadership to throw out ChatGPT and Chanakya thinking. Everyday we've been seeing young girls like your daughter or mine, on the front pages of our papers: Girl wrestlers weeping over being molested and sexually assaulted by a powerful man. If our Prime-Minister could one morning, without cameramen or journalists, walk over and hold these poor girls, and assure them his heart feels for them, what a glorious moment that would be!

Today, our country needs huge doses of Compassion, not Chanakya strategies or ChatGPT scripts..!

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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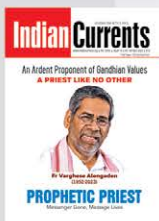


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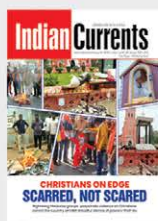


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