

Indian Currents

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An Ardent Proponent of Gandhian Values **A PRIEST LIKE NO OTHER**



Fr Varghese Alengaden
(1952-2023)

PROPHETIC PRIEST

Messenger Gone, Message Lives

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A PRIEST UNLIKE ANY OTHER



A diehard optimist with a unique vision and prophetic voice; a staunch proponent of Christo-centric life; an ardent supporter of Gandhian values of peace, non-violence and communal harmony; an inspiring mentor of students; a motivational orator par excellence, a workaholic who would say 'I am busy 24x7 but I have time for you' All these could probably sum up the life of Fr. Varghese Alengaden, the founder of Indore-based Universal Solidarity Movement of Value Education for Peace, who passed away recently. Like a colossus, he strode an unlikely path -- a path chosen by few. Today he is no more, creating a vacuum in an area he marvelled himself, in a field he made a niche for himself.

A reference to the sessions and seminars he conducted, and the number of participants in them, could give a glimpse of what he was involved in the last few decades of his eventful, untiring life. He conducted more than 300 seminars for school teachers and addressed 2,15,600 parents in 235 schools and tens of thousands of students from hundreds of schools, both at his USM centre in Indore and outside. This brings out his immense faith and trust in the youth. It was this belief which led him to ask himself, 'why not train the youth to take charge of the nation with an inclusive, broad and lasting vision.' This probably led to the regular leadership training camps for school students, each one lasting for a week, conducted by the USM. The culmination of each camp saw scores of students leaving with new glint in their eyes and new-found resolve in their heart. Their testimonials are galore at the archives of the USM.

Fr. Alengaden's extraordinary vision was not limited to the mission he undertook among the students. He was a champion of peace and communal harmony which was exemplified in the peace conventions he conducted across several cities in the last few years. Though he was a Gandhian without a Gandhian cap, nothing could cap his ceaseless efforts, joining hands with several civil society organizations, to motivate people to work for peace following the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi. He was a humanist to the core. He abhorred discriminating people on the basis of religion, region, caste, colour or creed. He had overcome man-made barriers to walk his talk. Readings and prayers from all religions, regularly practiced at the USM centre, stand as a testimony to what he stood for.

He was a priest who shed some of the identities without any inhibition; but Jesus Christ and His teachings were at the centre of his life. The Christo-centric retreats he had conducted for prelates, priests and religious at the USM centre were unique in many ways. His oft repeated and unambiguous stand distinguishing religiosity from spirituality is an evocative expression of what priesthood meant to him. Without mincing words, at every forum available to him, he spoke on the need to shun religiosity and pursue spirituality, following the footprints of Jesus Christ.

Now, that smiling face, with a never say die attitude, with his 'ho jayega' (It will be done) maxim, is gone. The best way to describe his life would be to quote Oscar Wilde, "To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all." Yes, he lived his life, inspiring and motivating those around him, keeping the identity as a human being above all other identities.

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

Dr. Suresh Mathew

Editor

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POWER QUOTES



Grace is not part of consciousness; it is the amount of light in our souls, not knowledge nor reason.

Pope Francis

• • •



Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.

St. Francis of Assisi

• • •



Find out who you are and be that person. That's what your soul was put on this earth to be. Find that truth, live that truth, and everything else will come.

Ellen DeGeneres

• • •



Success depends upon previous preparation, and without such preparation, there is sure to be failure.

Confucius

• • •



Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently.

Maya Angelou

• • •



Life can be much broader once you discover one simple fact: Everything around you that you call life was made up by people that were no smarter than you. And you can change it, you can influence it... Once you learn that, you'll never be the same again.

Steve Jobs

• • •



You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time.

Abraham Lincoln

Fr. Varghese Alengaden Unique in Life, Unique in Death Too

He has left a legacy of building a civilization of love through inter-faith harmony, motivating and training young people to become change-makers in society and transforming the Church as salt and light by following the way of Jesus

BY **JACOB PEENIKAPARAMBIL**



One of the famous quotes of Fr. Varghese Alengaden is, "Copying is an insult to God because by copying, God's unique creation is distorted."

This conviction of Fr. Varghese emerged from his deep contemplation on the very purpose of life. He was a person who constantly reflected on the question, "Why am I here on this earth?" He also frequently asked the question, "If Jesus were here today what would he do?" As a result, he could gradually discern his own uniqueness and his unique mission and undergo a paradigm shift from religiosity to spirituality. He was different in his appearance, thoughts, writings, speeches and actions from the ordinary Catholic priests. His uniqueness was also demonstrated after his death when his last rites were performed.

Deviating from the traditional practice of burying the body, Fr. Varghese was cremated in a crematorium in Indore on 28th March after his death on 26th. When his



body was laid in the coffin, it was not in the priestly dress, but in his characteristic attire of white kurta, pyjama and gamcha. After the Holy Mass and special prayers for the dead, half an hour

inter-faith prayer with short readings from eight different scriptures, interspersed with the motivational songs written by Fr. Varghese, was conducted. When his body was kept in the Cathedral Church in Indore for public viewing and homage, instead of playing the traditional Christian songs, the inspirational and motivational songs written by Fr. Varghese were played.

Naturally the media people and some of the Catholic faithful had the curiosity to know why there was a deviation from the age-old ritualistic practices. The last rites of Fr. Varghese were held according to his WILL. He has written the reasons for the wishes he had expressed in his will.

Fr. Varghese strongly believed that the most important identity of a person is humanity and God is to be seen and served in human beings. In

his life, he could transcend the lower identities like religion, caste, gender, language, etc. and focus on the higher identity of humanness. He could embrace people belonging to all religions and respected all religions. Therefore, in death he did not want to be identified with only a particular sect of people. That is the reason for not using any religion-related attire.

A large number of people who came to pay homage to Fr. Varghese in the Cathedral Church were people belonging to other faiths. In death also he wanted to be inclusive and send a powerful message to people of all faiths to be inclusive by rising above the divisive walls created by religions.

Many people, including journalists, asked, "Why was his body cremated instead of being buried, according to the Christian practise?" Against the backdrop of shrinking space for burial grounds, Fr. Varghese was of the view that Christians could adopt the practice of cremation, but not by using firewood. Cremation by using firewood leads to pollution, besides cutting a lot of trees. Both are detrimental to the environment, he used to say.

Fr. Varghese and the Universal Solidarity Movement (USM) he launched did not own any land or building. After death also he did not want to possess six feet of land. He believed in a quotation of Mahatma Gandhi, "I have no property and yet I feel that I am perhaps the richest man in the world."

Fr. Alengaden was a man of detachment and transparency. He did not have his own email address; all his communications were sent through the common email address of Universal Solidarity Movement (USM). He insisted that the audited statements

Fr. Varghese Alengaden was born on December 30, 1952 as the son of Ouseph and Annam of the Alengaden family in Kallur, Thrissur district, Kerala. He has two brothers and one sister. His elder brother Mr. Johny had been his mentor in his childhood. He completed his school education between 1952 and 1970 in Kallur.

After joining Sagar Diocese in Madhya Pradesh as a missionary, he completed his priestly studies from Nagpur Seminary and was ordained in 1981. From 1981 to 1993 he was a priest in Sagar Diocese. While working in the diocese, he was appointed as the Director of the M.P. Youth Commission and he animated hundreds of young people.

After working 12 years in the diocese of Sagar, in the year 1993, he got inspiration to work for inter-faith harmony and unity of India through young people. With the permission of the then bishop of Sagar he came to Indore to start his new mission, USM, with the blessings of late Bishop George Anathil. From 1993 to the day he was admitted to the hospital he was single-mindedly devoted to USM.

of account of the USM should be published along with the annual report and it should be made available to the public.

Some of the special characteristics of his personality are broad and inclusive vision; focus on spirituality based on the core values of religions rather than religiosity based on rituals and dogmas; emphasis on following the way of Jesus rather than worshipping Jesus; being a prophet with courage, compassion and creativity; utter faith in the providence of God with the slogan, 'Ho Jayega' and 'possibility-thinking'; extraordinarily warm hospitality;

24x7 availability with the caption, "I am busy, I have time for you" and a magical skill to build and nurture friendship with hundreds of individuals.

A unique practice followed by Fr. Varghese was writing his journal daily with observations, insights and resolutions. He wrote his journal without fail till he was admitted to hospital for heart surgery on March 2, 2023. There are 46 volumes of his journal with more than 37,000 pages of A 4 size paper. Indeed, it is a marvellous feat. Fr. Varghese used to share during his seminars and training that the two main sources of his passion for mission, energy, enthusiasm and creativity are one-hour contemplation and journal writing daily.





His vision for India and the world as encapsulated in the vision of USM, is perfectly in tune with the vision of India as envisaged in the preamble of the Indian Constitution and the 'Reign of God' as envisioned by Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth was the source of his inspiration and Mahatma Gandhi was his role model in building an inclusive India by following the path of non-violence and inter-faith harmony. He has read half a dozen books on Mahatma Gandhi and showed the movie 'Gandhi' to hundreds of students and teachers.

The USM community in Indore which he animated for the last 30 years is an attempt to realize the



vision of Jesus and the vision of the Indian Constitution. "There are no workers in USM; all are partners in the same mission with equal respect," say many people who visit USM.

Fr. Varghese was a prophet after the model of Jesus with courage, compassion and creativity. Like Jesus he was fearless in his speeches and writings. Sometimes he was fierce in his criticism of the Church for the deviations, lapses, corruption and scandals within it. When people accused him of mudslinging on the Church, he said that he loved the Church and that is why he pointed out the aberrations in the Church.

Fr. Alengaden in his autobiography, "Ho Jayega" (It will be done), outlined his own paradigm shift from religiosity to spirit-

uality, giving an account of his journey from being an orthodox 'priest of rituals' to helping people of all faiths to worship God in truth and spirit as told by Christ to the Samaritan woman at the well. He wrote: "Now I understand the viewpoints of those who are opposed to organized religions, their hierarchy, rituals, and corruption of their priests. I can now see why institutional religions silence and even kill prophets and welcome traditional preachers with reverence. I resolve to help people of all faiths to worship God in Truth and Spirit."

The unusual symbolic expressions found in the last rites of Fr. Varghese indicate the uniqueness of his person and the unique mission he launched in 1993: Universal Solidarity Movement (USM). Through the USM Fr. Varghese reached out to thousands of students, teachers, principals, parents, bishops, priests, sisters and civil society members. Participation of many principals, teachers, and USM alumni (students who had participated in the Enlightened Leadership Training in USM and now doing job or higher studies) in the last rites of Fr. Varghese is an explicit sign of his and USM's influence on them.

Fr. Varghese emerged as a prolific writer, motivational speaker and a fervent advocate of Gandhian values. He has contributed more than 30 books on various social, religious and educational issues and hundreds of articles in periodicals and newspapers.

Fr. Varghese was a prophet after the model of Jesus with courage, compassion and creativity. Like Jesus he was fearless in his speeches and writings. Sometimes he was fierce in his criticism of the Church for the deviations, lapses, corruption and scandals within it

“God in Flesh and Blood” (ten volumes Bible reflections) “Ho Jayega”, “Struggle, Smile, Stay”, “Educare”, “The Key”, “But God was There”, and “Burn Books, Burn Brains” are prominent among his books. His articles in various periodicals and newspapers were challenging and sometimes provoking because he spoke truth to power.

He conducted more than 300 seminars for school teachers and addressed 2,15, 600 parents in 235 schools and thousands of students in about 500 schools during the last 30 years. He organized 9 National Peace Conventions in which an average 300 people participated from different parts of India in order to motivate people to work for peace with the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi.

The most significant contribution of Fr. Varghese is the Universal Solidarity Movement with the vision of building a civilization of love and a universal family

by adopting the core values of all religions.

What makes USM different from many organizations and movements is its emphasis on the personal transformation of its members before they venture into activities for social transformation. The members are asked to practice the principles before preaching them to others. The conscious practice of the Five Paths for Personal Transformation is mandatory for all the members.

The creative programmes designed by Fr. Varghese to bring about changes in the students, teachers, parents and principals include One-week Leadership Training for High School Students, two days Seminar for Teachers with the theme, “Teachers as Mentors”, Parents’ Seminar focusing on the role of parents in the education of their children, Leadership Training for Heads of Institutions, highlighting the areas on which they have to give special attention, Knit India, three day-gathering of students, teachers and principals to build unity and harmony and launching National Peace Movement for organizing annual National Peace Conventions.

The messages sent by many people reflect the impact of Fr. Varghese and the USM in their lives. “The way you welcomed each one of us to USM has taught us the true meaning of warmth and hospitality. We have learnt what is inclusion, spirituality, and time management just by watching the way you lived life. In each phase of my life, from being a student, moulding me into a USM brand and youth ambassador, my marriage, pursuing journalism, becoming an author, motivational speaker, to recently becoming a mother...you have been my guiding light”, wrote Mrs. Ankita Das, ex-student, St. Mary’s Inter College, Prayagraj, U.P.





“Fr. Varghese fought for secularism and human values throughout his life. He was an extreme optimist and believed in changing situations. He was one of the few people who used to shower nectar even during poisonous times. He had transcended the boundaries of being an individual and an institution. He was a hope among all of us. And hope always remains eternal; so, Fr. Varghese will always remain

with us,” wrote Chinmay Mishra, Gandhian thinker and columnist.

“Fr. Varghese Alengaden was a true Gandhian by heart, and his efforts and support for promoting peace were truly remarkable. As a Rotarian, he embodied the values of service above self, and his dedication to improving the lives of those around him was truly inspiring,” said Rotarian Purnesh Jain.

Fr. Varghese has left a legacy of building a civilization of love through interfaith harmony, motivating and training young people to become change-makers in society and transforming the Church as salt and light by following the way of Jesus. Becoming a partner in his mission is the best homage one can pay to Fr. Varghese. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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‘You Changed Our Lives’

BY **MRS. ANKITA DAS**

The man who visualized India to be rebuilt by the youth and gave birth to the Universal Solidarity Movement, a holistic movement to transform India with the principle of ‘You Be the Change’, is no more.

Whoever has met Father Varghese Alengaden has surely re-met their own selves.

We can never forget how he made each one of us feel that we were born for a purpose and can make a difference. He always made us feel that ‘we mattered.’

I am so fortunate to have met him in this life. I always used to wonder what on earth have I done for the way he made me feel but that was his power, to make each one of us feel loved, valued and so significant. You gave meaning to who we are and made us think beyond ourselves.

The way he welcomed each one of us to USM has taught us the true meaning of warmth and hospitality. We have learnt what inclusion, spirituality, and time management meant, just by watching the way he lived life. Truly Father, your life is your message to us. I am personally indebted to you for being the light of my life for the last 14 years.

In each phase of my life, from being a student, moulding me into a USM brand and youth ambassador, my marriage, pursuing journalism, becoming an author, motivational speaker, to recently becoming a mother...you have been my guiding light.

Thank you for always being so available for each one of us and giving us the charge of nation-building and building a civilization of love. While your passing away is a big personal and national loss, we assure you that we will continue to live this mission and keep up the spirit of USM in everything we do.

May your soul rest in peace. Thank you for such a rich legacy and leaving us with so much to cherish. We all can feel your divine presence and blessings. Please keep watching over us.

You will now be like:

“Up Above the World So High, Like A DIAMOND In the Sky.”

We will continue to look up for you and we know we will find you as ‘Our Father in Heaven.’ ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MRS. ANKITA DAS is an ex-student of St. Mary’s School, Prayagraj, U.P. who was associated with the USM

A Rare Diamond with Rough Edges

He was a visionary, motivating and training youth to live the vision of India as envisaged in the Constitution; to bring about a civilization of love as envisioned by Jesus Christ

BY **DR MUDITA MENONA SODDER**

Fr Varghese Alengaden shocked many with his untimely and unexpected death. Many of us had last met him on February 1, 2023 at the 9th Global Peace Convention at Porbandar in Gujarat. He was indeed a rare diamond with rough edges. Hailing from Kerala, like a true missionary, he began religious life as a priest, in the Sagar diocese, with traditional religious values. Soon the pendulum oscillated to the other extreme. Reality, gradually enlightened him along life's journey to find the mid-way path.

Leaving the Sagar diocese in Madhya Pradesh, true to his inner calling, he began with Swami Sacchidananda's Dharma Bharati Movement in Hyderabad; and soon it metamorphosed into the birth of the Universal Solidarity Movement (USM) of Value Education for Peace in Indore in 1993.

He was a visionary with a big dream of motivating and training youth to live the vision of India, as envisaged in the Indian Constitution; to bring about a civilization of love and the reign of God here on earth; as envisioned by Jesus and the Church. He had the wisdom to recognize talent, the charisma to attract and persuade people; and together with his 'Ho Jayega' (It will be done) belief, positive attitude, inclusive, broad, spiritual and Gandhian dictum of 'Be the Change', he was, slowly but surely, able to actualize his life-long commitment to launch a holistic movement for youth, to take charge of the nation.

With deep faith and trust in God and the courage, compassion, commitment and daring to abandon the security of the church and institutions, he surrendered totally, and clung to God; tossed and battered along the storms of life. He boldly and shamelessly (with the 'besharam' flower as his symbol) endured it all, never gave up his vocation as a priest or the Church; and finally rebuilt himself and came out transformed, refined, polished and shining, sparkling like a diamond emitting his light and radiance all around. Completing his mission here on earth in 70 years, this unique, original, creative and dynamic visionary prophet, prolific writer, motivational speaker and fervent Gandhian, walked untrod-

den paths, introduced incredible, innovative ideas; adventurous plans, values and new age ministries; celebrating the gift of life all along. Self-discipline, hospitality and generosity especially for the elderly, rejected, and sick were his forte.

Fr. Alengaden was exceptional in writing his personal journal daily without fail. He opened his heart and purse to one and all without counting the cost, even when his finances were low, and his energies feeble. On his table he had the caption, 'I am busy, I have time for you.' He accepted the rejected with open arms, visited the sick at great cost to self and honoured the dead by visiting their graves periodically, with great respect and gratitude, to seek their blessings.

I was fortunate to have worked and lived with him in the USM community, talked to him and received his blessings on February 1, 2023 at Porbandar, on the last day of the Peace Convention and prayed for him for five hours during his bypass surgery on March 4, and finally attended his last rites on March 28 at Indore. I consider myself amply blessed!

Hundreds of people came to pay their homage to him at the Cathedral church. Parul Jain from Udaipur said, "It is really unbelievable that Fr Alengaden is no longer in this world".

The last rite services were preceded by a 20-minute documentary, giving glimpses of his life and work. Three bishops and more than 75 priests concelebrated the Mass of the Resurrection, at St Francis of Assisi Cathedral Red Church, Indore. The Eucharistic celebration was followed by an Inter-Faith Prayer Service, culminating with cremation at 5 p.m., which he had desired. His ashes were taken to Sagar diocese by his elder brother and mentor Johnny Alengaden and family, relatives and close friends, on March 29.

Fr Varghese Alengaden has left behind a legacy for us to emulate. Becoming catalysts and spreading his message is the best tribute we can pay him. May he rest in peace and receive his eternal reward in heaven. ©

Messenger Gone, But not His Message

Fr. Alengaden took up promotion of Value Education as his mission. Since then, there was “no turning back” until his death

BY **M. L. SATYAN**

I have known Fr. Varghese Alengaden since 1993 while I worked with Pratyasa Movement and Dharma Bharathi Institute of Peace and Value Education (now known as Universal Solidarity Movement). I met him first time at Kochi during an inter-religious conference organized by Dharma Rajya Vedi, an inter-religious wing of Pratyasa Movement. Following that meeting, he invited a four-member team (consisting of Acharyasri Sachidanand, Swami Sundaresan, Sant Isher Singh and I) to Madhya Pradesh for a month-long tour.

We addressed different categories of people like school students, teachers, religious nuns, priests and general public in various parts of Madhya Pradesh. As a consequence, Fr. Varghese took up the promotion of Value Education as his mission. Since then, there was “no turning back” and he continued this mission until his premature death.



I have found Fr. Varghese a person of values which was evident in every aspect of his life.

Kind and gentle: A jack fruit has a rough surface but it contains sweet fruits inside.

Likewise, the voice and dealings of Fr.

Varghese seemed to be rough. Yet he had a kind and gentle heart. He was affectionate to others.

Joyful: He always had a gentle smile. It was an expression of his inner joy. If a person was depressed, worried or tensed, he could heal that person just with a magic smile. His jovial nature and “Ho Jaayega” mindset kept others close to him.

Simplicity: He followed the “incarnational model” of Jesus. He abandoned the religious dress and chose a common man’s dress and wore it always. Even in his final journey, he was given a farewell in his simple dress (Kurta, Pyjama and Gamcha). He never wanted to own any property during his lifetime. Hence, he opted for cremation.

Truthfulness: For Fr. Varghese, “yes” meant yes and “no” meant no. He never minced words. He exhibited his sincerity in his words, actions and life always and everywhere.

Convictions: He had his own convictions. He was a person of principles and values such as patriotism, hard work, punctuality, cleanliness, service to the needy, respecting the uniqueness of every individual, etc. He never ever compromised his values.

Hard working: One of his mottos was: “I am busy 24/7 but I have time for you”. He had the habit of working till late night or early morning. He used to sleep for just 3 to 4 hours only. He used to keep



himself busy with reading, writing, traveling, and conducting meetings.

Punctuality: He was always 'before time' for any community activity like prayer, group work, meeting, etc. He always began a program on time and ended it on time.

Communicating and training: He was very good in his oral and written communications. He expressed his thoughts and views with great clarity and courage. He has authored many books that have inspired priests, nuns, students, teachers, parents and government officials. He has conducted hundreds of training programs for different categories of people all over the country as well as abroad.

Motivating: He always tried to listen and understand a person's problem and motivated that person accordingly. He could motivate any person, of any age, of any background. Everyone who came in contact with him was motivated. On March 14, 2022 he came to St. John's Medical College Hospital, Bengaluru to meet me. I was under treatment for my rectal cancer. On the next morning my surgery was due. He boosted my morale by saying, "Satyan, do not worry. You have overcome health crises in the past. Now also you will come out clean. Be courageous". He also assured of his prayerful support to my wife and daughter.

Memory power: He always remembered every individual whom he met and worked with. Likewise, he had a good memory of the past events. He was good in documenting every important event for future reference.

Spiritual: Although he belonged to a priestly group and a diocese, he never remained at the level of "religiosity". He rose above caste, colour, creed, rituals, ceremonies, rules and laws and lived in a "spiritual sphere". "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the whole universe is one family) was his spirituality. Hence, he chose the name "Universal Solidarity Movement" as the name for his mission.

I had the privilege of attending his funeral ceremony in Indore. There was a perfect harmony between the Eucharistic Celebration (since he was a priest) and the Inter-religious Prayer (since he had an inter-religious mindset). Probably the Cathedral



witnessed the inter-religious prayer first time. People from all walks of life bid him a tearful farewell.

In fact, Fr. Varghese played many roles – a loving brother; a reliable friend; a trustworthy guide and an affectionate father. I wish to conclude this Tribute with a meaningful poem titled "Away" written by James Whitcomb Riley.

I cannot say, and I will not say
That he is dead. He is just away!
With a cheery smile, and a wave of the hand
He has wandered into an unknown land,
And left us dreaming how very fair;
It needs must be, since he lingers there.
And you, O you, who the wildest yearn
For the old-time step and the glad return,
Think of his faring on, as dear,
In the love of There as the love of Here;
And loyal still, as he gave the blows
Of his warrior-strength to his country's foes.
Mild and gentle, as he was brave,
When the sweetest love of his life he gave,
To simple things: Where the violets grew
Blue as the eyes they were likened to,
The touches of his hands have strayed
As reverently as his lips have prayed:
When the little brown thrush that harshly chirred
Was dear to him as the mocking-bird;
And he pitied as much as a woman in pain,
A writhing honey-bee wet with rain.
Think of his still as the same, I say:
He is not dead, he is just away! ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ML SATYAN is an NGO Consultant and a freelance Journalist.



A Prophet of Universal Solidarity

Fr. Alengadan with few of his friends started the Universal Solidarity Movement which has become a national youth movement today

BY **ACHARYASRI**

It was in March 1990 that Fr. Varghese Alengadan and I had met for the first time. Our common friend Sr. Reena Kuzhiveli arranged the meeting. I was deeply influenced by the courage and dynamism of the 38-year-old priest from the Sagar Diocese in Madhya Pradesh. We developed a deep emotional bond from that first meeting itself.

I invited him for the National Inter-religious Seminar organised by us at Cochin from September 30 to October 2, 1990. As a follow up of this National Seminar, we launched a Shanti Mission under the banner of Dharma Rajya Vedi (DRV).

Fr. Alengaden became a wholehearted supporter of DRV and Shanti Mission. He organised a two-month tour for our four-member inter-religious team in Madhya Pradesh. Except for a few minor hiccups, the tour was a great success.

The money received by our team during the MP tour was deposited in a State Bank account at Bhopal with the late Fr. P J Joseph SVD serving as the account holder. This money was used later on to set up a Dharma Bharathi Institute of Peace & Value Education at Indore in July 1993. Fr. Varghese served as the first Director of this Institute till the end of



1998. Working together, we developed an inter-religious vision, mission and action plan for a great new India through the Dharma Bharathi Institute. In November 1998 we decided to part ways and venture out independently. The Dharma Bharathi Institute was shifted to Hyderabad.

Fr. Alengadan with few of his friends started the Universal Solidarity Movement which has become a national youth movement today. His dynamism and enlightened leadership have enabled the USM to reach out to a large number of students, priests, religious and lay leaders all over India. USM has become a great blessing for India and the Indian Church today.

I thank and praise God for the gift that Fr Alengaden was for me and for Dharma Bharathi Institute which now functions from Lucknow with Dr. Satyaprakash Bharat serving as its Director General. I have been focussing on developing DRV into a socio-spiritual organization for an Integral Renaissance of India based on an Indian Face of the Christian Faith.

I am ever grateful to my dear departed friend for his support and collaboration. May his soul rest in eternal peace in Christ our Lord. ©

His dynamism and enlightened leadership have enabled the USM to reach out to a large number of students, priests, religious and lay leaders all over India. USM has become a great blessing for India and the Indian Church today

Archbishop's "Assurance" to BJP Unacceptable: FORUM for Priests and Religious

An advocacy group for Catholic religious in India has termed as unacceptable an archbishop's conditional offer of support to the Bharatiya Janata Party saying it would have serious long term repercussions.

"We are shocked by the recent statement made by Archbishop Mar Joseph Pamplany of Telli-cherry, given wide coverage by all sections of the media. According to media reports, "Archbishop Pamplany assured to extend support to BJP if the union government raises the price of rubber to 300 rupees," says a statement of the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace.

The statement was issued by the forum's executive committee that met March 23-25 at Divya Karunya Ashramam in Thannipuzha near Kalady, Kerala.

The archbishop made the offer at a protest rally of the Catholic Congress at Alakode in Kannur. He said that the farmers of his territory would help the BJP in Kerala and will overcome the situation of the BJP not having an MP from the state.

"Coming from a member of the hierarchy, such 'assurances' are unacceptable, deeply regrettable and bound to have serious long term repercussions. Fascist, fundamentalist and fanatic forces are inimical to the Constitution of India, to the intrinsic values of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, to its democratic ethos and to the secular fabric of the country," says the statement issued by Jesuit Father Cedric Prakash, the forum's Media Cell In-Charge.

The group of progressive priests, brothers and sisters points out that the BJP, through its insidious divide and rule strategies, makes inroads into all sections of society, including among the Christians.

"This was experienced recently in the elections held in three North Eastern States and earlier in Goa. Its blatant posturing and preparations for forthcoming elections in Karnataka and other states and the National elections of 2024, are indicative of its goal:



the establishment of a state based on the 'Hindutva' ideology," the forum states.

Describing the reality as grim, the group notes that for the Hindutva ideology supporters view any citizen who stands up for truth and justice, including human rights defenders and media personnel as anti-national.

They are hounded and harassed, incarcerated and killed; minorities (particularly the Muslims and Christians) are demonized and denigrated, attacked and jailed, bemoans the forum.

"This has been a cruel experience every Sunday for the evangelists and followers of evangelist Christian communities in Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and other states," it says.

"At the receiving end of a brutal and unjust system are the Adivasis and Dalits, fisher-folk, small farmers, migrant workers and the unemployed, the poor and other vulnerable sections of society," the group points out.

The forum regrets that the Church in India does not play the prophetic role in these troubled times as expected from her on behalf of the suffering in our country.

At the same time, "a large section of the hierarchy, clergy and religious are frightened to take a stand for truth and justice," the group alleges. ☪

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)

Intellectual Interest Weakens Moral Stature Collapses

Sectarian ridicule has replaced rational thought. Right wing-guided universities concentrate on the benefit of caste-system rather than common good

BY **ARCHBP THOMAS MENAMPARAMPIL**

Many universities in India are closing down their philosophy department for lack of applicants. Hindutva love for Hindu wisdom is least visible in BJP-led states. Our fanfare today is about Ayodhya and Mathura, not about the Vedas, Nyaya or Buddhist schools of thought. The level of philosophic competence has fallen and keenness of interest dipped. 'Bania' instincts are evidently in another direction.

Under Hindutva inspiration, polarised issues have drawn the best attention. Sectarian ridicule has replaced rational thought. RSS-guided universities concentrate on the benefit of caste-system and role of women in the kitchen! Surprisingly there is greater interest in intelligent thinking in non-BJP states like West Bengal, Kerala, Odisha and Delhi. Philosophy-related programmes are vibrant there. Creative thinking guides social processes, reforms faltering institutions, and sustains participative values.

Great thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Angelia Davis linked philosophy with public life. They made entire populations reflect over concrete issues. We



need studied answers to life-related anxieties like human-trafficking, social responsibility of business, threat to environment and future-oriented questions like erosion of ethics.

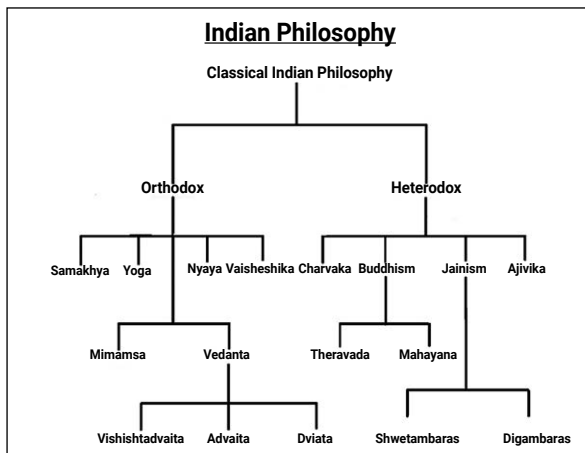
European and American universities invest heavily on Indian thought, traditions, and heritage. Despite allegations of western bias and colonial distortions, some of the western scholars remain the only reliable authorities on several Indian classics. We must remain open. Ram Nath Kovind, the former President, insists that universities should cultivate a universal perspective. They cannot be lost amidst concepts of narrow-minded nationalism.

Mother of Democracy

Narendra Modi is proud in claiming that India is the Mother of Democracy. Please note: The BJP and RSS are quick in appropriating all that was positive in Indian history, ignoring their own ruinous contribution. The entire wisdom of Indic thought they claim as theirs; they press their ownership over Vivekananda, Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, even Ambedkar...in spite of the fact these stalwarts were standing directly against everything the Saffron School is propagating.

It is true that the Vaishalis, Lichchavis, Sakyas and other tribes (in today's Bihar and neighbourhood) in Buddha's day had a democratic social structure, much like that of the tribal people of the North-east today. But it is equally true that violent Aryan hordes crushed them and their democratic traditions over a period of time, the dominant classes reducing them to the status of Shudras and outcasts. With the expulsion of Buddhism from India, their last traces disappeared except in the Northeast...their next target.

The political drama that is being enacted today



by the BJP-RSS alliance is a repetition of the same suppression of the weak. It is a determined effort to keep two-thirds of India's humble population at their humble level. Dalits, tribals, OBCs and Muslims are the victims.

Stifling of Democracy

While the entire world hails India as the biggest democratic nation in the world, an acute consciousness is awakening to the fact that the quality of our democracy has fallen, and fallen very low. On the Electoral Democracy Index of Sweden's V-Dem Institute, India has slipped from the 100th to the 108th position. Political critics are being arrested, and cases are brought up continuously against Opposition leaders. Six people were held the other day in Delhi for putting up anti-Modi posters. Of over 50,000 posters printed, 20,000 were intercepted.

Priyanka Chaturvedi of the Shiv Sena says, Enforcement Directorate has become as popular as the "Extortion Department". Over 95% of the victims of the ED have been Opposition leaders. Meanwhile, BJP remains a "washing machine" that clears corrupt leaders of all their crimes and promotes them to



cabinet rank. A journalist, Sanjay Rana, was beaten and arrested for questioning the UP Education Minister. He was baselessly accused of being a threat to peace and taken to an unknown destination.

Our democratic institutions have suffered most. Parliament sessions go mute or end up as a farce. Crime-accused parliamentarians have become more comedians in the assembly hall than presenters of creative political proposals. In Bihar Assembly, laddus were flung in all directions, not studied evaluations of the social scenario.

Mistakes on Either Side

There is no doubt that there have been occasions when the so called "secular" heroes humili-



ated Hindu sensitivities. Even today a section of the "liberal" thinkers press for same-sex marriage. Thus, there have been exaggerations that damage the 'secular-liberal' image.

Meanwhile, Hindutva response to liberal insensitivities has been steadily growing. For example, there have been vigorous protests against Bollywood's projection of Hindu beliefs and customs in bad light. While social criticism is legitimate, insensitive descriptions of valued traditions can be hurtful. Mutual accusations, baseless allegations, and calculated provocations, have gone to excess. This is a moment for inviting relaxed relationships.

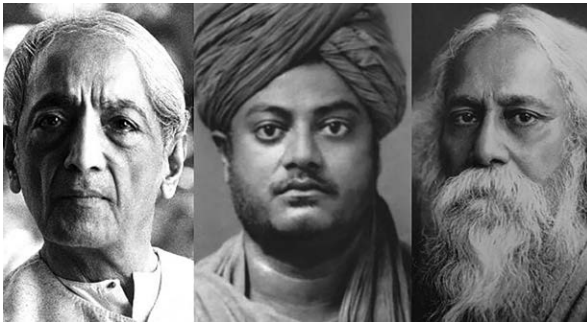
Anger is in Command

The political ecosystem that BJP and RSS have created fosters anger about anything. Emotions are being built up. Saeed Akhtar Mirza says that biased scholars are weaponising history; it is not true that perfect peace reigned in India before the arrival of the Muslims. Hindu kings fought each other and plundered treasuries and temples. Today's Hindutva violent groups continue that tradition.

For example, Sakal Hindu Samaj in Maharashtra has retained an aggressively Islamophobic front. Cow-related lynchings continue. Cow-departments assume greater powers in BJP-led states. Embarrassing tales multiply. Recently there was an account of a "purification" service conducted with cow urine in Shimoga district, at a place where a Muslim had recited a prayer.

History Repeats Itself

Then comes a moment when people driven to the corner respond in their own style: e.g. Americans responded to British exploitation, Shivaji to Mughal domination, Ukrainians to Russian bullying, Mahatma Gandhi to British imperial system, unhappy citi-



zens to BJP autocracy. Will the masters of “muscular nationalism” and aggressive promoters of Hindu rashtra take responsibility for the consequences of their exaggerations?

Over 2,000 pro-Khalistani protesters gathered near the Indian mission in UK. Others have been active in Canada, the US and other places. The issues are too sensitive to be discussed at this sensitive moment, but will the “majoritarians” who want to homogenize India understand? Can they learn from the negative experience of Pakistan with ever-widening fault lines of diverse loyalties in their country?

Balanced Muslim intellectuals have been calling on their co-believers not to go by a type of “religious-absolutism” that undermines universally accepted human values. Thinking sections in the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and other communities have done similar things. Listen to sober voices, attend to facts! Unfortunately, facts alone are not enough. Bruno Latour says that facts find acceptance only if there is a shared culture, credible institutions, and reliable media. These have been effectively marginalized in India. A new culture has been created in which truth has no place any more. All are waiting for His Master’s Voice.

Going further, all are racing ahead to please the Master with “anticipatory obedience”. Timothy Snyder in his book ‘On Tyranny’ says, “Individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want, and offer themselves without being asked”. Many Nazi atrocities were the initiatives of individual leaders in the field who were competing to please Hitler in advance, interpreting his mind. Similarly, petty men today are rushing ahead to defend the Prime Minister and his policies or make nasty remark about Rahul Gandhi or the Gandhi family.

Modi-defenders are many, whether they be Amit Shah, Shivraj Chouhan, Rajnath Singh, S. Jaishankar, Himanta Biswa Sarma or Kiren Rijju. Rijju even went to the point of calling retired judges an “anti-India

gang”, shocking the entire judiciary. Others express their zeal for Hindutva causes in fervent Hindutva styles. Leaders in Himachal Pradesh charge Rs. 10 as “cow cess” on each bottle of liquor. Cow-related lynchings continue. Ajanta Neog in Assam announces 2.5 lakh rupees for each of the 800 new Namghars (Hindu prayer houses). Himanta Biswa Sarma arrests 4,111 people for child marriages.

Meanwhile, balanced men like Hiren Gohain raise their voices, asking the government to remedy the situation that caused the evil than punish the victims. They recommend a holistic approach. There are so many other serious problems to think about, they say, for example, the top 10% in India own 77% of the national wealth, Bihar literacy rate is as low as 61.8% and Arunachal 65.3%. About 61 students of premier engineering and management institutes in India have committed suicide since 2018, many of them due to caste discrimination. Suicides have risen of late with 13,089 terminating their lives in 2021. These are real issues that call for serious attention.

Problems Aggravate

Social scientists notice that, while the educated middle class in Turkey or Israel stand for democracy, Indian middle class are eager for an authoritarian government that controls minorities and silences critics. What intrigues them more is that Non-Resident Indians in the US subsidize obscurantism and communal violence back in India! What surprises the world even more is the flight of Indians, who can afford, from the golden land of Modi. In 2022 over 683 Indians crossed the English Channel illegally on boats! More are in line to the US and the entire West.

With arrest warrant for Rahul and his dismissal from the Parliament, the general atmosphere has



further deteriorated. Mamata Banerjee sees a new low for constitutional democracy with opposition leaders daily under attack and criminals raised to Cabinet ranks. Hemant Soren says, that the ruling clique is having Amrit Kaal, while others are under Emergency. Mutual name-calling has touched the roof. BJP spokespersons call Rahul Gandhi today's Mir Jaffar, for betraying India to the British through his talk at Cambridge, criticizing the autocratic style of Modi government. The usual Congress retort has been to call the BJP-RSS family Jai Chands who betrayed the Hindu cause. Don't forget Jagath Seth who financed Clive's Plassey venture. Is that the measure of loyalty of the business community to India?

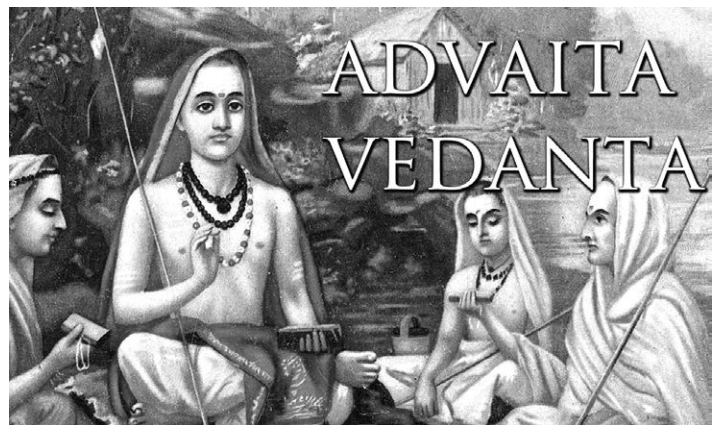
It Pays to be Polite

Rahul's remark about Modi sharing the name with defrauders, though said in good humour, could have been avoided. However, no one with good sense would think of two years in prison for such type of political teasing. Modi had been merciless ridiculing the Gandhi family. Mamata would have hit back, but Sonia merely kept her dignity; Rahul just teased back. Fairness should be both ways. Words return to pin the speaker to his own place when there is no truth and propriety in what has been said.

Kejriwal's comment may be considered far more humiliating than Rahul's. He said after Sisodia's arrest, how he realized that the country needed an educated Prime Minister, not someone who would suggest beating the plate to keep away coronavirus! Modi himself had humiliated our country during a visit to China and Seoul in 2015. He had proclaimed loud how "earlier people were ashamed of being born Indians". His pretended claim was that he had redeemed the image of India. He is little aware that ancient Chinese used to long to be reborn in the land of Buddha. This is a matter of history.

In any case, Modi-defenders have made the biggest blunder drawing attention of the entire world: they have proved Rahul right at Cambridge by silencing him in the Parliament, issuing an arrest warrant against him and expelling from parliamentary membership! Human Rights are dispensed with. Opposition parties unite. Autocracy moves from blunder to blunder. History repeats itself again.

Chinese General Sun Tzu (4th cent BC) would thus instruct his troops, "If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every



battle". It would seem it is in that direction our leadership is taking us. They have encouraged too much untruth-telling, so that our understanding of our civilization, of each other and of our neighbouring nations has grown distorted.

Our universal outlook has been reduced. The participatory political style of ancient Vaishali has been set aside. Our philosophical outlook has been replaced by temple-building mania, just like the period before the Islamic invasions. "You will succumb in every battle" in this way. The greatest dangers are averted through mere alertness. Sun Tzu admits, the best battles are won without fighting.

Thoughts Shape Future

Kim Jong-un of North Korea has been accused of caring more for his cattle than his fellow-citizens. We have failed more in this respect. Cow-lullabies seem to have become the national anthem of India as a nation. But in Happiness Index we fall low, while Finland has remained the happiest country in the world for the 6th year running, with an impressive measure of: social support, income, health, freedom, generosity, absence of corruption.

These are human values and achievements which we cannot afford to ignore. They are brought into existence through intelligent thinking, scientific planning, a clear-sighted vision for the future, and joining hands across communities. Bridaharanya Upanishad says, our thoughts and words become our actions, habits, character, and destiny. Set your thoughts, then, in the right direction. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ARCHBISHOP MENAMPARAMPIL's analysis of socio-cultural and political issues has led to debates and concrete peace initiatives, for which he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

In Defence of North-East Christians

There is a concerted effort to malign Christians in the North-East, calling them members of a foreign religion, and subjecting them to physical attacks

BY **CHHOTEBHAI**

Not belonging to the North East (NE), why should I bother about what is happening to the Christians there? As always, Sacred Scripture has the answer.

While describing the community of believers as a body, we are told that “If one part is hurt, all the parts share its pain” (1Cor 12:26). Again, “Each part must be equally concerned for all the others” (v 25). More importantly, “It is precisely the parts of the body that seem to be weakest, which are the indispensable ones” (v 22). Simply put, if the Christian community in the N-E is under attack, it is the duty of every one of us to rise to their defence.

Christians were lethally attacked on 26th March at a rally organised by the Janjati Dharm Sanskriti Suraksha Manch” (JDSSM), Forum for protection of tribal religion and culture. It is a frontal organization of the RSS that has always been inimical to Christians and conversions. The JDSSM had claimed that one lakh tribals from all over Assam would attend the rally. *Organiser*, an RSS publication, claimed that 55,000 attended, itself a questionable figure. Wealthy and influential sponsors are known to leave no stone unturned to ensure a big gathering. The participants may not necessarily be aware of the purpose of the rally.

Recently a veteran missionary from Chhattisgarh wrote an article on “Ghar Wapsi” (homecoming)

of Christian tribals in the 1990s. Most of them did not know why they had been brought there. More recently, a suspended Catholic bishop orchestrated a “Prayer and Peace Rally” replete with food, transport and “beverages”. It turned out to be a thinly veiled attempt to drum up support for the suspended prelate!

The *Organiser* claimed that tribals from 30 districts of Assam attended, demanding that tribals who had converted to Christianity be debarred from getting reservations as provided for in Article 342 of the Constitution of India. They sought to draw a parallel with Article 341 for Scheduled Castes that debarred Christian and Muslim Dalits from such benefits, by virtue of a Presidential Order of 1950. The logic behind this demand is that if a similar step is taken for Scheduled Tribes, it will immediately stem the tide of tribals converting to Christianity. The *Organiser* further reports that “unethical conversion” should be stopped. Commentators believe that this is a prelude to an anti-conversion law as already exists in 11 states of India.

Binud Kumbang, the JDSSM Co-Convenor, reportedly said, “The tribal people are the easiest prey or victims of conversions in India, mainly targeted by the highly communal theocratic foreign religious groups ... Tribals have given up their original tribal culture, customs, rituals, way of life and traditions



after conversion ... Christian conversion was like slow poison, killing the tribals' original beliefs ... the purpose of reservations is to protect and preserve the tribal way of life”.

The JDSSM also claimed that of 2.28 crore Christians in India (2011 Census) 78 lakhs were from the N-E region. That is 28% of the Indian Christian population. The figures are more or less accurate.

Could this massive rally have been organised without the support of the ruling BJP? Yet, true to its double speak, Dr Ranaj Pegu, the state's Tribal Affairs Minister, conveniently stated, “It is a Central subject. We have nothing to do with it”. On the other hand, Aditya Khakhary, President of the All Assam Tribal Sangh, said, “We do not support their demand ... it is unconstitutional ... they (tribal Christians) are also following their traditions and customs”.

Some serious charges have been levelled against Christians – unethical conversions, being easy prey and victims of a communal, theocratic, foreign religion, and the giving up of traditional culture and customs. How has the Catholic hierarchy responded? This is what Abp John Moolachira of Guwahati said in a circular, “Please pray and ask our people to pray that this gathering will not adversely affect our work or the life of our people but encourage people to turn to Christ our Saviour”. Ouch, the archbishop has played straight into the hands of his detractors! Besides, is it enough to pray? Is there no need for evolving a counter narrative (not offensive)?

I contacted some bishops and members of the N-E Catholic Research Forum. I am grateful to John Shilshi IPS (Retd), Dr Salam Irene and James Pochury for their inputs. Let us now dispassionately address the charges levelled against the N-E Christians.

Unethical Conversions: There is nothing unethical about a person or group converting to another religion, provided that it is not by allurement or coercion. The Catholic Church forbids such acts. I quote from the Vatican II “Declaration on Religious Freedom” – “No one is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will” (DH 9). Hence one should “not exert coercion upon them” (DH 11). One must also ask our Hindu friends why they are so uptight about the tribals accept-



ing Christianity? They were never Hindus in the first place. Even in Central India, tribals are demanding that their ancestral Sarna religion be recorded in the Census, as they are not Hindus.

Easy Prey & Victims: This is an insult to the intelligence of the tribal people. Many of them are from warrior clans that have fended off much more powerful invaders. They are hunters, not hunted.

Communal: The Church in India is in the vanguard of promoting secularism. The “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” states – “In her task of fostering unity and love among men and even among nations, the Church gives primary consideration to what human beings have in common” (NA 1).

Theocratic: Theocracy means having a State religion. That does not exist in a secular country like India. In fact, Jesus is the founder of secularism when he said “Pay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and God what belongs to God” (Mat 22:21).



Foreign Religion: Christianity is not a foreign religion. It is a universal one. The word catholic itself means “universal”. What does the JDSSM have to say about propagation of Hinduism in Far East countries like Indonesia, Laos and Cambodia? Buddhism originated in India, but today it is far more prevalent in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Tibet, Korea and Japan. Would these countries classify it as a “foreign religion”?



Abnegation of Tribal Culture: This is the most poisonous arrow; but the facts are to the contrary. I reply in Shilshi's own words: "Tribals who became Christians have not given up their culture. They have, on the other hand, refined the culture to a level that could easily be understood by others. The Hornbill Festival in Nagaland is one example. A Christian majority State Nagaland annually hosts the festival which is culture-centric. It is the showcasing of the Naga tribal cultures. Christianity has helped every tribe of the N-E improve their literature. Bible and hymns in their respective dialects is just one example.

"Every Church has adopted the culture in the way they worship, and also refined some of the practices. For example, whenever a local priest is ordained, he wears a vestment stitched out of their respective tribal shawls. So, the Christian faith is not foreign as alleged. Through education, tribal scholars (Christians) have helped chronicle the history of their people, which otherwise was mostly oral". Vatican II actually urges Christians to "acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture" (NA 2).

I now have a counter question. What is culture? Is it sacrosanct, especially when it militates against modern gender, secular and democratic values? Without offence to anybody let us look at some aspects of culture/tradition that have been either legally banned or abandoned under societal pressure.

Topping the list is the *Manusmriti* and its endorsement of casteism. Then there were patently unjust practices like sati (the widow being burnt on her husband's pyre), child marriage, ban on widow remarriage, etc. The Mandal Commission reported

that in Kerala lower caste women were not allowed to cover the upper part of their bodies; a feast for the eyes of the upper castes that included the Syrian Christians. The head dress of Arunachali tribes like the Nishis and Apatanis had the head of the Great Pied Hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*). The Nagas were known as head hunters, a title retained by the Naga Regiment of the Indian Army.

Talking of the Naga Regiment, would the followers of a so-called "foreign religion" sacrifice their lives for the country? The Indian Army has 27 infantry regiments of which two are from the N-E – Naga and Assam. The Naga Regiment, founded in 1970, had its baptism by fire in 1971 itself. It won one Mahavir Chakra, 4 Vir Chakras and 12 other gallantry awards. Sepoy Imliakum Ao of 2 Naga Regiment received the Mahavir Chakra. Naga officers in other regiments also won gallantry awards – Capt Neikezhkho Kenguruse of 2 Rajputana Rifles (Mahavir Chakra), Capt Elison Jami of 12 Para Special Forces and Maj Imliakum Keizar of 4 Gorkha Rifles received the Shaurya Chakra, the peace time equivalent of the Vir Chakra.

The Assam Regiment was formed in 1941 in what was then an undivided Assam. But its jawans are mostly from "Christianised" tribes, not the Assamese. They won 71 gallantry awards within a year of their establishment. They have also won an award for the best marching contingent at the Republic Day Parade. Lance Naik Albert Ekka, a tribal Christian from Jharkhand, won the Paramvir Chakra posthumously. Do our tribal Christians still require a "certificate of nationalism" from the JDSSM?

Moving to Meghalaya, James Michael Lyngdoh became the Chief Election Commissioner. He had then said that his greatest achievement was to conduct free and fair elections in J&K. Two other Khasis became Chairperson of the UPSC that conducts the exams for IAS/IFS/IPS officers. They are Rosemary Kharbuli and David Syiemlieh. Mizoram has the distinction of having the cleanest elections thanks to the moral authority of church leaders.

I rest my case in the defence of the brave daughters and sons of the N-E Christian community and salute their honesty, bravery and commitment to the nation. Jai Hind. 🇮🇳

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHHOTEBHAI is the Convenor of the Indian Catholic Forum

Catholic Theology Students Attend Muslim's Iftar Party



A group of students of theology from Delhi's Jesuit-run Vidyajyoti Institute of Religious Studies on March 26 attended an iftar program, the ritual of breaking the fast during the Ramadan month.

They were invited by Syed Muhammad Nizami Sahib to the iftar at the dargah of Sufi saint Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya on the fifth day of Ramadan.

Muslims throughout abstain from eating and drinking during the day and end the fast at sunset during Ramadan month. Many Muslims and their groups use the iftar to build and promote interfaith relations. Reminding the relevance of such interfaith engagements, Jesuit Father Joseph Victor Edwin, who teaches theology and Christian-Muslim Relations at Vidyajyoti, said: In the light of postmodernist thought which takes shape as abhorrence of uniformity, universality, and absoluteness, the Church has a new task of discerning her identity in the context of many religions."

He reminded the students of the message of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue addressed to 'Muslim brothers and sisters,' that urged Muslims and Christians to strive to promote together a 'culture of love and friendship' in the context of 'the culture of hate.'

The Vatican message said the culture of hate is nurtured through the numerous "negative attitudes and behaviors towards those who are different from us," including "suspicion, fear, rivalry, discrimination, exclusion, persecution, polemics, insults, and back-biting" through social media.

Father Edwin said the message encourages both Muslims and Christians to nurture respect, goodness, charity, friendship, and mutual care for all in the context of negativity.

Syed Muhammad Nizami Sahib said that Sufis emphasize the importance of experiencing God in one's life. He further said every human is created to love God and love his/her neighbour.

Sufism, he said, has played a great role in addressing the spiritual concerns of Muslims. In the Sufi spirituality the ethical teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and Jesus are highlighted.

The theology students said the experience convinced them that adherents of other religions are good, loving "precisely because of their religions. The Pope's invitation is encouraging as he asks people to act with confidence that humanity belongs to God, build a future together on the foundations of Peace and Justice, and to cultivate Frankness and courage. © (Courtesy: Mattersindia)

Rahul a Thorn in Govt. Side

When India's freedom fighters were ill-treated to prevent them from active political life and to kill their spirit, they emerged more powerful

BY P. A. CHACKO

It is not surprising that Rahul Gandhi, under Narendra Modi government, gets a verdict for a two-year jail term. Mahatma Gandhi, who led the nation to freedom from the obnoxious British rule, was in prison a dozen times. He spent a total of 2,338 days, or more than 6 years in jail.

Jawaharlal Nehru was imprisoned nine times during the freedom struggle and was in jail for 3259 days. During the 1930 Salt Satyagraha, Vallabhbhai Patel was sentenced to three months imprisonment.

Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Netaji Bose and so many other freedom fighters, who incurred the ire of the British regime for voicing their dissent, for listening to their voice of conscience, had to face the British verdict of incarceration; some were sent to the gallows, some were consigned to the dreaded kala pani.

The British brooked no dissent. Their reaction to the freedom fighters was borne out of fear, fear of losing their iron grip on their governance. They feared that the leaders would organise the people to



tell them to pack up and go. The arrogant British took pride in imposing on the people of the Indian subcontinent their British nationalistic rule. To this end they employed means such as lying, spying, jailing, killing people, massacring masses, and legislating iron rules to quell dissent, to smother

freedom of speech, to imprison leaders, and to keep prisoners without trial. They used judges and the law courts to do witch-hunting of national leaders and those who did not crawl before them in adulation or apologise for imperial mercy.

BJP government's aversion to Rahul Gandhi is proverbial. First, because he comes from the Nehru-Gandhi Parivar. The Sangh Parivar had been campaigning inside the Parliament and outside to end the so-called 'Parivar rule' of the Gandhis. Their vilification campaign did not spare even India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who was a freedom fighter and one of the founders of modern India. Narendra Modi was just 14 years of age when Nehru died in 1964. Yet, Modi seems to be know-



ing enough and more of Nehru, and he and his tribe spare no occasion to cast aspersions on Nehru and attribute all the present ills to Nehru. A well-designed attempt to focus on their agenda of having a Nehru-Gandhi Parivar-mukt Bharat!

Madhya Pradesh Minister Vishvas Sarang blamed Nehru for his speech of 15 August 1947, the day of our independence, for the current economic ills in the country. Pakistan problem, Kashmir issue, Maharashtra-Karnataka border problem, inflation, Adani scam etc. are due to Nehru, we are told.

Even Rahul's surname 'Gandhi' is made a butt of insulting joke. Rahul was ridiculed as 'Pappu', an ignoramus or a joker. But when his detractors saw him shaping up as a national figure with courage and commitment, they feared that this 'Pappu' was coming in their way of bulldozer governance and a challenge to their Rashtravadi politics.

When his opponents saw Rahul Gandhi as a rising star in the Indian firmament with is Bharat Jodo Yatra and a challenge to their Bharat Thodo Abhiyan, they feared him. When he started confronting the Prime Minister about his alleged unholy alliance with Adani, the Treasury Bench members bit their lips in fury and squirmed in their hot seats uneasily. No wonder Rahul had to pay for his uncomfortable questions in the Parliament.



Congress President and leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha Mallikarjuna Kharge leads a protest rally in the Capital in black outfit and tells the nation that Rahul was punished for the following searching questions he asked in the Parliament: What is Modi's relationship with Adani? Why is Adani taken along when Prime Minister Modi goes to foreign trips? Why is Adani introduced to foreign dignitaries abroad such as Prime Ministers and Presidents? How come Adani, a small time Gujarati trader, became owner of lakhs of crores so fast and why no watchdogs like ED or CBI go to investigate his assets and look into allegations? Why are most of India's PSUs dished out to Adani?

When one is gripped with fear, one can become violent and can adopt any means to eliminate the opponent. Even to dismantle any opposition unity Rahul had to be tackled. Tackle they did by calling him names, by demonising him and by getting him legally sliced and by having him barred from his Parliament membership.

When Hitler acted with fire and fury to kill Jews and to eliminate his opponents in order to foist his dictatorship and Aryan nationalism, he was digging his own grave. Finally, drunk with power and self-inflated glory, he ended up committing suicide. The balloon burst! He won the ill fame of having been the most repulsive political leader the world ever witnessed.

Political analysts opinion that persecution of Rahul Gandhi and political vendetta will boomerang on Modi and his regime. When India's freedom fighters were ill-treated and imprisoned to prevent them from active political life and to kill their spirit, they emerged more powerful and vibrant. Those who gloat in temporary glory by eliminating dissent, by road-blocking opposition and by stonewalling critics can end up in lion's mouth. And, history will deal with them appropriately too. ©

When Hitler acted with fire and fury to kill Jews and to eliminate his opponents in order to foist his dictatorship and Aryan nationalism, he was digging his own grave. Finally, drunk with power and self-inflated glory, he ended up committing suicide.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Caught in Anti-Hindi Fire

The sentiment of the people of Meghalaya is against imposition of Hindi; hence, the Governor's address in Hindi to the House led to protests inside and outside the Assembly

BY **ALBERT THYRNIANG**

The Governor's address in Hindi in the Meghalaya Assembly on March 20 was marked by protests and walk-out by one of the opposition parties, the Voice of the People's Party (VPP). Formed only in 2021, the VPP, in its election debut, won four seats in the Assembly polls held recently.

No sooner had the Governor, Phagu Chauhan, began his speech he was met with interruptions by the VPP's supremo Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit. Quoting rule 20 of the rule and conduct of business he told the Governor that the conduct of business in the House should be in English. Appealing to all members, irrespective of party affiliation, he said the House should stand united as Meghalaya came into being because Assam started to impose Assamese as an official language.

Permitted by the Speaker, the Governor continued his speech in Hindi. Basaiawmoit began to shout slogans like "We condemn the Governor; we will not accept this; Meghalaya is not a Hindi speaking state; we cannot allow the government of India to impose on us the language we don't understand; we will not allow this to become a tradition."

The Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma, intervened to say that the behaviour of the member was not acceptable as the rule provides for a member to speak one's mother tongue provided provisions are met. In this case, the English text was distributed to all members.



Assuring that no precedent is being set, he informed that the Governor can't read English and he has to address in Hindi out of compulsion. He appealed that the Governor be respected. Throughout the intervention of the Chief Minister, slogan-shouting continued.

When the speech finally resumed in Hindi, the agitated member along with three of his MLAs staged a walkout saying, "The people of the state are insulted; they are sending Governors to Meghalaya who don't speak English. We are boycotting the proceeding."

This incident has once again sparked the debate on imposition of Hindi throughout the country. In Meghalaya, this is not the first that a Governor has addressed the Assembly in Hindi. The then Governor, Ganga Prasad, was the first to do so in 2018. Then too there were protests. A legislator, Ampareen Lyngdoh, and a couple of MLAs in the Opposition reacted by speaking in their mother tongues in the House though there was no such provision.

In spite of knowing that the official language in Meghalaya is English, not Hindi, and that the people of the state don't understand Hindi, the Central government continues to appoint Governors who can't even read English. Clearly there is an agenda to impose Hindi in Meghalaya. Certainly, there are many who speak English who can be appointed Governor in the state.

The present Governor was apparently appointed intentionally so that under the pretext that he does not read English, his speech in the Assembly will be in Hindi. A precedent will be set. A tradition will be created. The use of Hindi will, therefore, be normalised inside and outside the house. This is the design.



The intention is a suspect. The Central government is disrespecting the people of Meghalaya. The role and function of the Governor is not limited to just reading the written text in the Legislative Assembly. The Governor attends many functions. If his speech is not understood by anyone, then his presence is futile. He also interacts with the public. If people and the Governor don't understand each other, the latter will be ineffective.

All languages, including Hindi, are respected. Here the issue goes far beyond respecting a language. Will memoranda, for example, have to be in Hindi? Or will the English memos be first translated into Hindi for the Governor alone? How practical is that? In Meghalaya there are three autonomous district councils (ADCs): The Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC), Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) and the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC). Their Bills require the Governor's assent. Now should the Bills be first made available in Hindi? Is that realistic?

Will the Legislative Assembly's Bills also be first translated into Hindi for the sake of the Governor alone? It is time consuming, if not impossible. All the ADCs' and state government's Bills will lapse in Raj Bhavan. This is an utter disrespect to the state of Meghalaya. It is mandatory for Meghalaya's Governor to know English if the titular head wants to serve the state.

There are those who opine that use of Hindi in the Assembly is harmless since it is one of the 22 official languages in India. But does it mean that any of those 22 languages can be used in Meghalaya Assembly? Tomorrow a Governor may insist that he or she addresses in Bengali in the House because he or she doesn't read English. Others may demand for Assamese or Tamil or Malayalam or Gujarati or Urdu or any other language in the official list.

Protests and boycotts will surely take place not because MLAs hate these languages but simply because they don't understand them. You may retort that these languages are not official languages in Meghalaya. Hindi too is not an official language here. Hindi has no primacy over other languages. Hindi and English are both official languages in India. And in Meghalaya English is the official language. English has to be used here by Governors.

The Chief Minister's staunch defence of the Governor is understandable given his closeness with the BJP and its top leaders. His justification that

Hindi be respected must be pleasing to the ears of the Sangh Parivar. It is the BJP's ideologue, the RSS and other Hindutva groups which are pushing for the imposition of Hindi all over the country. They are pursuing the theory of one nation, one language, one culture, one religion and one law.

As his government has the blessing of the BJP, the Chief Minister is compelled to stand by the Governor. But there are instances where Chief Ministers publicly disagree with Governors if needed. In January this year in Tamil Nadu, the Chief Minister, M. K. Stalin, moved a resolution in the House in the presence of the Governor, R. N. Ravi, for skipping the mention of DMK's founder, Periyar, Ambedkar and two former CMs.

The unprecedented incident saw the Governor walking out of the House. In November last year, Mizoram Chief Minister Pu Zoramthanga wrote to Union Home Minister Amit Shah to transfer the chief secretary Renu Sharma because MLAs don't understand Hindi and some have difficulty with English. This is an extreme, but when it relates to the pride of the state even a public spat with the Governor or the Centre is not shied away.

If a Governor addresses the Tamil Nadu Assembly in Hindi surely unruly scenes will be witnessed. We may not agree with the antics of the VPP but we know well that the government takes notice only when such things are displayed. The Central Government has not noted the democratic protests in 2018. Before it is too late, a stronger opposition has to be demonstrated.

The stand of the VPP received a massive support from the public. It is surprising that local parties said nothing. This is because they have surrendered to the largest party, the NPP, that is heading the government. In his sound bite, a UDP minister, Paul Lyngdoh, acknowledged his preference of English over Hindi. However, he trivialised the issue saying he would demand for the appointment of an English-speaking Governor only if he was elected an MP.

The content of the speech of the Governor was completely lost in the pandemonium over Hindi. No one discussed the policies of the new government, highlighted in the Governor's address. This is the price we pay because of the insensitive government. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALBERT THYRNIANG is a Meghalaya based freelancer. He writes regularly for 'The Shillong Times'.

Time to Root out Spurious Drugs

An estimated 1 in 10 medical products in low-and middle-income countries is substandard or falsified, leading to a major health hazard

BY **AARTI**

The special drive recently carried out by drug regulators across several states, aimed at stopping the production of adulterated drugs besides ensuring good manufacturing norms and compliance, has resulted in the cancellation of licences of 18 pharma companies, and it is laudable decision.

As of now, we know that some 76 pharma companies were reportedly inspected by a joint team of the Centre and State governments and 26 of them have been served a show-cause notice.

With a complete ecosystem for the development and manufacturing of drugs/medicines, the Indian pharmaceutical industry, third largest in the world by volume and worth USD 40 billion in terms of value, contributes 3.5 percent of total drugs/medicines exported globally to more than 200 countries. While many of our reputed pharma companies have made their mark in highly regulated markets such as the US, the UK, Canada, etc., several resource-poor countries in Africa depend on India for medicines.

However, there have been some substandard medicines finding its way into the system causing embarrassment to our pharma sector. Not long ago, over 55,000 bottles of generic medication used to treat gout were recalled from the US market. More

Anti-malarial and antibiotics are among the most reported substandard and falsified medical products. Notably an estimated 1 in 10 medical products in low-and middle-income countries is substandard or falsified



recently, cough syrups imported from India have failed in Gambia. And eye drops in the US.

On October 5 last year, the World Health Organisation issued medical product alerts over substandard (contaminated) paediatric medicines identified in WHO region of Africa – Gambia. Substandard medical products are those that fail to meet quality standards or specifications and are, therefore, "out of specification".

Four Indian products, namely, Promethazine Oral Solution, Kofexmalin Baby Cough Syrup, Makoff Baby Cough Syrup and Magrip N Cold Syrup manufactured by Maiden Pharmaceuticals Limited were found to contain unacceptable amounts of diethylene glycol and ethylene glycol as contaminants. WHO cautioned that diethylene glycol and ethylene glycol are toxic to humans which would result in abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, inability to pass urine, headache, altered mental state and acute kidney injury and may lead to death.

Again, on January 11 this year, WHO issued Medical Product Alert over two substandard (contami-

nated) liquid dosage medicines identified in WHO European Region – Uzbekistan. The two India products -- AMBRONOL syrup and DOK-1 Max syrup -- manufactured by Marion Biotech Private Limited were found contained unacceptable amounts of diethylene glycol and/or ethylene glycol as contaminants. WHO flagged the issue stating that if such medicines are used especially in children, it may result in serious injury or death and toxic effects can include abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, inability to pass urine, headache, altered mental state and acute kidney injury.

According to WHO, substandard and falsified medical products may cause harm to patients and fail to treat the diseases for which they were intended as they contribute to antimicrobial resistance and drug-resistant infections. They can be found in illegal street markets, via unregulated websites to pharmacies, clinics, and hospitals. Anti-malarial and antibiotics are among the most reported substandard and falsified medical products. Notably an estimated 1 in 10 medical products in low-and middle-income countries is substandard or falsified.

In India, the manufacture, sale and distribution of drugs are regulated under the provisions of Drugs & Cosmetics Act and Rules 1945 made thereunder. The Act, amended in 2008, provides stringent penalties for the manufacture of spurious drugs, drug not of standard quality or misbranded, adulterated or spurious. A drug is categorized 'Not of Standard Quality' (NSQ) for a variety of major and minor technical reasons such as not stating the name of the pharmacopoeia correctly, problem with quality of bonding agent, colouring agent, dissolution time, etc.

However, there are other more serious cases, where the active ingredient is significantly less in quantity that can harm patients. Under the Rules, the licensed manufacturing premises shall be inspected jointly by the Drugs Inspectors of Central Government and State Government to verify the compliance with the conditions of license and the provisions of the Drugs & Cosmetics Act and Rules for not less than once in three years or as needed as per risk-based approach.

Spurious or imitation drug products are drug formulations manufactured concealing the identity of the product usually resembling another drug, especially some popular brand, to deceive the buyer and cash on the popularity of the original product

which may or may not contain the active ingredients. Under the Act, punishment for selling any NSQ drug which may cause death or grievous hurt is same as that is applicable for spurious or adulterated drugs causing death or grievous hurt which is imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than 10 years, but which may extend to imprisonment for life and with fine which shall not be less than Rs 10 lakh or three times the value of the drug confiscated whichever is more.

The cause for concern is that although the Government has taken various regulatory measures to ensure the quality of medicines in the coun-



try, like affixing Bar Code or Quick Response Code in Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) and some drug formulations, spurious drugs seem to make its way into the system.

Out of a total of 2,76,842 drug samples collected across the country by the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), which has six zonal offices, four sub zonal offices, thirteen Port offices and seven laboratories spread across the country, and Drug Controllers in States/Union Territories during the period 2019-22, 8458 samples (3.05 percent) were found to be NSQ and 859 samples (0.31 percent) were adulterated.

In 2012, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare which studied the functioning of CDSCO recommended that once a batch of a drug is found to be substandard and reported to CDSCO, it should issue a press release forthwith and even insert paid advertisements in the newspapers apart from uploading the information on the CDSCO website. Retail chemists should be advised to stop

selling unsold stocks and return the same to local Drugs Inspectors as per rules. In its action taken report, the Health Ministry had stated that CDSCO started the drug alert system in respect of drugs found to be of NSQ, spurious, adulterated, etc. by the central drug testing laboratories.

The Mashelkar Committee which examined drugs regulatory issues including the problem of spurious drugs had recommended in 2003 that there should be one drug Inspector for 200 sales outlets and one drug Inspector for 50 manufacturing units. As per official estimates keeping in view the size of Indian Pharma Industry and the number of sales units, around 3200 drug Inspectors are required, both at the Central and State levels, but vacancies seem to be posing several challenges.

To ensure quality, safety and efficacy of medi-

cal products, there is need to strengthen the regulatory network as the pharma sector requires regular inspections by the authorities coupled with zero tolerance for any compromise with the quality.

That drugs manufactured even by licensed manufacturers have reportedly put a question mark on the quality of exported drugs – be it the deaths of children in Gambia and Uzbekistan and blindness caused by bad-quality eye drops -- there is need to strike at the root of spurious drugs. By ensuring that all pharmaceutical companies in the country conform to good manufacturing norms, avoidable loss of lives can be prevented.

Regulatory authorities can keep the general public educated by uploading information on spurious and sub-standard drugs on their websites and through press notes in newspapers on a regular basis. ©



Church cautious to demand to end reservation for converted tribals

Church leaders in India have reacted cautiously to the demand of an organization representing indigenous people that the government remove the reservation for tribal people to Christianity or other religions.

A March 26 rally organized by the Janajati Dharma Sanskriti Suraksha Mancha (JDSSM) in Assam's Guwahati city also demand a ban on religious conversion of tribal people in Assam. Hundreds of Boro, Karbi, Tiwa, Dimasa, Rabha, Mising and other tribes from 30 districts of Assam reportedly attended the rally.

“Conversion of tribal people in Assam and elsewhere in India to foreign religions has been a threat to indigenous faiths and cultures for decades. The rate of conversion has increased and the ST people fall prey to communal theocratic foreign religious groups,” alleged JDSSM working president Binud Kumbang. He said conversion could be checked if the converted tribal people are stripped off the Scheduled Tribe list. “The converted people completely give up their original tribal culture, customs, rituals, way of life, and traditions,” he alleged.

Allen Brooks, spokesperson of the United Christian Forum of Assam, says “We will make a collective representation on the issue, as it concerns all Christian Tribals irrespective of denominations,” he told Matters India March 27. The demand, he added, is not in the interest of indigenous people.

The JDSSM demanded an amendment to Article 342A of the Constitution, which highlights the benefits for the Scheduled Tribes. The amendment should ensure “automatic delisting from SC/ST reservation” if such people undergo religious conversion, the organization said. In India, Christianity and Islam are considered foreign origin religions as other religions followed in the country are of indigenous origins.

The RSS and its affiliated groups are opposed to people converting from Hinduism or from the indigenous communities who follow animist religions to Christianity and Islam. They, however, do not oppose religious conversion to Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. The demand to scrap the tribal Christian reservation has come at a time the Supreme Court is handling a petition demanding reservation to converted Dalits, formerly untouchables.

The federal government through a 1950 Presidential order had denied reservation benefits to Dalits who forms the lowest strata of life, converted to Christianity and Islam.

Indigenous people from many provinces such as Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh among others have been demanding to recognize their animist religions through a special religious code after efforts were made to categorize them as Hindus in official records including national census. ©

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)

Priest gets bail after raid by child rights panel

A court has granted bail to a Catholic priest four days after his arrest and detention in Madhya Pradesh where child rights panels are on an inspection spree of Church-run schools and institutions to prevent alleged religious conversions.

Father R B Dionysius, principal of St. Mary's School, in Morena district, Madhya Pradesh, was released on March 28 after being held on multiple charges, including disturbing the peace and using criminal force against a public servant on duty.

People familiar with the development said the priest was framed in a false case to tarnish the image of the Catholic school in Gwalior diocese, and in a state where Christians make up a mere 0.29 percent of its 72 million population.

"Father Dionysius is traumatized," said a fellow priest from the diocese who did not want to be named. We are now helping him to recover, the priest added. Dionysius was arrested on March 25 following a surprise raid on his residence within the school campus by government officials, under the leadership of Nivedita Sharma, a member of the state's commission for the protection of child rights.

After the raid, Sharma told media people that the team seized liquor bottles, condoms, and religious objects. It was part of a well-orchestrated strategy to defame the priest and the school, which enjoys a good reputation in the locality, the diocesan priest added.

"Nearly 1,800 students are studying at St. Mary's School and not a single parent or student made a complaint," the priest noted. The diocesan priest said the state child rights panel and district officials were targeting only Christian schools in Gwalior.

A diocesan official said Dionysius was targeted after he canceled a contract awarded to a right-wing Hindu leader associated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Madhya Pradesh. The contract was terminated because of the poor quality of work, the official added.

Sharma and her team conducted another raid on the Gwalior diocese-run St. Peter's School in Dabra district, on March 27 and accused the school of indulging in religious conversion. The team seized posters, banners, crucifixes, and religious objects used for the feast of Infant Jesus earlier.

"Even keeping religious materials in school has become a cause of concern for the child rights commission and its members are making false allegations of conversion against schools," the diocesan priest lamented. Many schools, hostels and orphanages run by Christians in MP, which enacted a sweeping anti-conversion law in 2021, have come under the scrutiny of federal and state child rights panels under the pretext of curbing religious conversions. "It is a totally false allegation. We are serving society and we need to be treated respectfully," said a Church leader who did not want to be named. © (Courtesy: UCANEWS)

Pastor, wife freed after 30 days behind bars

A Protestant couple accused of religious conversion in Uttar Pradesh has been released from jail after spending 30 days behind bars.

"Pastor John and his wife were granted bail and were released on March 27 after a district court observed that allegations of religious conversion against them could not be proved," their lawyer, who did not want to be named, told UCA News on March 29. Pastor Santosh John and his wife, Jiji John, were arrested on Feb. 26 following complaints of religious conversion by Bajrang Dal, a group of Hindu hardliners, in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh. The lawyer said that "the hardline Hindu group could not give any solid evidence" against the couple who were picked up while conducting Sunday prayers in Indirapuram, Ghaziabad district.

"The allegation that the pastor and his wife distributed some T-shirts, pamphlets and conducted prayer services at their rented house does not prove that they

have been forcing people to change religion," the court observed while releasing the couple.

Minakshi Singh, a Christian activist who helped the couple secure bail, said it was a fabricated case by vested interest groups to disturb communal harmony in India's most sensitive state, which has witnessed communal riots on many occasions.

"However, the truth has triumphed," said Singh, general secretary of Unity in Compassion, a charity based in Uttar Pradesh. Singh, however, said that "Pastor John and his wife were jailed for no fault of theirs." "We all know who is behind the incident," she said. According to data compiled by the United Christian Forum, which traces atrocities against Christians, Uttar Pradesh recorded 149 incidents of persecution in 2022 with 38 cases registered under the sweeping anti-conversion law. ©

(Courtesy: UCANEWS)

MP Police File 'Cheating' Case Against Jabalpur Bishop

Police in Madhya Pradesh have registered a criminal case of cheating against Bishop Gerald Almeida of Jabalpur, a charge that a diocesan official dismissed as “totally false.”

The case against the bishop comes close on the heels of the falling apart of a purported sexual assault case against a Catholic school principal in the Jabalpur Diocesan Education Society Higher Secondary School in Junwani, a village in the state's Dindori district.

Church officials said both cases show that the Church is being targeted by local authorities.

“We have charged the bishop with cheating, other crimes for abuses, neglect among other things,” said Dhiraj Raj, an inspector at Samnapur police station in Dindori district where the case was registered.

The case was registered on March 22 based on a complaint by an official from the education department under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Amendment Act, 2021, he told UCA News on March 24.

Raj refused to reveal any further details and said the police will probe the claims against the prelate.

“It is a fabricated case. We will fight it legally and prove the innocence of our bishop,” Father Abraham Thazhathedath, vicar general of the diocese told UCA News.

Another Church official who did not want to be named said the fresh case against the bishop is to further target Catholic institutions after parents and students in Junwani village denied “the concocted sexual assault story.”

The Catholic school has been in the eye of a storm since March 3 following a surprise inspection by members of the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights.

“Child rights panel officials have been desperately carrying out inspections in Christian schools and hostels, and are trying to find fault with everything that we do,” the Church official told UCA News.

Thazhathedath said the Church has nothing to hide and all its educational activities were in the public domain.

Nam Singh Yadav, the principal of the diocesan school and hostel in Junwani village was arrested



and remanded in judicial custody on March 7 following an allegation that he had sexually assaulted eight minor girls.

The police also made a Catholic priest, nun and a male member of staff parties to the case, however, nobody else has been arrested yet after the students and parents openly denied the allegation against the principal as false.

Among the eight girls five have already demanded action against officials of the child rights panel who searched the girls' hostel in a late night raid.

The parents have questioned the officials' conduct for taking their girls at night to government-run accommodation without their consent.

The rights panel tried justifying its actions by citing an allegation by a Grade 11 student that the principal had touched her inappropriately,

but her relatives clarified that no such thing happened.

Many Christian institutions such as schools, hostels, and orphanages in Madhya Pradesh have witnessed increased inspections from the child rights panel followed by the filing of criminal cases under some pretext or the other. ©

(Courtesy: UCANEWS)

One Step Backward, Two Steps Forward

BY P.A. JOSEPH

Life is a struggle between failure and success, stepping back and moving forward. I must hold back to what I am at, and where I am, and never to get lost at negative results and discouraging events.

I must have something at my grip always, something to visualize, something to plan out, and something to pray for. I realize that I do not lack ideas; I have enough and more potential. It will be to my great surprise and joy that I have tremendous possibilities. Also, there is great power in the universe, an array of opportunities and resources, only I have to harvest, select, gather and develop. I must keep my mind and vision ever open and sensitive and receptive.

I must think in terms of prosperity, achievement, and success. This is very optimistic and confidence-building. I must believe, do and succeed. I must learn to throw out all negative thoughts and failure syndrome and be aware of success in all my endeavors and undertakings. I should not get lost if I feel everything is gone wrong or out of control. In any fresh attempt my source and approach must be right: morally, spiritually, and ethically, and it should appear so to anyone outside of me. What is right is transparent and vibrant, as goodness diffuses itself. No one should hide what is right and vibrant.

For an apparent wrong objective, I cannot take a wrong route or means. If I sow negative thoughts, I should not expect positive result. I will get what I sow. It may be a matter of time, now or later. A person's life is what one's thoughts are. As I think, so shall it be for me. I need to flush out old, tired, worn-out attempts and fill the mind with fresh, dynamic and most acceptable ones. Negative thinking is wrong thinking and it has to be totally changed. I must be aware that there is constant inflow of fresh and new thinking.

Further I should relax for normal strength and activities. Relaxing is not to be sluggish or inactive. Our system needs it, and I must respond to the call for relaxing. A few years ago, it was reported



that every night in the United States more than six million sleeping tablets were required for one day to put the American people to sleep. It is said that every other hospital bed in the US is occupied by a patient not because of he/she encountered a germ or had an accident or developed an organic malady, but because of his/her inability to organize and discipline his/her emotions. What a pathetic health situation!

There are people who under the pretext of study or hard work turn night into day, and gradually land up into severe health problems. Normal sleep is one of the best means for relaxing. Apart from sleep, therapies of prayer, faith, and love are excellent for relaxing. This we read in the life of Jesus, where Jesus found time to relax in prayer, deep communion with his Father and loving company with his followers and even the sick people.

According Ignatius Loyola 15 minutes of intense prayer is enough to keep one relaxed and motivated for the whole day. The great Acharya Vinoba Bhave, immersed in Bhoodan Movement, once replied to a journalist that for him looking into the face of poor farmers around him day and night were moments of deep relaxing as he could see God in each one of the clients. ©



Bob's Banter » BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

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For He Knows What They Do..!

And as we approach Good Friday, I see Jesus on the cross, and with a sad face He hears the sounds of the howling mob, braying for His blood. He had heard them earlier in Pilate's courtyard as they had shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Jesus must have looked into the mob and seen the very ones who had attended His sermon on the mount. He must have seen many He had healed, or relatives of those He had given sight to, or had helped walk again, and maybe raise from the dead!



and saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing!"

So, who is it who knows what is being done?

And I go back in time to the high priests and pharisees, who plotted to kill Jesus, and who cunningly used the mob, and here

two thousand years later, it is the same; many who sit in authority, who instigate and misinform the millions of illiterate and uneducated in our country.

They know how easy it is to feed people with untruths of 'forced conversion' and that foreign



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His eyes must have been sad.

But He knew they were not at fault.

He knew they had been instigated by those in power, cunningly and cleverly, and knowing this He cried out to God in Heaven, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do!"

Two thousand years have passed, and today as I look at scenes in my own country, of Christ's own followers being persecuted, with churches broken, false cases thrust on innocent priests, and laws passed to stop His followers from talking about Christ, I feel like crying out the same words, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do!"

Yes, these are the same ones who went to the best school started by Christian missionaries. Yes, many of them were treated in the best hospitals quite often at no cost. Yes, many of them poor and poverty stricken were fed and clothed, but now they are part of the mob!

And I hear Christ above, still turning to His Father

powers are trying to grab our country through their foreign God, and the poor and uneducated believe and become their army to destroy, demolish, and desecrate.

Even as the mob is not to blame, a God above looks down, and sees those behind that mob!

My column for this week was another, a political satire, till I felt this overpowering feeling this morning, making me pen this piece, one in which I humbly warn those that instigate the mob, that a God above sees the suffering, notices the destruction, watches the false cases, hears the cries for help, and knows, oh yes, He Knows What You Do, even as He stretches out His hands like that Good Friday long ago embracing all who suffer for Him..! ©

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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