

Indian Currents

www.indiancurrents.org • Vol. XXXV • Issue 31 • 31 July - 06 August 2023 • ₹15
Total Pages - 40 Including Cover

MANIPUR MIASMA

Death and devastation show no signs of waning; Fury of the diabolical attacks continues even after three months in Manipur



WAR ON WOMEN

How can the man, who launched *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* with so much passion, even sleep, when his country's women and daughters were being raped brutally under his nose?

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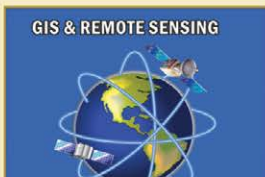
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Subjects



MANIPUR: INDIA'S GROUND ZERO



Manipur is India's ground zero. The dictionary meaning of the term 'ground zero' is "the place where a bomb explodes." What is happening in the tiny state in the North-East is more devastating than the explosion of a bomb.

The scenes and snaps emerging from across Manipur are nauseating. The latest is the video of parading two women naked in public surrounded by 'howling armed barbarians'. It will make people go numb and dumbfounded. But the State police remained like 'statues' as they did not act on the FIRs filed in the case.

Any police force worth its salt would have moved swiftly and rounded up the culprits. A speedy investigation and trial in a fast-track court would have sent the right message to others of the same ilk. It took two months for them to make the first arrests.

The worst part is that the death and devastation show no signs of waning; the fury of the diabolical attacks continues even after three months. Even more frightening is the 'absence' of government and governance in the State. It is not surprising that the state police, as in every other state, apparently acted as per the dictates of the political patrons. But it boggles every sensible mind that the Central Government with a huge reserve of para-military forces and the fourth largest Army in the world could not put an end to the bloodbath taking place in Manipur.

It goes without saying that the government looked the other way when majoritarian madness was let loose to teach a lesson or two to the 'victims' who form around 40 per cent of the population. The government could quell the violence in no time, but it dithered apparently due to motives other than governance.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose eloquence in attacking the opposition parties and their leaders is unbeatable, kept a prolonged silence of three months on the 'burning Manipur.' The Prime Minister, who finds time to tweet and talk on every issue under the sun, kept mum when the state was in flames; neither he bothered to visit the state though he talks of his love for the North-East which, he claims, had been left unattended by the previous governments. At last, when he opened his mouth on the issue, when he expressed his sadness and anger, the element of empathy was missing in his statement. His mention of Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh along with Manipur exposed his political intent.

Though the Parliament is in session, the Prime Minister has not shown any inclination to make a statement in the House; but he delves on the issue outside, from public platforms, exposing his scant regard for the sanctum sanctorum of democracy.

The Manipur issue, though it has not moved the authorities to act, has stirred the conscience of the world. The European Union Parliament has passed resolution condemning the incidents. The US has expressed 'shock and horror' over the continuing violence, killings, widespread destruction of worshipping places and the atrocious act of parading women naked in the State.

The image of the country is at stake. The BJP and the governments at the Centre and the State should put the country above petty, partisan considerations. The Biren Singh government should go. That should be the first serious step to bring back peace in a state where once people lived together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Suresh'.

Dr. Suresh Mathew
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Indian Current Publications
375 - A, Pocket - 2
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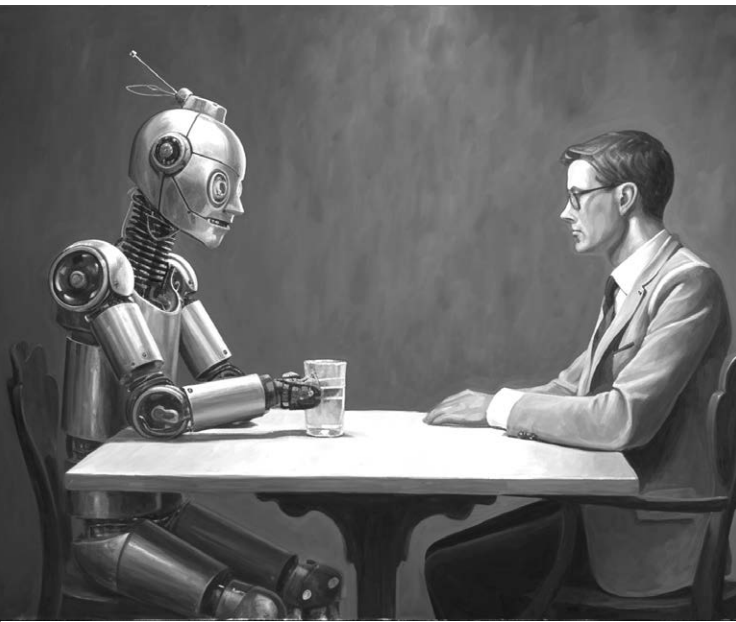
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POWER QUOTES



Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.

William James

• • •



The great thing in this world is not so much where you stand, as in what direction you are moving.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

• • •



Every truth passes through three stages before it is recognized. In the first, it is ridiculed. In the second, it is opposed. In the third, it is regarded as self evident.

Arthur Schopenhauer

• • •



The difference between a successful person and others is not lack of strength not a lack of knowledge but rather a lack of will.

Vince Lombardi

• • •



Don't worry about failures, worry about the chances you miss when you don't even try.

Jack Canfield

• • •



have never in my life learned anything from any man who agreed with me.

Dudley Field Malone

• • •



Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.

Thomas A. Edison

• • •



Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking.

Steve Jobs

Manipur Miasma War Against Women

What happens in the North-East State is unspeakable abuses. Yet the government seems to be going soft on the hooligans and hoodlums, giving the impression that there is more to it than meet the eyes

BY **JASWANT KAUR**

A video has gone viral. It shows two Kuki women being paraded naked in broad daylight, followed by a large leering group of men. They were then sexually assaulted in the adjoining fields. Can we even call them men or even human beings? They were worse than animals.

A civilised person would never touch a woman inappropriately without her consent. The incident happened in broad daylight and it dates back to May 4, 2023.

Some sources claim that the Meitei men raped Kuki women in retaliation for another incident of sexual violence against a woman from the Meitei tribe. It was later on discovered that the photograph that went viral was not from Manipur. Regardless, does rape of a woman from one tribe give a license to men to rape women from that tribe? It is horrifying to even think of such a proposition.



Manipur has been consistently in the news for the past nearly three months. Reports of violence, riots, and vandalism stemming from a longstanding feud between the Meitei and Kuki communities have been making rounds.

There are also reports that the whole pogrom was aimed at ethnic cleansing. Today, there is not a single Kuki in the Imphal city. If the clash was between Meiteis and Kukis, as the government says, why were churches belonging to Meiteis destroyed by the Meiteis themselves?

The state had no Internet services all these months. Hence people from other parts of the country got news in bits and pieces. We certainly came to know how religious places were attacked and vandalised. However, no one would have imagined such a horrifying act.

Some even speculate that the state is on the

verge of a civil war. A retired lieutenant general has compared the state to war-torn nations like Libya, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Syria, stating that Manipur is now stateless and that life and property can be destroyed by anyone at any time.

Yet, we didn't see a sign of law and order being restored. Our authorities were in deep slumber or were perhaps pretending to be so. It has been estimated that more than 60,000 people have been displaced and have been staying in make-shift (so-called) relief camps.



A few reports indicate that the incident happened on May 4 in Thoubal district and that a zero FIR was filed on May 18 in Kangpokpi district of Manipur. However, despite filing the FIR, which included charges of abduction, gang rape, and murder against unknown armed miscreants, no arrests were made until the video went viral. Till the time of writing, the police have arrested 14 people. But why was the administration silent for so long?

It has also been reported that although the video shows only two women, there was another woman who was also brutally gang-raped. These three women, along with two family members of the youngest victim, sought refuge in the forest when they witnessed a large group of 800 to 1000 people



3,200 urge president to visit Manipur, ensure justice

More than 3,200 people from various walks of life on July 24 signed a memorandum urging the Indian President to “intervene urgently” to end the ethnic crisis in Manipur.

The memorandum was drafted by the National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM), an association of likeminded academics, artists, retired bureaucrats and concerned citizens, representing hundreds of movements and organizations from across the country.

“We request you to visit the state and assure justice to all the violated people, in particular the Kuki Zo women who have faced immense sexual, physical and mental violence,” says appeal addressed to the country’s first president from a tribal community. The signatories want the president to ask the Union home minister and the Manipur chief minister to resign immediately, owning moral and legal responsibility for “their colossal failure” to maintain law order in the state where ethnic clashes have raged since May 3.

The appeal was submitted after a video surfaced in social media about the sexual assault on two Kuki women who were paraded naked in public. The May 4 incident came to limelight only on July 19 because of the internet shutdown in Manipur. The movement, headed by Jesuit Father Cedric Prakash, urged the president to ensure accountability of all authorities and restoration of peace and justice in the strife-torn state.

A copy of the memorandum, submitted to also

Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, lauded the Supreme Court for intervening in the matter as the government kept a cool response to it.

“We are grateful to the Chief Justice of India for issuing a stern statement to take immediate action to bring peace in Manipur,” the memorandum says. The court had warned that it would act if the government fails to act on Manipur.

The appeal decried the role of the Union and state governments, which have not only failed to restore normalcy in the burning state for three months, but has deepened the ethnic tensions, enabling majoritarian violence, leading to gross human rights abuses.

It has called for a comprehensive and time-bound judicial inquiry to ensure due legal process and accountability of violators and authorities, not only in the ‘viral’ case of sexual violence and murders, but in hundreds of other cases, as admitted by Manipur Chief Minister Biren Singh.

The appeal also urged the president to uphold the rights and safety of all vulnerable sections, especially the tribal women and ensure that there is no unconstitutional and unfair change in the list of Scheduled Tribes.

The president has also been urged to hold back assent to regressive amendments to forest laws that would have far-reaching adverse impact on forest cover and forest-dwelling communities across India. ©

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)



armed with sophisticated weapons looting and burning their homes. Initially, the police rescued them, but they were stopped by the mob on their way to the police station. The mob overpowered the police and literally abducted the women! There is also the allegation that the policemen threw the women to the wolves.

Those who were supposed to save them became witnesses to one of the most horrendous incidents in the country! What kind of law and order was this? Or, was there any law and order in place? A few victims have even claimed that they were forced to strip and were raped while the police watched as if some drama was happening. The youngest woman's father and brother, who attempted to save her, were murdered on the spot.

Soon after the video became viral, many more women came forward. Many of these are staying in the relief camps. This happened when the state is being ruled by the BJP. Incidentally, the Chief Minister is from the Meitei community, who had the responsibility to find a peaceful solution to this conflict and uphold the Constitution at all times. Clearly, he had no control over the situation.

Home minister Amit Shah did visit Manipur but his efforts proved to be futile. It suggests that the government, be it at the Centre or in the state, had no muscle over the perpetrators of violence. Is that even possible? If yes, then why was the President's rule not imposed on Manipur? Many of our elected (so-called) representatives have now started opening up. This video suddenly awakened them? Suddenly, their concern for women and womanhood has come to the fore.

The chief minister has admitted that many such incidents might have occurred during this period. The Supreme Court has taken note of the video

and has instructed the government to take immediate action. The Chief Justice of India (CJI) has warned that if the government fails to act, the court will intervene. The CJI has described this incident as completely unacceptable, highlighting the exploitation of women as a tool for fuelling communal tension. The court has called it "the most serious form of constitutional abuse". Parliament has also seen disruption over this incident.

Finally, the Prime Minister spoke up, of course, in a language that suits his demeanour. He has also directed all Chief Ministers to take appropriate measures to ensure women's safety. Meanwhile, the opposition proposed a no-confidence motion. The BJP-ruled government might have won in Parliament but it has failed us, as a country. The government has failed our women. How can the man, who launched *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* with so much passion, even sleep, when his country's women and daughters were being raped brutally under his nose?

History shows that women have always been at the receiving end during war, communal violence, political tensions, riots etc. It would take years for a victim to overcome the trauma, that too if she gets a safe environment or space, where she is able to regain her lost self-esteem and confidence. And it takes a lifetime to erase such incidents from one's memory. To add to this, the kind of stigma she is subjected to in our society, makes her life all the more difficult.

Our media too has not been sensitive enough. Many times, the images and crucial information of the rape victims are published, without thinking of the effect it will have on their life. This is not the end



of it. In most of the cases, victims do not even have the courage to speak up and file a case against the perpetrator(s). Even if they muster courage and file a case, the kind of trauma they face during the entire process, makes their life a living hell. The conviction rate in such cases remains low.

While there are sporadic instances of legal justice, it often takes years and a lot of strength from the victims, to stay put. Many a time, the victims have been forced to move away from their homes due to fear and stigma. The process to get justice is taxing for such women. And if the accused are put behind bars by the lower court, they are free to file an appeal and get away from it.

For instance, in Bilkis Bano case, all the 11 convicts were prematurely released from jail last year by granting remission in their life-term punishment. The men walked free on the last Independence Day. Their relatives celebrated the occasion by distrib-

uting sweets. They were welcomed with flowers and garlands! That's how convicts are treated in this country while rape victims await justice, throughout their life. Sometimes, even life is not enough for them to get justice. That's why women often bear with violence silently. Our systems have failed these women!

Despite the fact that 14 people have been arrested in the Manipur case, will these women get justice? Will the police have enough evidence to support the case except for this video? What about women, who have been keeping silent? Will we be ever able to give them justice? For how long will women have to face violence? Is there any answer to these questions? Unfortunately, no. ☹

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jharkhand Churches organize human chain, prayers for Manipur

Members of various Churches joined the Conference of Religious India to organize a human chain and prayer service on July 23 for peace and harmony in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur.

Jesuit Archbishop Felix Toppo of Ranchi led more than 10,000 people who stood on the road from 10 and to 12 noon, holding banners and placards pleading for peace and justice in Manipur where ethnic clashes have raged since May 3.

The archbishop was accompanied by Auxiliary Bishop Theodore Mascarenhas, prelates of other Christian denominations, and lawyers, besides the young people.

They then went inside St Mary's Catholic Cathedral on Ranchi's Dr. Camil Bulcke Path, where a prayer service was arranged.

The program was attended by priests and religious of various congregations, members of the Catholic Mahila Sangh (women's forum), Catholic Sabha (council), Yuva Sangh (youth forum), hostel students, people from various parishes who came by hired buses, autos, and bikes.

The program began with Jesuit Father Joseph

Marianus Kujur, director of Ranchi's Xavier Institute of Social Science, explaining various aspects of violence in Manipur.

He then asked the gathering if they feel pain because the victims in Manipur are Christians, tribals or humans. "Do we feel the same pain when such incidents take place in any part of India?" the priest asked.

He also wanted to know how they could help the Manipur people, besides organizing human chains, protest rallies and prayer services.

Archbishop Toppo referred to the Bible verses asking people to love their neighbour. "God is our loving father and when there is sorrow among his children God feels the same pain and anguish for his children," he added.

The prelate said God feels pain and grief when the dignity of women is outraged or raped.

"We need to repent and ask forgiveness from the Lord on behalf of the perpetrators, because we are sisters and brothers of those people. We have come to pray for Manipur today so that peace may prevail," he added. ☹

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)

Manipur women's humiliation triggers nationwide outrage

Christians, especially women, have joined nationwide condemnation of parading two women naked and gangraping them.

A viral video of 26-minutes shows men sexually attacking women belonging to the ethnic Kuki-Zo tribe.

One woman, aged 21, was gang raped, according to the first information report (FIR) filed by the survivors. The other woman was aged 42.

The incident happened on May 4, a day after deadly ethnic riots broke out between the mainly Hindu Meitei and predominantly Christian Kuki-Zo tribes in Manipur, which has been ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party for the past six years.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about Manipur after the video became viral on the 79th day of the violence. He told the media near the Parliament House that his heart was filled with anguish and anger over the horrific video and said the guilty would not be spared.

"As I stand next to this temple of democracy, my heart is filled with pain and anger. The Manipur incident is shameful for any civilised nation. The entire country has been shamed," he added.

Kochurani Abraham, a woman theologian from Kerala, is angry with the system that permits criminals to take women's bodies as sites of violence to give vent to their feelings of vengeance. "The sexual brutalities meted out to Manipuri women fill me with rage," she told Matters India July 21. Apostolic Carmel Sister M Nirmalini, head of India's 1,30,000 Catholic religious, says her organization "absolutely condemn the video," which she finds "very disturbing as a woman. It is an outrageous violation of respect and dignity of women."

Sister Nirmalini, who is based in Bengaluru, Karnataka, wants action against the police and punish the law providers who stood watching the crime. "Those who did this should be booked," she asserted. Presentation Sister Dorothy Fernandes of Patna, Bihar, says the "orchestrated ghastly crime" has sent a shiver down her spine. "I am sure all women feel that it has happened to them," she told Matters India July 20.

Nirmala Carvalho, a Mumbai-based journalist,

says the incident was not just a means to terrorize the entire Kuki community, but a horrific and inevitable accompaniment of the ethnic cleansing unfolding in Manipur for nearly three months.

The mob used the spectacle to publicly humiliate, demoralize and subjugate the ethnic Kuki community, and they were emboldened by the mute administration, she told Matters India.

Rape, she adds, has been the weapon and strategy of war in recent brutal civil wars in Rwanda and Sri Lanka. "In Manipur, far from being merely an ethnic violence, it is the massacre and annihilation of the Christians Kukis," she asserted.

Astrid Lobo Gajiwala from Mumbai, a writer and activist, points out that it took a video of women being forced to strip publicly, to make the state finally speak out against the atrocities happening in Manipur.

"If it wasn't for the widespread outrage the video provoked and the perceived damage to the image of the government, would the powers that be have broken their self-imposed silence?" she asks. Women's bodies, she told Matters India, have always been used "as a battlefield so while the Manipur episode is mind-numbing and horrific, tragically, it is not unexpected."

What is equally disturbing for her is the timeline. The incident happened on May 4. The first FIR was filed on May 18 and the prime minister apparently got to know of it with the rest of India on July 20.

"The chief minister now has admitted on television that there are more such incidents. So, what does the silence of the state mean? Does it mean that the weaponization of women's bodies is now par for the course in conflicts and so does not merit state attention and intervention?" she asks. She asserts the state authorities were complicit in the act if they knew about these atrocities and did nothing to restore law and order. "And if they didn't know over two months is this not a sign of incompetency?" she asks

Gajiwala wants all concerned about Manipur to document stories from the state, form committees for truth telling, and care for the victims.

Sister Fernandes wonders who would own up to

the loss of women's lives in Manipur. The Manipur chief minister has said that the administration shut down the internet in the state because 100 of such cases have taken place.

"If women's bodies become a battlefield, what message is being sent out to the nation? Do we women, our dignity, not matter? Do you want to use us and our bodies for your political gain?" asks Sister Fernandes, national convener of the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace, an advocacy group. She says justice demands that the prime minister and the chief minister resign along with the entire federal cabinet. "How should we conduct ourselves if we cannot protect the dignity and safety of women who form 50 percent of society?" she asks.

Abraham says the unruly mob with their act wants to show that women's sexuality is something they can juggle.

According to her, the Manipur incident is a repeat of Bilkis Bano, a gang rape survivor of the 2002 Gujarat riots, and thousands other Indian women with similar experiences. "Their stories are either buried in shame or get labelled as not meriting consideration," she laments.

Abraham says she does not expect an easy trans-

formation in the country where "toxic masculinities are licensed by the patriarchally inscribed socioreligious and political powers to belch out the venom in public and domestic life."

Yet, I do believe that through collective resistance this politics of hate unleashed in the country can be challenged and that gives me the audacity to hope in such hopelessness.

The Mothers' Forum of the Syro-Malabar Church also condemned the Manipur incident. "Amid the painful news of the Manipur riots going on for about two and a half months, young women have been stripped naked and gang-raped in a brutal and inhumane manner," a statement from the forum laments.

The mothers suspect that the Manipur chief minister and the prime minister are giving tacit approval to what is happening in that state.

"It is disgraceful that the rulers continue to be inactive even after robbing the honor of Mother India," says the statement that wants the conscience of India awakened against such heinous acts.

The government should bring the criminals to justice and ensure maximum punishment," the mothers asserted. ©

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)

Bishops decry law enforcement agencies' apathy, silence in Manipur

A top team of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India that visited the conflict-ridden areas of Manipur has criticized the prolonged silence and apathy of the law enforcement agencies in containing violence in the northeastern Indian state.

"It is our earnest appeal that the governance system should uphold the secular fabric of our country, reinforce constitutional values and cultivate an environment of peaceful co-existence of various communities," asserts the team led by the conference president Archbishop Andrews Thazhath of Trichur. The team that visited various places in Manipur July 23-24 included the conference's deputy secretary general Father Jervis D'Souza and Father Paul Moonjely, executive director of Caritas India, humanitarian response organization of CBCI.

It was the first CBCI official team to visit Manipur where clashes between Kuki tribal people and Meitei people erupted 82 days ago, killing more than 160 people and rendering thousands homeless. As many as 349 churches and institutions have also perished in the violence.

The visit also took place five days after a video surfaced on social media showing two women being paraded naked and later gang raped. The 26-minute video triggered national outrage prompting Prime Minister Narendra Modi to speak about Manipur for the first time. The incident occurred on May 4, but the world did not know about it until because of a ban on the internet in Manipur. A statement from the conference's public relations office says the team visited Kakching, Sugnu area, Pukhao, Canchipur, Sangai prou among other places and "saw the large-scale destruction

of private homes, churches/places of worship, schools and institutions in various places along the way.”

The team described it as “heart-wrenching” to see the places deserted and “seemed like they will not be inhabited in the near future given the mutual mistrust and fear that continues to prevail.” The team says it “is equally worried as to what is the actual situation and the future of those who have fled from these places and the future of their children, in the midst of all these vulnerabilities.”

The CBCI team distributed relief items in the relief camp at Indoor Stadium, Kakching, and opened a medical camp at Pukhou, Sugnu, which used to be inhabited by more than 1,000 families.

“They had their houses and properties totally destroyed and vandalized. St. Joseph’s Higher Secondary School and Parish which rendered educational, social and developmental service to all communities including Kuki-zo, Naga, Meitei and others had been reduced to cinders,” the statement says. Also destroyed were Holy Redeemer Church in the campus of Catholic School at Canchipur and the Regional Pastoral Training Centre and St. Paul’s Parish at Sangaiprou. The team also visited some schools and hostels where they saw anxieties and distress writ large on the faces of the children, “clearly leaving us with no answers at this point of time as to how we can build better the communities and the institutions.”

The statement also says Caritas India has responded to “this unprecedented crisis” from the beginning providing relief assistance and supporting the relief camps in collaboration with Catho-

lic Relief Services (CRS) and the Diocesan Social Services Society (DSSS), the Social Service Wing of the Archdiocese of Imphal. The agency has so far provided relief assistance worth 30 million rupees.

“Caritas India is committed to taking up continued assistance for the rehabilitation and rebuilding of the affected communities. As an expression of solidarity, various religious congregations and church fraternities have come forward to render various forms of assistance including material, healthcare, and psycho-social support in the relief camps,” the statement says. It also claims that the Church in India, responding to a CBCI appeal, has responded to the Manipur crisis by way of prayer, organizing peace rallies and mobilizing resources to support the affected people.

“We are deeply saddened about the prolonged situation of violence in Manipur. We condemn all forms of violence, atrocities and attacks especially on our institutions, places of worship and vulnerable sections of the society like women and children. We are equally worried about the prolonged silence and apathy of the law enforcement agencies in containing the violence” the statement says. The top Church team appealed to the government system to uphold the secular fabric of our country, reinforce constitutional values and cultivate an environment of peaceful co-existence of various communities.

“We call upon all concerned persons to enter into the process of dialogue and concentrate on the development of all sections of the people in order to bring about peace and harmony in India and in particular in the State of Manipur,” it adds. ©

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)

'Manipur Police Were Present, But Didn't Help Us': Women in Harrowing Video Tell 'The Wire'

One of the two survivors said that she saw four policemen sitting in the car and observing the violence. “They didn’t do anything to help us,” she said. This survivor’s father and brother were killed in this mob attack

Both the Kuki women seen in the harrowing video from Manipur who were paraded naked

and sexually assaulted – the FIR on the incident says one of them was gang-raped – have told The Wire that Manipur Police had been present at the scene of the crime but did not help them.

The incident took place on May 4 in Kangpokpi. At that point, ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities had just begun in

the state. The horrific video which forced the Biren Singh government into acknowledging the scale and type of violence in the state and apprehend an accused months after the incident took place, shows two women stripped naked and being paraded by a mob. One of the survivors in the video said, “Manipur’s Police were present there, but they didn’t help us.”

Another survivor said that she saw four policemen sitting in the car and looking at the violence. “They didn’t do anything to help us,” she said. Her father and brother were killed in this mob attack.

Calls to the Saikul police station, made by The Wire, have failed to connect. This report will be updated if police responds to these claims.

The first survivor said that residents of the B. Phainom village in Kangpokpi received information from their Meitei neighbours that Meitei mobs were making their way to the village. Kuki villagers knew they must run out of the village, but the families of the two women seen in the video were unable to and were captured by the mob. The complaint to police, which The Wire has seen, claims that the Meitei mob were armed with sophisticated weapons.

“I was thinking about the other survivor... but the attackers were not thinking of anything. They took us to a bushy area. Three people held me and one gave out a call, “Those who want to torture them, please come,” the survivor said.

The woman said that there were people who helped them among Meitei community members too. “Some of them asked us to take off our clothes, but there were also people who wanted to save us,” she said.

The FIR registered on June 21, 2023 speaks of three women-survivors in the incident of May 4, 2023, who were stripped naked and paraded. The FIR records a gangrape of a survivor.

The other survivor told The Wire that no rapes took place. “We were not raped by them – they just took off our clothes and touched our bodies,” she said. As noted before, the complaint and FIR allege the gang-rape of one woman. However, Supreme Court lawyer Vrinda Grover told The Wire that the legal definition of rape is much wider and not limited to penile-vaginal penetration. Grover highlighted that any of these acts

constitute rape if done against the will or without the consent of a woman:

- Penetration of a penis into the vagina, mouth, urethra, or anus
- Insertion of any object or body part (other than a penis) into the vagina, urethra, or anus
- Manipulation of any body part of a woman to cause penetration into the vagina, urethra, or anus
- Applying mouth into the vagina, urethra, or anus of a woman.

Manipur is under an internet shutdown since May 3 – a fact that could explain the delay in this video making its way to Twitter.

On July 19, Manipur Police tweeted on the matter, after what many have pointed out was “77 days since the incident.”

The Manipur Police tweeted:

“All out effort to arrest culprits as regard to the viral video of 02 (two) women paraded naked:

“As regard to the viral video of 02 (two) women paraded naked by unknown armed miscreants on 4th May, 2023, a case of abduction, gangrape and murder etc, was registered at Nongpok Sekmai PS (Thoubal District) against unknown armed miscreants and the investigation has been started. The State Police is making all-out effort to arrest the culprits at the earliest (sic).”

Journalist Vasudha Venugopal has tweeted based on inputs from government sources that the Union government is “likely to initiate action against Twitter as showing videos that could lead to problems in law and order”. “IT ministry is now working across platforms to see that the video is not being spread,” her tweet said. A member of the Indigenous Tribal Leaders’ Forum (ITLF) who met the two survivors spoke to The Wire.

“My heart is heavy. I have heard their stories, I met them, I talked to them, but seeing the video has made my heart newly heavy. All these stories of women and children being tortured, and not even a single word from the Prime Minister Narendra Modi?” she asked. Modi spoke on the video shortly after the report was published.

Since past two months, members of the Kuki community have claimed that the Manipur Police has favoured the Meitei community. 🗳

(Courtesy: The Wire)

Alarming Silence

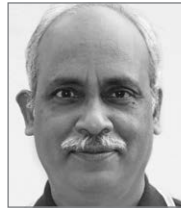
The horrifying incidents in Manipur have not moved 'the Sheep and the Shepherds' of the Church to act or even to speak up against the barbaric acts. We are fighting a losing battle against the Goliath who is far more powerful and prepared to wipe us away from the land

BY **JULIAN S DAS**

It is frightening and bone-chilling to realize that the Church in India has become insensitive to the plight of her worthy neighbours in the country. There are people being killed on bright day light, women paraded naked and gang-raped in public, innocent shot dead by military and para-military forces in the name of bringing peace and order under control, political scores set right over the corpses and the blood of people who seek identity as citizens of this great nation.

But honestly, none of these horrendous incidents and bone-numbing events disturb me in any way, as I feel comfortable and cosy within the fortified four walls of my house. I can shut down the doors and windows so that the 'cry of the poor' and hapless victims of violence for help and assistance may not reach my ears. And yet, I do not miss the Sunday mass and any special novena conducted in the Church. What more can I really do in order to show that I am a practicing Christian?

The Church lay leaders call us for a rally (it is not a protest rally, but a silent rally of solidarity with the suffering), and I dish out an hour or two to show my face, so that no one accuses me of not going to the street to express our solidarity with the people who matter to us.



Inaction, part of our patrimony

The inexpressible events which have unfolded in Manipur in the past two months have brought to fore how powerless the Church is in condemning such inhuman acts, not only killing so many lives but also destroying so many places of worship. If it were temples or mosques,

will the respective religious community be as silent as the Christian community is? Except for praying for these victims of political vendetta and religious bigotry, we have too little to do anything in order to show the power and the strength we have, as a minority religious community, giving the best of educational and human formation.

Is it not possible for all Christian schools, colleges and institutions in the country close for a day in protest against the inhuman violence unleashed in Manipur, in order to convey to those who are behind these well-orchestrated and calculated moves that we do not accept, nor agree to their vile plans and executions. But the master-minds behind these barbaric acts know as well as we do, that the Church in India is incapable of doing anything as a strong national protest, even if something serious were to happen to a section of the Church or her people. Unfortunately, our silence has become deafening, and our inaction monstrous.

Surely, it would be wrong to say that there are no individuals in the Indian Church who are not affected by what is happening around; but these "voices in the wilderness" are silenced by the deafening silence of the leaders and the masses. Often these individuals are relegated to our closets, branding them as loud-mouths, people who are over-sensitive to what is happening around.

Trouble at Door

We have seen over the years that to speak up when our people's constitutionally granted fundamen-



tal rights are forcefully taken away from them, would mean we would come under the scanner of the Income Tax department, the Intelligence Bureau, and our Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) certificate may not be renewed for unknown reasons, we may be branded as anti-national, and even sedition charges may be levelled against us; we realize it is better not to stoke the embers, lest a forest-fire should unleash from our courtyards.

We ask ourselves, is it all worth the trouble? Why should we risk the peace and comfort that we have been enjoying, by having a safe-distance from our unholy alleys, keeping them in good cheer, by inviting them to occupy chairs of eminence in our school and college programs, showing that we are more nationalists than the hard-core nationalists. Sorry, we cannot afford to face the seizure of our bank accounts and freezing of all financial transactions. We have seen enough troubles because we were vocal standing by the fishermen and women of Tuticorin diocese against the Kudankulam atomic plants. We are fighting a losing battle against the Goliath who is far more powerful and prepared to wipe us away from the land.

I must admit that I have become all the more insensitive to the injustice and cruelty done to innocent men and women, some of them my own relatives, friends and neighbours, and my feelings for them have numbed me, so that any amount of injustice and murders in front of my very eyes, do not disturb me. Tomorrow if the 'enemies of the nation' were to lay their icy hands on me, and drag me to the court and central agencies, I know I would have to go through them silently, without uttering a word.

If the world around is in the process of evolving an alternative narrative, where might is right, killing of innocent powerless men and women can



be justified in order to climb the political ladder or curry favour with those who are the creators of the neo-narrative of means justify the end, then we too bolster their arguments by our inaction and silence. But the fact is, silence could be so transformative as in the case of the germination of a seed, but the silence that the Church in India showcases is the sterile silence, which can be compared only to the silence of the non-existent.

I am the Church!

I find no better word to express the state of the Indian Church than to borrow one from a poem of Thomas Stearns Eliot (popularly known as T. S. Eliot), *The Hollow Men*, 1925, which talks about the spiritually dead people, who have lost all their enthusiasm and zest for living, and are counting their days to escape from this world of harsh reality.

The Indian Church needs more Oscar Romero's who would dare to challenge the lopsided policies and irrational laws of the government even if it meant that there would be attempts made to eliminate them. But that is how the Church can be a true leader, a true champion for even the sheep outside the fold, standing by them, and with them. Hopefully the lone voices heard from different corners of the nation would, one day, prick the conscience of the leaders who for personal gains perpetrate crimes against humanity and help them take up corrective measures to bring peace and harmony in the nation. ©

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JULIAN S DAS is a freelancer and film-maker, specialised in the production of 'massive open online courses'.



Heartless Leaders, Helpless People

The brutal violence and inhumanity being perpetrated in Manipur for about three months are mainly the result of our leaders becoming insensitive and inhuman

BY **JACOB PEENIKAPARAMBIL**

When we read the alarming news reports, hear the testimonies of eyewitnesses and watch the heart-wrenching videos coming from Manipur, we naturally ask the question, “Where is governance and what the leaders who are entrusted with the task of governing the country are doing?”

The brutal violence and inhumanity being perpetrated in Manipur for about three months are mainly the result of our leaders becoming insensitive and inhuman. No sensible person can believe that the central government is incapable of controlling violence in the State, with a population of 35 lakh population, and protect the life and property of people within a period of three months. The leaders who boast of making India a Vishwa Guru appear to be careless and inhuman.

The eloquent Prime Minister was silent on Manipur till the horrendous video of two Kuki women, who were paraded naked by a mob and sexually assaulted, became public. Even when he expressed



his sadness and anger no one could sense any empathy in his statement. His mention of Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh along with Manipur exposed his political intent rather than his human concern. His statement was nothing but an unedifying “whataboutery”, a technique often used by politi-

cians to respond to an accusation by making a counter accusation.

The silence of Modi in the face of ruthless violence and inhumanity is not something new. Journalist Tavleen Singh in her Sunday column in *The Indian Express* expressed wonder about Modi’s reluctance to show timely response to inhuman acts. If the PM had given a stern warning after the first beef-related lynching of Mohammed Akhlaq in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, there would not have been a chain of such mob lynching across North India. Silence of the topmost leader in the face of cruelty and inhumanity was a license to the foot soldiers of his party to indulge in any kind of inhumanity. The same strategy is being reenacted in Manipur.

Taking a cue from the Prime Minister, many BJP leaders and the party media cell began to divert the attention from Manipur to a rape incident in Rajasthan and violence related to panchayat polls in West Bengal. The gang rape video of a woman in Rajasthan of 2019 was picked up, recirculated and made viral. It has been four years since her assault and three years since her rapists were convicted. The BJP fielded Union Minister Anurag Thakur who alleged that there is a long list of heinous crimes against women in states ruled by opposition parties such as Rajasthan, West Bengal and Bihar, but they were playing politics over the Manipur incident.

Political parties and their leaders, instead of taking action against the perpetrators of the heinous crimes like gang rapes and devising meas-





ures to prevent such incidents, often try to exploit such occurrences for electoral purposes. Insensitivity of our leaders makes the victims of these crimes desperate and helpless.

There are many leaders in the ruling party whose hobby appears to be spreading the venom of hatred against the minorities and accusing them of the cause of all ills of India. Prominent among them is the Assam Chief Minister Himant Biswa Sarma. One of his recent statements is that Muslim vegetable vendors were responsible for the vegetable price-rise in the state. He issued a call for the state's youth to come forward to take up jobs in order to clean Guwahati from 'Miyas'. Miya, in local parlance, refers to Bengali-speaking Muslims who live in Assam but are believed to have originally migrated from Bangladesh. Sarma's rise in the BJP firmament is a reward for demonising Assam's Muslims as illegal immigrants to unite Hindus for winning election after election.

In a parliamentary democracy, the Prime Minister is accountable to the Parliament. The opposition parties have been demanding a statement from

the PM on Manipur, but the latter and his party have been stoutly refusing to make a statement. Modi and his party refuse to accept their mistake. Accepting mistakes by the rulers is part of accountability. Not making a statement in Parliament at a time of grave national crisis is an "absolute abdication of responsibility" by the Prime Minister, in the words of historian Ramchandra Guha. Not sacking Biren Singh, the Chief Minister of Manipur, who has been partisan to the majority Meiti community and utterly failed to control violence, is not only a great moral and governance failure on the part of the Prime Minister but also lack of sensitivity and humanity.

The root cause of insensitivity and inhumanity that have become the culture of today can be traced to three factors. First and foremost is the failure of political parties to educate people on democracy and the core values of the Indian Constitution. The Congress party that ruled the country for almost 54 years of 76 years after independence is primarily responsible for this failure. At the same time, the forces that are inimical to the Indian Constitution and secular democracy were working hard to brainwash people with an anti-secular and anti-democratic ideology. The whole nation is paying the price for the complacency and neglect of the Congress party and other secular parties.

The second factor is the failure of the followers of different religions to practice the core values taught by their respective religions. One can easily understand when one goes through the teaching of great religious leaders that humanity is the greatest religion. Religious leaders promoted religiosity based on rituals and dogma and made religion a business. Political leaders made use of religiosity for polarizing people on the basis of religion for winning elections. Blatant use

Help your children become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters or skilled psychopaths. Reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human"

of religion in electioneering by the BJP is an abuse of religion, according to the soul of the Constitution. Thus, politicization and commercialization of religion converted religion not only into an opium but also a poison. Converting India into a 'market of hatred' is the result of the cumulative effect of commercialization and politicization of religion.

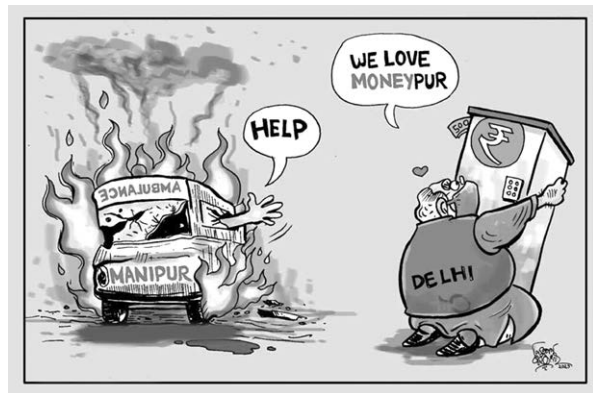
The third factor is a career oriented educational system that has neglected inculcation of core human and ethical values and building responsible citizens and visionary leaders. As a result, we have only a few visionary leaders who can be counted on fingers. On the contrary, ambitious and self-centred leaders have taken control of the levers of power not only in politics but also in all other fields too.

There is a huge difference between visionary leaders and ambitious leaders. While visionary leaders are altruistic, ambitious leaders are selfish and egoistic. Visionary leaders are original whereas ambitious leaders blindly copy others and it leads to unhealthy competitions and conflicts. Visionary leaders are creative and they set new trends and make a difference in their lives and in the lives of others. On the contrary, ambitious leaders often support orthodoxy and fundamentalism.

Visionary leaders unite people whereas ambitious leaders are divisive. Visionary leaders are spiritual whereas ambitious leaders are ritualistic and dogmatic. Visionary leaders are sensitive to the poor and the marginalized, and ambitious leaders are indifferent and insensitive to the under-privileged groups. Visionary leaders leave a legacy behind them, but ambitious leaders disappear from the memories of people. Two examples of ambitious leaders are Hitler and Mussolini who were cruel and inhuman.

Education plays a crucial role in developing visionary leaders. An education that gives equal importance to character formation and competence building is needed for the building of visionary leaders. In the absence of character, competence can become dangerous. As John Salovan Dicky says, "The end of education is to see man, made whole; both in competence and in conscience (character). For, to create the power of competence without creating a corresponding direction to guide the use of that power is bad education. Furthermore, competence will finally disintegrate apart from conscience".

If education itself becomes a business for making money, it leads to division and disintegration of



society. The unprecedented growth of hatred and violence that we witness in Indian society today is the result of the diffusion of an ideology that promotes exclusion and divisiveness. Certain organizations have made use of education copiously to spread this dangerous ideology. Unfortunately, many organizations involved in education, including the Catholic Church, failed to promote a counter culture by inculcating in the students the core values enshrined in the preamble of the Indian Constitution: secular democracy, justice, equality, liberty and fraternity that ensures dignity of individuals.

Today the majority of those who support the exclusive and divisive ideology that often justifies the use of violence, are mainly the rich and the middle class. They have been the main beneficiaries of the educational institutions that impart education through the English medium in India. In the backdrop of increasing violence against the minorities, one is reminded of what Dr. Haim Ginot, a child psychologist and psychotherapist, wrote years ago based on his own experience.

"I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no person should witness. Gas chambers built by the learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot by high school and college graduates. So, I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help your children become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters or skilled psychopaths. Reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human". ©

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Artificial Intelligence From Assistant to Behemoth

BY A.J. PHILIP

A few weeks ago, a former colleague sent me the link to a free, online training programme conducted on behalf of ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer). I had a few days earlier read a column by Thomas Friedman of the New York Times in which he expressed his amazement over the giant leap artificial intelligence (AI) had made.

For starters, he is one of the world's most widely-read columnists. One of his books, *The World is Flat*, was critically acclaimed for his innovative approach, however flawed his theory that those who eat McDonald burgers won't go to war with one another. Clans are better fighters than total strangers as the Mahabharata proves beyond a shadow of doubt.

He interviewed the head of an AI company, which, on his prompting, demonstrated the writing skills of

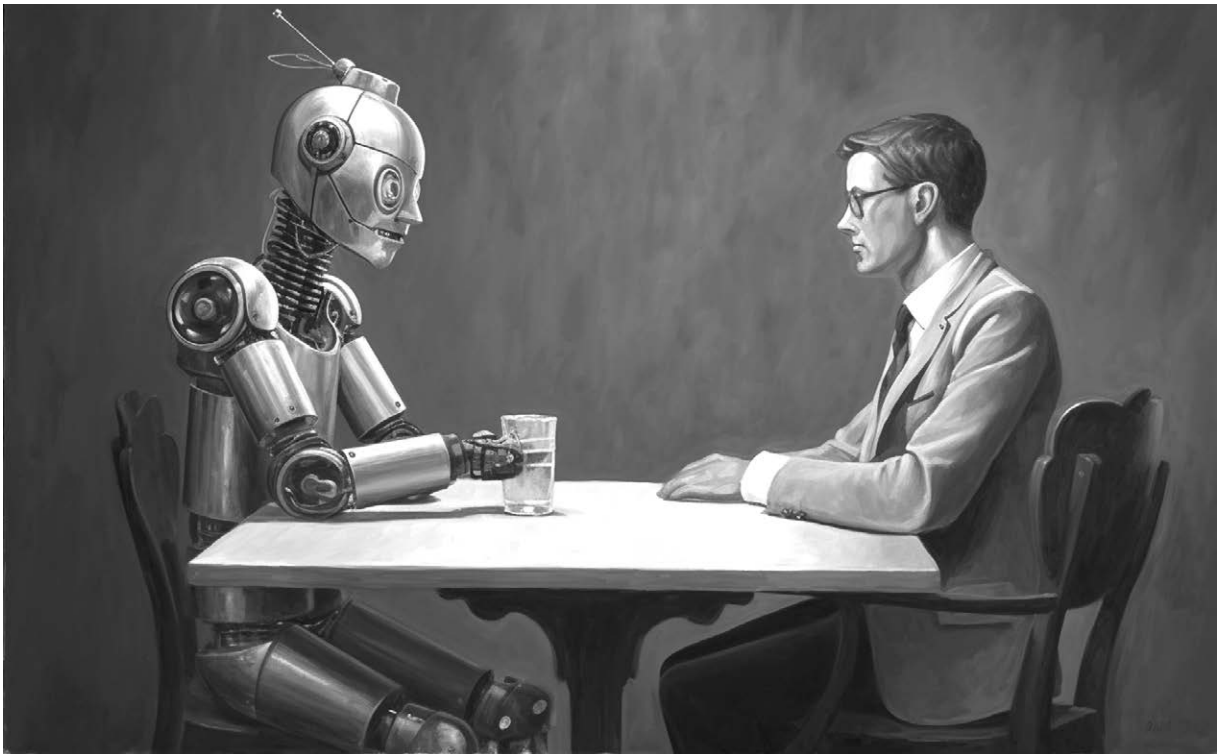


an AI-enabled laptop. For instance, Friedman asked the machine to write an article on a particular museum in New York, USA, in 800 words. He asked it to rewrite using only 400 words.

Then he asked the machine to write the same piece in a Shakespearean Sonnet format. All this was done in a matter of seconds, not minutes. It was against this backdrop that I joined the 90-minute training programme from the comforts of my home in New Delhi.

He dazzled the audience by claiming that ChatGPT, since its release in 2022, has been ruling the roost. It got its first million subscribers within a month of its release. In terms of popularity, it has overtaken search engines like Google. It can do work which the search engine cannot.

In order to remain in the market place, Google



was also compelled to introduce its own version of ChatGPT. I am yet to try it and I am, therefore, unable to comment on it, let alone make a comparison. My knowledge about AI is rudimentary, to say the least.

A young man with considerable experience in computing took the class in which hundreds of people from all over the world participated. What struck me was a spelling error in a word used to explain the prowess of AI. As it was an interactive session, I pointed out the error, which many would have certainly noticed.

I got a fair idea of AI from his speech. I wanted to use it to test and review a book I read, and written by a close friend, Chetna Keer, an exceptionally brilliant humorist, whose command of the English language I admire. I have been with her throughout her literary journey. It was to Chetna that I turned when Deepalaya wanted to bring out a book to celebrate its 40th anniversary. After so much of brainstorming, we titled the book Fruitful Forty.

For the test, I gave inputs in 500 characters on *Garnets Under My Gulmohar*, her latest book. Immediately, I got the review. It was a book of fiction, a thriller. Since I mentioned that the author was an environmentalist, it presumed that the book was on the environment. In short, the review was totally useless. What's worse, it gave a chapter-wise review, totally uncalled for.

As I mentioned, my experience and knowledge of AI are limited. The India Today news-channel recently showcased its AI skills, when it introduced its first AI-based newscaster at a prestigious conclave it organised with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the stage.



The threat AI poses is real and sanguinary, not imaginary. It forced thousands of artistes and technicians in Hollywood to go on a strike against the increasing use of AI in film-making

The channel claimed that it would soon have the PM interviewed by the artificial newscaster, who can speak a host of languages with equal felicity. It was an editor who alerted me about India Today's leap of faith in AI. Otherwise, I might have missed it.

I wondered whether Modi would subject himself to such an interview. I have seen an interview he had given to Karan Thapar while he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat. He had to ask for a glass of water, thank him and walk out of the interview because Thapar asked him an inconvenient question. Since then he has not given an interview to any journalist worth his name, though he allowed film star Akshay Kumar to interview him.

Since the AI interviewer can be programmed by the Prime Minister's Office, Modi may find such an interview more comfortable. Let's not jump the gun. Let's wait for Sana, the Aaj Tak AI newscaster, to interview the Prime Minister.

After watching the India Today programme, I met and heard the first Malayalam AI news-reader whose video was uploaded on YouTube. The "girl" resembled a film star I knew but could not recognise. After her introductory remarks in beautiful Malayalam, the creator of the video came on the screen.

He explained in simple language how he created the video using easily available resources in the public domain. As I write this, I can also create an AI newscaster who would resemble, say Hema Malini or Amitabh Bachchan.

I can also create text and the newscaster can read it in Malayalam or Marathi, with fluency that I cannot. What I meant to say is that the AI technology is available at virtually no cost to those who are interested. Let me be frank, the video in Malayalam helped to demystify AI and make it intelligible to the masses.

Nonetheless, the threat AI poses is real and sanguinary, not imaginary. It forced thousands of

artistes and technicians in Hollywood to go on a strike against the increasing use of AI in film-making. For instance, the producer can easily create lyrics, prepare a screenplay and make shooting schedules using AI. Who knows he can also dupe actors using AI technology.

This is not a figment of the imagination. Someone in Kerala produced a video using a character who resembles thespian Mammootti when he was younger and his hair was black. The question that arises is: why pay enormous sums of money to actors like Mohanlal and Aishwarya Bachchan when actors who are more handsome and beautiful can be created using AI?

I remember the Marxists in Kerala protesting against the use of computers some 40 years ago. What guided the Hollywood workers in the capital of Capitalism when they struck work was the same fear of losing jobs. There can be no disputing the fact that a lot of jobs can be done by AI. For instance, a condensed version of a book can be obtained in a matter of seconds, if AI is given access to the book.

Artificial intelligence is not yet perfect. It can even write and write without facts and figures. For instance, when I asked ChatGPT to write a piece on me as “a senior journalist”, it produced one in a few seconds.

It was a long piece on the attributes of a good journalist with no relation to me. There was not a single sentence from which I could make out that it was about me.

There can be no disputing the fact that a lot of jobs can be done by AI. For instance, a condensed version of a book can be obtained in a matter of seconds, if AI is given access to the book



The article was like the intelligent child who wrote about the cow when she was asked to write about the tree. Since she had prepared herself to write about the cow, what she did was to tie the cow to a tree and describe the cow. The child should have been given marks for her critical thinking, if not her essay on the tree.

In the short film made using a variation of Mammootti, there was one thing distinguishable. If you see the close-up of the face, you can realise that the skin tone and colour are the same everywhere. Ask any photographer, he will tell you that however great the Photoshop's capabilities are, it cannot indistinguishably fix the head of a person to the body of another. Ganapathy with the head of an elephant is in the realm of faith, not AI.

As of now, AI cannot be a substitute for human intelligence. It can even land a person in trouble. If a boss starts using flowery language in his writing, it will not be difficult for his secretary to identify the AI source. Ditto for the secretary, whose extraordinary linguistic talent flourishes all of a sudden. In the case of AI, what's good for the goose is good for the gander too!

The other day, I heard a speech in English delivered by a person whose command of the language was nothing commendable. When he read out his speech in grammatically correct, idiomatic language, I could make out that he either plagiarised it or used AI to create it. Of course, I admired his understanding of AI and his willingness to use it in his daily job of preaching.

As the experts learn and improve AI, a time will come when AI will produce books like Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and create lyrics like *Mah Nà Mah Nà...* which means nothing and hymns like *Amazing Grace*, banned from India's Beating Retreat programme. Allowing AI to rule the world is also dangerous.

In Kerala, AI-assisted CCTV cameras were installed by the traffic police all over the state. The camera caught one Orthodox priest for not wearing the seatbelt. He was fined. He refused to pay the fine as he was wearing the seatbelt at that time. The villain of the piece was his flowing jet-black beard in which the belt merged.

When the police officers were convinced, they cleared him of the charge. A few days later, he was caught again by another camera at another place. For him, the question was Shakespearean: To have a Beard or not to have a Beard.

At the rate at which AI has been growing, there is a fear that it might devour its creators, as often happens in science fiction. Imagine, AI is able to guess what a person thinks. There was a bizarre case in which the husband was punished for "killing" his wife. He had in a moment of passion said, "I want to kill you". He said this in love. He did not know that he was providing clinching "evidence" of his desire to kill her!

If, suppose, in a moment of anger, a person feels like "killing" another person and AI is able to detect the goings-on in his mind, he can be punished for "planning to commit murder". The dangers of such

The European Union has woken up to the threat AI poses and it wants laws to be in place to control the Behemoth that AI has already become. Countries like the US and India will, sooner than later, be compelled to think on the EU lines



a scenario are too many to recount here. The European Union has woken up to the threat AI poses and it wants laws to be in place to control the Behemoth that AI has already become. Countries like the US and India will, sooner than later, be compelled to think on the EU lines.

AI will take a few more years, if not decades, to read the human mind. As of now, it is just a tool in the hands of human beings. It requires intelligence to use AI effectively and efficiently.

Otherwise, it will end up like when a lazy sub-editor of the now-defunct *Observer of Politics and Business*, a newspaper Dhirubhai Ambani launched in the nineties, used automatic spell-check and published the front page where Deputy Prime Minister Devi Lal's name was published as Mr Devil consistently in the text.

Books have begun to be written using AI and film producers are increasingly turning to AI to reduce the cost of film production. Today, a young girl can produce a movie with just a mobile phone in her hand. In fact, a few years ago, my neighbour Anil Kumar's teenaged son produced a short film using a smartphone.

Could anyone have imagined this twenty-five years ago when uploading a three-minute video, produced in India, from Russia or Hong Kong cost tens of thousands of rupees? Artificial intelligence may have greater strength than human intelligence but it will never be a substitute. After all, the created can never replace the creator! ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Tripura: Another Hindutva Lab

The central topic of discussion in the State is the demand for scrapping of Schedule Tribe status to the people who had converted to other faiths

BY **THOMAS MALSOM**

Tripura is the second smallest state in the North-Eastern region but has the second largest population in the region (of nearly 4 million), next to Assam. The state is bordered by Bangladesh almost on all sides and is connected to the rest of India only by its northernmost points.

It has frequently served as an example for the people of other states whenever any sort of unrest, turbulent situation or turmoil arises with the common phrase 'we do not want to be the next Tripura.' This phrase for the people of Tripura may not be pleasant to hear; in fact, this phrase has recurrently sparked contentious debates and discussions. For obvious reasons, however, this phrase is now regularly used in reference to the current state of affairs that tribal people are in, such as the 'demographic imbalance' that has made Tripura perhaps the only state in India

where the indigenous communities (first settlers) are compelled to become a minority (with 31.8 %, according to the 2011 census).

The 'land question' is another crucial aspect because, despite being granted Autonomous District Council (ADC) and having constitutional protective provisions like the 6th Schedule, tribal communities do not have full-fledged autonomy over their land and resources. Instead, mega projects under the guise of development programmes continue to wreak havoc on the tribal livelihood exacerbating their social inequality and broadening socio-economic disadvantages. Tripura is still being used as a testing ground or experimentation which came to light when Janajati Suraksha Mancha: Tripura Chapter demanded ending/scrapping all government perks and benefits offered to the tribal people who have converted to Christianity.



Janajati Suraksha Mancha (JSM)

Tripura Chapter, considered to be an affiliate group of the right-wing regime, which represents the indigenous/ethnic/tribal people adhering to indigenous faiths, has petitioned the government to remove those tribals who have undergone religious conversion from the list of Schedule Tribe (ST). Their main concern is that indigenous faiths and culture have long been threatened by the conversion of tribal people to foreign religion which is Christianity.

In tune with these objectives, Kartik Tripura, joint convener of the JSM, Tripura Chapter, revealed to EastMojo on July 15: "On July 13 last, a state-level conference of our generation was held in Agartala. The community heads of different tribal groups attended the meeting and expressed their views. The central topic of discussion was the scrapping of Schedule Tribe status to the people who had converted to other faiths. By default, they become entitled to benefits as religious minorities. For that Article 342 of the Indian Constitution needs to be amended."

Justifying his stand, he further stated that "The Scheduled Tribe benefits are extended to people for the protection of their culture and social customs. Those who got converted to other religions have nothing in common with the traditional tribal culture and customs. They follow an altogether different path. Besides, a section of these people are accessing dual benefits both for ST status and as religious minorities. If one person gets benefits by government schemes and funds allocated under two separate departments it is quite discriminatory for the rest of the others."

Considering Mr Tripura's claim that the tribal Christians benefit from numerous departmental schemes and programmes and as religious minorities, he is alluding to the progress of the tribal Christians. Therefore, it is imperative to look into the benefits or progress of the Christian tribals that he is referring to. When one picks up any field of development sector to understand tribal development and if someone claims that tribals of Tripura

benefited from development schemes, especially the Christian tribals, they are daydreaming. For example, we can begin with the education development programmes by the state government for tribal people, where despite the existence of various educational schemes, many schools have ceased to operate in the tribal-dominant rural villages and very subpar classes and education are being delivered in the state as a whole.

Next, considering the areas of development projects/schemes involving forest land and livelihood, unchecked and unregulated Agro-forestry programmes are expanding in the forest habitation zones further destroying the livelihood of the tribals. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 was put into effect to redress injustices that made the tribes marginalised communities. Although they

were granted access to land entitlement i.e., patta under FRA, tribal people have only received user rights for minor forest produce. Large-scale projects like dams and resource extraction severely impair the livelihood of the tribal population; they are also being evicted from their own land.

In some projects, in the name of tertiary treatment of waste/garbage management, tribal villages are used as landfill without regard for biodiversity or sustainability of the environment. In many villages, in the upland hill areas, tribal communities struggle with a lack of access to clean water. Empty water containers lining up the national highway (NH8) near the Atharamura Hill Range, broken pipes, non-functional water tank or tube wells on the roads are self-explanatory and a testament to the water insecurity.

Additionally, the numerically smaller tribal communities, like the Karbong, whose ethnic identity, culture, tradition, and language are not adequately documented and safeguarded continue to be swindled under the homogenizing process and are on the verge of extinction. This is the devastating situation experienced by the tribal communities and which are also equally faced by the Christian tribals in Tripura since they all dwell together.

Despite the existence of various educational schemes, many schools have ceased to operate in the tribal-dominant rural villages and very subpar classes and education are being delivered in the state as a whole

So, what sort of benefits or advantages, as claimed by the JSM, Tripura Chapter, are extended to the Christian tribals from the government schemes and/or from being a Christian minority in Tripura? Instead, the Christian missionaries' selfless contribution merits tremendous gratitude in safeguarding the tribals' culture and tradition whereas the state government fails to do so. On the other hand, the state's attempt at cultural homogenization fostering the use of a common language like Devanagarti script for indigenous language/dialect in documentation is an effort to forcibly assimilate them into the dominant society in Tripura.

This move has brought changes in the social structure of the tribals, whereas Christian missionaries do not interfere with it. For example, despite Christianity being frequently dismissed as anthropogenic, a notable contribution made by the Christian missionaries is the preservation of indigenous languages by documenting and cataloguing the indigenous word and providing quality education in Tripura.

Henceforth, given the foregoing debate, one should attempt to comprehend the underlying ideology and should view the JSM initiatives as a strategy of the ruling regime to dismantle unity among the indigenous people. As an illustration, the current

situation in Manipur is the experimentation/result of a similar political strategy in which they are somehow successful in fostering and destroying the unity among the native communities. Attacks on the Christian tribal groups are nothing new, but despite Manipur and Tripura having experienced ethnic conflict, churches belonging to Schedule Tribes (ST) have been least destroyed.

Prior to the Manipur issue, the same thing was experimented in Assam, in the name of Jana-jati Dharma Sanskriti Suraksha Mancha (JDSSM) of Assam that demanded the same thing that STs converted to Christianity be removed or de-listed from the list of STs and that Article 342 of the Indian Constitution be amended to protect the existence of the genuine STs in India. Following the experiments in Assam and Manipur, the current experiment is in Tripura with the sole intent of causing division and breaking *Thansa* (unity) among the Indigenous tribal communities in the name of religion to destabilise the North-East. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Pastor, six others arrested on 'conversion' charges

Seven Christians, including a pastor and a woman, were arrested and their prayer hall was sealed by police in Uttar Pradesh for alleged violation of the stringent anti-conversion law.

Police interrupted a Sunday prayer service on July 23 at Badesar village in Ghazipur district. They took the pastor and six others to the police station, where they were retained for a night.

All seven were presented in a local court on July 24 and were remanded in judicial custody.

"It is totally a false case against our people," said Vikrant Kumar John, son of arrested pastor Vinod Kumar James, who heads the Protestant James Prarthana Bhavan (Prayer Hall) at Badesar.

John told UCA News on July 25 that a 50-strong police team came during the Sunday service. "They rushed inside the church and stopped the prayer service, accusing us of conducting religious conver-

sion," he said. They also seized copies of the Bible and other Christian books, he added.

Nearly 700 people were attending the service. They arrested the pastor and six others and allowed the others to go home.

"The police seemed to be acting as per a pre-planned script," John alleged while adding that Jitendra Kumar, a right-wing Hindu leader had earlier sent his supporters to the prayer hall and filed a complaint.

In his complaint, Kumar alleged that Pastor James conducted special prayers on Fridays and Sundays which hundreds of people attended.

He accused the pastor of offering Rs 45,000 and jobs to the people for becoming Christians.

"We never converted anyone by offering jobs and money," John said. ©

(Courtesy: UCANEWS)

Red Flagging India Railways

A brutal capitalistic ethic seems to be the guiding principle in the Railways which focusses on providing costly travel, ignoring the ordinary mortals

BY **MATHEW JOHN**

When contemplating the subject of safety on the Indian Railways (IR), I am reminded of a French writer's observation more than 150 years ago: "The more things change, the more they remain the same." He insinuated that although a lot of changes appear to be happening, there has been no significant transformation for the better. Likewise, despite huge advances in technology, a more skilled workforce and greater resources, safety on IR remains an area of darkness and precarious unpredictability. The trumpeted statistics of decline in train accidents through the decades is primarily the upshot of technology rather than of thoughtful and carefully strategized policy.

Saddled with the most intricate and involved inter-dependencies, safety of the IR is the end-product of the cohesive fusion of its myriad parts – the front-line staff, permanent way, rolling stock, signaling gear, even the public which is more obtrusive on the Railways than in most other transport modes. And the toughest challenge is that you can't take your eyes off the ball. Safety is enhanced only when it is the primary focus of an organization.



The British ushered in the Railways, along with a management style that advocated railroading (the etymology of the word is a no-brainer) and dire punishments for instilling staff discipline and getting work done. Although the Brits were thrown out long ago, their punitive template has been embraced by the indigenous sahibs and carries on to this day. Following the horrific Balasore accident, we heard the Railway Minister echo the tired admonitory shibboleth about inculcating a culture of "zero tolerance of accidents". The PM, during his visit to the accident site, had only one message to convey – that those found guilty would be severely punished.

Significantly, in the wake of the Balasore tragedy, not much has been said by the political brass or the railway management about issues relating to workplace culture, adequacy of safety category staff, staff morale or working conditions, as though these matters are inconsequential to safety. The large number of vacancies in the safety categories, the replacement of railway staff with ill-paid and undependable contractual labour, even in safety-related activities, and the endemic problem of punishing over hours of work particularly among loco pilots, bode ill for safety. An organization where there is many a slip between the rules and actual practice, and where a "work to rule" threat constitutes the biggest nightmare for the management, cannot possibly be the ideal workplace.

As a former Railway man, I could not help but feel a sense of déjà vu when reading about the turbulence and finger-pointing on the Indian Railways (IR) in the wake of the Balasore accident. We have



come a long way from the time when moral responsibility for a catastrophe was shouldered by the conductor of the orchestra. Lal Bahadur Shastri resigned as railway minister in 1956, taking full responsibility for a major accident. And since then, two more railway ministers have acted honourably when major accidents have happened by resigning and not merely offering to resign – Nitish Kumar in 1999 and Suresh Prabhu in 2016. The present Minister, like many of his predecessors, is guilty of “deflection”, which is a term in psychology that involves diverting blame onto someone else to preserve one’s own position and self-image. The current regime has mastered this art!

While front-line staff guilty of dereliction that cause accidents are deservedly punished, major train accidents invariably result in a public outcry for assigning culpability at the higher echelons of management. This is when the exercise becomes random and mercurial. Post the Balasore tragedy, there has been a flurry of penal transfers among the top management of the South-Eastern Railway, including the General Manager. In what is a blatantly capricious, unjust punishment, one of IR’s outstanding engineers, the Additional Member (Signal) was ignominiously shunted out of the Railway Board for the failure of one of the thousands of staff under his nominal control. Clearly, mollifying an outraged public with well-advertised, albeit unfair, punitive action against the top management is more important than worrying about the adverse impact of such patently unjust punishments on railway staff morale.

Early this month, the CBI arrested three Railway signaling staff of the Balasore jurisdiction and charged them under IPC sections relating to culpable homicide not amounting to murder, causing disappearance of evidence, and endangering safety owing to wilful negligence. With the trade unions emasculated, there have been no protests against this unprecedented draconian action, which conveys the dire message that all front-line staff held responsible for a major accident can realistically expect to be arrested. Railway staff morale is understandably at an all-time low.

The stifling culture of intimidation and licentious retribution has engendered the most dele-



rious repercussions for safety. The almighty fear of punishment has spawned the dangerous practice of concealing failure, and “doctoring” safety-related statistics, whenever possible. The widespread statistical subterfuge vitiates analysis of the root causes of accidents and impairs the railway management’s capacity to accurately assess risks and establish the priorities for determining safety investment and policy.

To cite an example, when the Railway Safety Review Committee (1999-2001) under the legendary Justice H R Khanna was examining safety issues on IR, an intrepid young officer of the South-Central Railway(?) gave a “bare all” presentation, proving beyond a doubt that CRT wagons were four times more prone to accidents than other types of wagons in the fleet owing to genetic structural instability, a technical glitch that the management was oblivious of for years due to rampant manipulation of accident figures. Thankfully, the management took immediate action on the Committee’s recommendation to rapidly phase out these wagons from the system. The lesson learnt was that ignoring or sweeping “indicative” accidents (unsafe acts that do not result in accidents) and other infractions under the carpet can ultimately lead to the Balasore type of disasters because the basic causes of both major and minor accidents are the same. Nevertheless, fudging of safety-related statistics continues apace.

It goes without saying that railway safety must be an all-encompassing mission, “an envelope surrounding and fundamentally influencing everything else.” Unfortunately, the railways have never been on top of safety, but this Government



has gone way beyond ordinary neglect of safety and indulged in reckless brinkmanship that has adversely impacted the entire railway ecosystem.

In its zany obsession to showcase radical transformation of the IR, this government has wrecked systems and traditions that have sustained IR since Independence. The insane sweeping revamp of the management structure is a crippling blunder and portends a laissez faire, apathetic ethos supplanting the passionate loyalty and commitment to one's department that was hitherto the distinctive management style.

The subsuming of the Railway Budget into the General Budget is irrational, but is there a method in the madness? With financial autonomy ended, so has the hitherto intensive public scrutiny of Railways' finances, and, resultantly, so too has fiscally responsible behaviour gone out of the window. Camouflaged within the humongous General Budget, the Railways' profligacy is now unchecked, because of which the premier transport organization has turned loss-making since 2016, despite massive injection of funds, unremitting traffic demand and unprecedented industrial peace.

While perfunctory attention is paid to the life-and-death problems relating to routine maintenance, replacement of overaged assets, timely replenishment of safety category staff, improved working conditions, the overriding obsession of this government, apart from the whimsical cataclysmic changes in systems, has been on glamorous, show-boat projects.

This government has clearly shrugged off the corporate mission of IR to provide safe, efficient, affordable, customer-focussed, and environmentally sustainable transportation in an efficient and cost-effective manner. Its lopsided priorities are reflected in the profligate spending on breakneck electrification of the entire BG system without a proper cost-benefit analysis, a needless prodigality that has aptly been called "the demonetization moment" by an anguished, recently retired colleague. Because of this ill-conceived project, up to 6000 diesel locomotives and their extensive support infrastructure, will soon become redundant.

The plan to run 400 pairs of Vande Bharat trains in three years is financially imprudent. This is another highfalutin white elephant that is being executed at frenetic pace, without much thought about the adverse implications for line capacity, for other ordinary train service requirements, apart from technical issues relating to power consumption and the need for creating exclusive maintenance facilities. Much like the Bullet Train vanity project that is financially ruinous and completely at odds with the needs of the common man, the glitzy Vande Bharat trains cater only to the well-heeled, the least expensive seat being almost four times costlier than sleeper class fare in a super express train. A brutal capitalistic ethic reigns behind the veneer of sabka saath, sabka vikas socialism!

Old hands remember a time when the Indian Railways followed a different script. As railway ministers, Madhu Dandavate and George Fernandes travelled by train service. The common man's train – the Jan Shatabdis – were the focal point of the railway management in the losing passenger segment of Railways' business. In the 1980s, one of the legendary general managers of IR, D Hariram, got the oldest former railway employee in Gorakhpur to inaugurate a new passenger train service. Former Railway Ministers visited the injured victims of major train accidents in the hospitals but, as a rule, avoided hanging around accident sites as they knew that their presence deflected attention from the critical task of restoration. I fear that such stirring institutional memory is being forgotten and overwhelmed by strobe light-driven inaugurations and photo-op visits to accident sites. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MATHEW JOHN is a former civil servant. The views are personal

Gandhian center sealed, Gandhians evicted in Varanasi

Gandhians in Varanasi, have expressed shock and dismay after the Uttar Pradesh Administration sealed the Sarva Seva Sangh (SSS), a well-known Gandhian institute that serves as the central office of its various branches all over India.

Vallabhacharya Pandey, a Gandhian and national convenor of Asha Trust, termed it unfortunate that the government tries to destroy the 63-year-old national heritage that was the workplace of Vinoba and Jay Prakash Narayan.

He said that even if the government destroys the property, it will never be able to destroy Gandhi, Vinoba and Jayaprakash Narayan from the hearts of Indians.

In an unexpected move, the district officials of Varanasi arrived at the center around 7 am on July 22 with around 500 police men, including Rapid Action Force. With the help of some 200 laborers the police forcibly entered each house in the 12.5 acre campus and removed its residents' belongings.

The police also forcibly evicted Gandhians, who were on a 63-day satyagraha protesting against the government attempt to demolish the premises, and arrested eight of them.

The arrested included SSS national president Chandan Pal, who came from Kolkata to participate in the satyagraha, Ram Dheeraj, SSS's state president, Arvind Anjum, editor cum publisher of Sarvodaya Prakashan, Nandlal Master, coordinator of Lok Samiti, Jeetendra Yadav and Ishwar chand, a veteran Gandhian activist.

The SSS also conducts a kindergarten school giving free education for the poor children around. When the children arrived for the morning classes on July 22, they found their class room locked by the police.

Thousands of books published by the Sarvodaya publications are thrown out by the police and are lying in the open air wet in the rain.

People evicted, with whatever things they could carry, have moved out to their acquaintances.

Two Catholic priests of Varanasi, who joined the satyagraha, said the administration's action had shocked them.

Fathers Neetilal Joseph and Jayant, members of

the Indian Missionary Society and well known Gandhians, manage Lok Chetna Samiti.

Father Joseph told Matters India that the government's attempt is not merely to destroy Gandhian institutes, but to wipe away Gandhian principles, values and thoughts from the minds of the common people.

The center, situated on the bank of rivers Ganga and Varuna, in Rajghat on the northern end of Varanasi city, was founded in 1960 by Jay Prakash Narayan with the help of President Rajendra Prasad, Vinoba Bhawe, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Jagjivan Ram to propagate Gandhian teachings.

Shastri, the then Railway minister, arranged for the sale of Railway property to this institute.

The demolition drive is based on a notice given by the Railways saying that SSS stands on railway land encroached by the Gandhians. A legal battle has been going on for the past few months on the ownership of the land.

Dhiraj told Matters India that his organization possesses the sale deed signed by the Divisional Railway Manager, receipts issued by Railway for the money received for the sale of the land and other legal documents.

The district treasury has the mutation documents.

Last week the Supreme Court directed SSS to approach the lower courts for settlement of the issue.

The SSS campus houses Sarvodaya Publication which has published more than 1,500 books on Gandhi and Gandhian Institute of Studies where research on Gandhian thoughts has been taking place for the past six decades.

The government allegedly wants to demolish the institutions and houses of the Gandhians to build a shopping mall, and to promote tourism.

SSS is adjacent to NAMO ghat on the bank of Ganges, which is a popular tourist spot made in honor of PM Narendra Modi. 142 shanties of the poor people in a slum called Kila Kohna, next to the SSS, were demolished three months ago for extending the NAMO ghat. ©

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)

India that is Bharat?

With the Opposition naming its alliance as I.N.D.I.A., the BJP is unnecessarily raking up an issue pitching 'India' against 'Bharat'. India or Bharat, what is important is sticking to constitutional values

BY **RAM PUNIYANI**

BJP has been in power for the last nine years. The opposition parties have gradually realized that it is not ruling on the lines of the Constitution and neither for inclusive India which should be based on Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Justice. BJP has been using the agencies like ED and CBI as a major tool to weaken the opposition parties. Its policies on the one hand have given boost to crony capitalists, and also have been undermining democratic freedom.

Its politics is centered on the issues related to identity, Ram Temple, Love Jihad and many other jihads, cow-beef and hyper nationalistic postures against one neighbour. Its policies have increased the sufferings of the average and poor sections of society, be it the demonetization, Covid 19 lockdown at short notice or be it the rising unemployment, problems of farmers, increasing atrocities against Dalits, Adivasis, women and religious minorities. One can go on and on.

The selective use of Central agencies is one of the major concerns apart from realization that BJP is the richest national party, enhancing its riches through electoral bonds. PM Care Fund is another of the mechanisms which is disturbing the apple-cart of our system. To cap it all, BJP has vast support



of manpower from the various affiliates of RSS, which without fail, work for the party during elections. All this has made the non-BJP parties to come together and form an alliance, INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance). This got formulated in their second conclave in Bangalore where 26 opposition parties met to save democracy and Constitution and to take on the might of BJP, whose organization goes from booth level to national level and works as a well oiled machinery.

As the opposition parties' coming together became a reality, BJP woke up to their combined march. The first thing they did was to bring the NDA out of the freezer and try to put together some 38 parties, few known and most unknown rag-tags. Most of the party leaders were bowing to the supreme leader whose photo was the only one on the banner. They were deeply stung by the brilliant acronym INDIA. Apart from denigrating these opposition parties, some of their leaders said it was improper to use this acronym. As per them, use of the name of INDIA will have undue influence and will be a personation at elections," news agency ANI reported. They also filed a police complaint at Barakhamba police station in Delhi.



Assam Chief Minister Hemant Biswa Sarma has tried to make comment at different levels. As per him, our civilizational conflict is pivoted around India and Bharat. The British named our country 'India' and we must try to free ourselves from colonial legacies. Our forefathers fought for Bharat and we will continue to work for Bharat."

Responding to him, Jairam Ramesh of the Congress tweeted, "His (Sarma's) new mentor, Mr. Modi, gave us Skill India, Start-up India and Digital India – all new names for ongoing programmes. He has asked CMs of different states to work together as 'Team India'. He even made an appeal to Vote India! But when 26 political parties call their formation INDIA, he throws a fit and says use of India reflects 'colonial mentality' ..."

Stung by this, he changed 'BJP for India' to 'BJP for Bharat' on his twitter handle. As such civilizational conflict and values, which he is mentioning, are being articulated by many pro-Hindutva writers. JNU Vice-Chancellor Shantishri Dhulipudi Pandit pointed out, "Reducing India to a civic nation bound by a Constitution disregards its history, ancient heritage, culture and civilization." Many other writers from this stable are saying that civilizational values should be given preference over values of Indian Constitution.

The BJP's interpretation of Indian civilization is narrow; it harps on mainly Brahmanical traditions of Hinduism. The interaction with Greeks and Huns is ignored and the coming of Islam and Christianity is looked down upon as being a 'foreign' invasion on our civilization. This narrative is in contrast to the understanding of Indian civilization aptly put by Jawaharlal Nehru, "She was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously..."

The worldview of Hemant Sarma and company is fixated on the glorious past where the Brahmanical values ruled. In their view, even the great Indian traditions contributed by Charvak, Buddha, Mahavir, Emperor Ashok, and Bhakti-Sufi have no place. Their immense hatred for 'left' historians like Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, Ramsharan Sharma, Harbans Mukhia and the like is rooted in their view of the civilization revolving around birth-based caste and gender hierarchy. These professional historians brilliantly brought out the deeper dynamics of soci-



ety; they were concerned not just about the 'religion of the ruler' but deeply outlined the lives of Dalits, women, Adivasis among others -- the real diversity of Indian civilization.

As such the colonial legacy is carried on today by the likes of rightwing stream which looks at history through the constructs of colonial masters. Their goal was to divide the society along religious lines so they introduced 'communal historiography' (looking at history through religion of the king). This is the premise of the likes of Hemant Sarma. Capping the communal historiography they have added the upper caste-patriarchal notions in their narrative and have made this the basis of their exclusive politics.

Their main obstacle is the Indian Constitution. As Indian nationalism started growing they began glorifying Manusmriti and its laws and labeled 'Muslims, Christians and Communists' as the internal threat to their nationalism. The opposition to the Indian Constitution has been openly articulated by this politics, most clearly by K.Sudarshan, previous RSS Sarsanghchalak, who said the Constitution was of no use for the people of the country".

Undoubtedly the opposition to INDIA of the opposition parties is a major step to oppose the inclusive values of our civilization. As such, the Constitution itself is an outcome of evolving Indian civilization. The opposition to the INDIA alliance is also rooted in the thesis which sees 'civilizations in clash' (Samuel Huntington), in contrast to what UN report which emphasizes on Alliance of Civilizations, well articulated in Nehru's above quote. Hope INDIA prevails over the divisive politics of the likes of Hemant Sarma. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

A Balancing Act for Women

Many working women often face the dual responsibility of managing and balancing the challenging responsibilities of her home as well as the workplace

BY **AARTI**

The reported recent decision of the Sikkim Government to enhance the maternity leave of its female employees from 6 months to 12 months and also provide paternity leave (one month) is laudable.

With this generous benefit, Sikkim may be able to improve its population, which is currently the lowest in India at around 6.32 lakh.

The average number of children born to women of childbearing age in a given population, most commonly known as the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), varies worldwide.

According to latest reports, South Korea has the lowest TFR at 0.78 and the highest is 6.73 in Niger, a country in West Africa, where most of its land area lies in the Sahara Desert.

In India, compared to the global average TFR of 2.3 children, as per the fifth round of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) conducted during 2019-21 (released last August) it is 2.0 (down from 2.2 as per NFHS-4 (2015-16) and 2.85 as per NFHS-2 (1988-89).

Sikkim's TFR has drastically fallen to 1.1 (NFHS-5) from 1.2 (NFHS-4) and 2.8 (NFHS-2).

The birth of a child undoubtedly brings joy and excitement. However, to protect the employment of women during the time of her maternity, the Union Government enacted the Maternity Benefit Act in 1961. It entitles working women engaged

in mines, the circus industry, plantations and shops or establishments employing 10 or more persons (except those who are covered under the Employees' State Insurance) of maternity benefit – i.e., full paid absence from work – to take care of her child up to 12 weeks due to delivery. In cases of illness arising due to pregnancy, etc., they are entitled to additional leave with wages for a period of one month and six weeks with wages in case of miscarriage.

Based on recommendations from various quarters, when the Act was amended in 2017, the maternity benefit was raised from 12 weeks to 26 weeks for working women with two surviving children and 12 weeks for more than two children. An adopting mother (one who legally adopts a child below the age of three months) including a commissioning mother (one who commissions a surrogate mother to bear a child on her behalf), can avail maternity benefit for a period of twelve weeks from the date the child is handed over to the adopting mother or the commissioning mother, as the case may be.

In case where the nature of work assigned to a woman is such that she may work from home, the employer is to allow her to do so after availing of the maternity benefit for such period and on such conditions as the employer and the woman may mutually agree. Further every establishment with 50 or more employees has to provide the facility of creche within such distance as may be prescribed, either separately or along with common facilities. The woman employee is permitted to visit the creche four times a day, which also includes the interval for rest allowed to her.

Most of the States in India, in line with the Central Act, have enacted their own Maternity Benefit Act. In March last year, Tamil Nadu notified amendments to its Maternity Benefit Act wherein it has raised the maternity leave from 9 months (270 days) to 12 months (365 days).

27 percent of women in the Indian workforce according to a 2018 study join work, about 48 percent drop out within four months of return-



ing from maternity leave and 50 percent drop out mid-career before the age of 30 for childcare.

In industrialised countries like the US, the Family and Medical Leave Act provides protection for parents to take away time from their job following childbirth. Even as no national paid parental-leave policy exists, some progressive organisations do provide paid parental leave. However, the cause for concern is the gender bias. A recent study found that men were not penalised for becoming a father and were being offered higher salaries than their child-less counterparts. Whereas, women experience a reduction in compensation and the impacts are greatest when children are youngest (under 5 years of age). Typically, mothers are less likely to be called back for jobs, recommended for hire or recommended for promotion. More so because employers view mothers as unreliable due to the distraction of family responsibilities. Employers were found to rate mothers' competency 10 percent lower than non-mothers and similarly, mothers' commitment to their jobs was 12 percent lower.

Well, for a new born, the first six months are quite crucial according to the World health Organisation and UNICEF. Children should be breastfed within the first hour of birth which must be continued for the first 6 months of life – meaning no other foods or liquids are to be given to the child, including water.

Breastfeeding, which provides optimal nutrition to the child and prevents infection as well as malnutrition, has been found to cut down 22 percent of all neonatal deaths. Breast milk, not only has a protective effect against childhood obesity but is also an important source of energy and nutrients. It can provide half or more of a child's energy needs between the ages of 6 and 12 months and one-third of energy needs between 12 and 24 months.

The maternity leave is of immense help to new mothers as infants need to be breastfed on demand – that is as often as the child wants, day and night. However, many infants reportedly do not receive optimal feeding and only about 44 percent of infants aged 0–6 months worldwide were exclusively breastfed over the period of 2015–2020. For mothers, longer durations of breastfeeding has been found to contribute to their health and well-being. Besides reducing the risk of ovarian and breast cancers, helping space pregnancies, breastfeeding also promotes postpartum weight loss of lactating mothers.

27 percent of women in the Indian workforce according to a 2018 study join work, about 48 percent drop out within four months of returning from maternity leave and 50 percent drop out mid-career before the age of 30 for childcare

Various surveys have shown that a large number of working mothers most often feel low on energy. While some do not get proper sleep, others are burdened with health issues after childbirth. Many new mothers seem to suffer from postpartum depression which includes anxiety, confusion, irritability etc. As a number of factors increase a new mother's vulnerability to avoidable health issues, at the workplace there is an imperative need to have them examined minutely so as to find lasting solutions.

Well, that e-commerce giant Amazon has reportedly put in efforts to retain working mothers in India inspires confidence. It is said that among others, multiple options are being offered to them like virtual and flexible working opportunities. Post their 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, women employees can have a modified work schedule for up to 8 weeks.

Air India, which has around 5,000 women employees, that includes flying and non-flying staff, has been in the news for providing 26 weeks of maternity leave to its women employees as well as daycare support under its revamped policies. Notably, women pilots are to be given the choice to opt for quicker turnaround flights till the child reaches the age of one year. There will also be counselling sessions to address mental well-being, preparation for childbirth and plans to return to work for expectant mothers.

Regulatory authorities need to regularly conduct surprise checks and wherever the rules merely exist on paper, such organisations need to swiftly brought to book.

Looking beyond rules and regulations, treating women as equal partners can go the extra mile in smashing the gender bias. ©

High court orders fresh probe into bishop's death

The Madhya Pradesh High Court has ordered a fresh probe into the death of a Catholic bishop in Madhya Pradesh.

Bishop Thomas Thennatt of Gwalior died in a road accident on December 14, 2018 and his family members suspected foul play in the death as the prelate's body was buried without performing the mandatory post-mortem examination.

The Gwalior bench of the high court on July 19 ordered the probe into the death of the bishop, who was then 65 years old.

The single bench of Justice Roopesh Chandra Varshney in its order dismissed the objections from the First Additional Sessions Judge, Shivpuri district that upheld the order of the Judicial Magistrate First Class in the same district and ordered for a fresh probe.

"In the opinion of this court, the aforesaid approach of both the courts below suffer from material irregularity," the high court bench said.

It referred to a recent Supreme Court order that said, "The victim has a fundamental right of fair investigation and fair trial. Therefore, mere filing of the charge-sheet and framing of the charges cannot be an impediment in ordering further investigation/re-investigation/, if the facts so warrant."

The high court in July 2022 had passed a similar order after the petitioner Claramma Constatine, a sibling of the bishop sought for an impartial probe into his death.

The petitioner approached the judicial magistrate court that heard the case for a fresh probe in view of the high court order but her plea was turned down saying, "The application of the petitioner has been dismissed on the ground that an application for further investigation in any matter can be entertained till the commencement of trial i.e. once the charges have been framed and the matter is listed for prosecution evidence, no such application for further investigation can be entertained."

The petitioner, subsequently, appealed before the Sessions court against the order of the lower court. The sessions court too upheld the lower court order forcing her to approach the high court again seeking direction for a fresh and impartial probe into her



brother's death.

"We are happy that the high court has accepted our demand for a fresh probe into the death of Bishop Thennatt," says Pastor Lovers Masih, the son in law of the petitioner.

"We are hopeful that the truth will be established in the probe," Pastor Masih told Matters India on July 24.

The body of the bishop was exhumed in June 2019 and conducted post mortem examination six months after his burial following a petition by Dolly Theresa, a local Catholic who approached a court alleging foul play into his death.

The petitioner in her petition said "there were three others including the driver traveling in the car at the time of the accident. But none of them suffered even a minor scratch on their bodies and gave contradictory statements about the whole incident, raising suspicions."

She accused the diocesan officials of refusing to hand over "bishop's personal belongings such as ATM, checkbook among others things and denying permission to take his body to his home state Kerala."

She also questioned the way the diocesan officials buried his body without even mandatory autopsy.

Constatine said, the diocese favoured the driver who drove the car of bishop Thennatt at the time of accident and even given jobs to his family members and associates among other things to pointed that there was some foul play in his death.

The petitioner has also named eight priests in the diocese among the 21 as respondents.

Father N John Xavier, named as one of the respondents, told Matters India on July 24 “It is a fact that the bishop died in the road accident” and added, he “will not run away from any investigation.”

“Police interrogated me and I have the same thing to say again as the truth remains the same.”

Father Xavier, a former vicar general, said he was not present with the bishop at the time of the accident, or when he was taken to the hospital where he was declared dead. He was not present when it was decided to bury him without mandatory post-mortem examination.

“I only attended his funeral,” he added.

The priest further clarified, “Bishop (Emeritus) Joseph Kaithathara of Gwalior had ordered to bury the body without post-mortem examination and it seemed to have created confusion among his family and others.”

Bishop Thennatt was the first member of the Society of the Catholic Apostolate, popularly known as the Pallottines, to become a bishop in India.

Pope Francis appointed him the Gwalior bishop on October 18, 2016. He was ordained a priest in 1978 and had served Guntur diocese in Andhra Pradesh before moving to Madhya Pradesh in 1991. 📍

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)



Catholic priest held for sexually abusing minor girl

A Catholic priest serving as the principal of a diocese-run college in Shivamogga has been remanded in judicial custody for allegedly abusing a minor girl.

Police arrested Father Francis Fernandes, principal of Sacred Heart College under Shimoga diocese in Karnataka, on July 20 following a complaint from a girl, reported to be below 18 years of age.

Local media reports said the priest has been charged under provisions of the stringent Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and the Scheduled Caste (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

After daylong interrogation, police produced the priest before a special court on July 21 and he was remanded in judicial custody for 14 days.

Offenses under the laws meant to protect minors and vulnerable groups are treated as non-bailable and the arrested can file a bail application before the court.

The complainant, according to media reports, belongs to the Banjara community, a nomadic ethnic group in India, and was a second-year student at the diocese-run college.

The Shimoga diocese, led by Jesuit Bishop Francis Serrao, confirmed the priest had been arrested and remanded.

Father Veeresh V Moras, its public relation officer, said police made a friendly request for Fernandes to accompany them to the police station on July 20,

saying “they had to seek some clarifications from him.”

“They did not mention any case against him. We were shocked at his arrest and judicial custody,” Moras told UCA News on July 21.

We are “unaware of the exact charges leveled against him,” Father Moras added. “We have deputed a lawyer to represent him.”

The initial reports suggested that he was charged under the provisions of POCSO and the prevention of atrocities laws, he said.

“Father Fernandes used to be kind and gentle and we never ever heard any such allegations against him at all,” Father Moras claimed.

The police reportedly arrested the priest after a group of people from the Banjara community staged a protest demanding action against the priest in front of the local police station on July 20.

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) in its biennial gathering in Bengaluru, the capital city of Karnataka state, in February 2020 adopted a resolution of “zero tolerance to sex abuse” cases in the Church.

The meeting was attended by 192 bishops. They said that the Church “will not tolerate any kind of sexual abuse.”

They also agreed not to shield any instance of abuse from prosecution by civil authorities. 📍

(Courtesy: UCANEWS)

Orphanage shut down alleging 'conversion'

A Christian orphanage has been closed down, citing attempts to convert children to Christianity. The children housed in the orphanage were moved to government-run facilities on July 26 following a surprise raid on the orphanage by the child rights officials of Madhya Pradesh state.

The orphanage housed 73 children, 38 boys and 35 girls. It was managed by a Christian tribal group called Adivasi Sahayada Samiti (council for helping tribal people) Jobat in Alirajpur district.

The orphanage failed to comply with the provisions of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act as it "did not have a valid registration," said Omkar Singh, who headed the inspection team.

The inspection team also accused the orphanage managers of working for religious conversion after seizing copies of the Bible from some Christian children. Kalpana Daniel, president of the tribal council and a member of the Church of North India (CNI), said she sought time to register the orphanage and get licenses. But officials closed it down.

Some 30 children, who are orphans, were moved to government facilities in the state. Children of single parents were sent back to their houses.

The tribal council has been working for the poor for the past three decades. "It is duly registered," Daniel told UCA News on July 27.

"Until now, nobody, including the district child welfare committee, informed us about the need to separately register the orphanage," Daniel said.

"We will soon apply for the registration and continue with our work," she added.

The council runs an old-age home on the same premises for 13 elderly people. Pastor Emmanuel Dawar, a former member of the tribal council, told UCA News the conversion allegation "is totally false."

"It is politically motivated as the ruling pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party lost most of the seats in tribal-dominated areas" in the 2018 state elections.

The ruling BJP blamed Christians for the defeat and "has been harassing us by filing false cases of conversion against us," Pastor Dawar said.

State polls in Madhya Pradesh along with elections in the neighboring Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan this year will be a prelude to next year's national elections where Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seeking a third consecutive term in office.

Madhya Pradesh amended its more than five decades-old anti-conversion law in 2021 with more stringent provisions.

Several Christian schools, hostels, and orphanages have witnessed flash raids. Several cases were also filed against them, accusing them of violating the anti-conversion law.

Christian leaders say the law is often used to target Christians in tribal-dominated areas, where missionaries offer education and healthcare.

"It is their plan to polarize voters" ahead of the assembly elections by the year-end, Pastor Dawar said. ☪



Officials detain Catholic teens wanting to be nuns

Parents of three tribal Catholic girls have demanded their release from the custody of child welfare authorities in a central Indian state after they were forcibly taken away on suspicion of conversion to Christianity.

"We want our children to be immediately released," Prakash Baria, father of one of the girls told UCA News on July 26. The teenage girls were reportedly detained in Madhya Pradesh by a team of the state's Commission for Protection of Child Rights on July 21. They were detained during an inspec-

tion of a Catholic school hostel in the predominantly tribal district of Jhabua, where they were staying, Church sources said.

The girls, two of them studying in grade 11 and one in grade 12, reportedly said they wanted to become Catholic nuns, which was interpreted as a religious conversion activity by the inspection team, Baria said. The girls are now held in the custody of the District Child Welfare Committee (CWC) ignoring their pleas, alleged their parents who are from Jamburi village in Banswara district of neighboring

Rajasthan state. Baria along with the other parents had arrived in Jhabua and questioned the authorities' decision without even informing them.

"We are tribal people who have followed the Catholic faith since our forefathers' time. Why are our children kept in the custody" of the officials, Baria asked. Samsun Makwana, another parent, asked: "Is it a crime to become a nun?"

"Even if our daughters have said that they want to become nuns, what is the problem," he said.

Makwana said his daughter had studied up to class 10 in the village school and was sent to the Catholic school for further studies and she was accommodated in the Church-run hostel. The parents told UCA News on July 26 that they plan

legal action against the child welfare authorities if their daughters are not released.

Ashok Arora, chairman of the CWC, told UCA News that they were handed custody of the girls by the state's child rights panel team.

He accused the hostel of violating norms and asked: "Is a school hostel a place to keep candidates who want to be nuns or give them training?"

"This is sheer harassment," said Sister Pramila Toppo, hostel in charge and superior of the Convent of Missionary Sisters of Ajmer. She told UCA News that it was "unfortunate that innocent girls are being treated like criminals for no fault of theirs."

"It seemed a deliberate attempt to tarnish the image of our education institutions," she added. ©

Suspended "reformist" priest to continue mission to cleanse church

A priest, suspended for his "grave disobedience" and causing public scandals, says nothing will deter his mission is to cleanse the Kerala Church, particularly his Syro-Malabar Church.

"I see the suspension as the first acknowledgment of my new mission. I also know that many more crosses are being prepared for me," Father Ajimon Puthiyaparambil told Matters India July 22.

The Syro-Malabar diocese of Thamarassery in the southern Indian state of Kerala dismissed the 46-year-old priest on July 18 after he refused to take charge as the parish priest of St Joseph's Church Nooramthode.

A "Decree of Suspension," issued by Bishop Remigiose Inchananiyil of Thamarassery, says Father Puthiyaparambil was suspended after "having heard" him to explain "the scandalous situation created by his public grave disobedience."

The decree also points out that Father Puthiyaparambil was served the transfer order on April 29. However, on May 13 he announced through a letter his decision to quit parish ministry. The letter was addressed to his parishioners in Mukkom, which his parish then, and Nooramthode, and "the brothers and sisters in the Kerala Church."

The priest, who has served several parishes after his ordination on December 30, 2002, said he has a prophetic call to follow the teachings of Christ "in its real sense" and work for eliminating the decay in

the Church. He was upset with some recent scandals related to Syro-Malabar Church leaders, including Cardinal George Alencherry, its head.

"The Church suffers from moral turpitude and lack of financial transparency. There are court cases against bishops and many of them openly indulge in political alliance," he explained.

Bishop Inchananiyil says the priest violated the canon law by "obstinately" insisting in his decision despite the prelate and the curia members urging him several times to return to the diocese and take up the new ministry. The prelate also accused the priest of taking a public stand against the decision of the Syro-Malabar Synod through public speeches and messages in the social media, "causing scandal and violating ecclesiastical discipline."

The bishop then suspended the priest from exercising all priestly ministry such as celebrating Mass and administering other Sacraments, until further orders. The bishop then offers him Good Shepherd Priest Home in Kozhikode for his stay during the suspension.

He recommended the priest to trust in the "Mercy of the Lord and to take refuge in His forgiving love."

Maintaining that he has no problem with the diocese, Father Puthiyaparambil says he is not going away from Jesus. He said his fight against the rottenness entrenched in the Kerala Church will continue. ©

(Courtesy: mattersindia.com)



Bob's Banter » BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

bobsbanter@gmail.com

Political Godmen Teachers..!

Bob!" said the voice at the other end, "You would fit well as the principal of our godmen school!" It was a few hours after reaching the Godman School, I was summoned hastily for a meeting, "What's the hurry?" I asked the committee member who had come to my lavish quarters, "I am just getting used to the place."

"If you cannot solve this immediate problem, you might have to return home by the next train!" said the committee member woefully as he led me to the board room. "We know all your qualities," said the chairman, "which is why we've offered you the principal's job! We have competition which may wipe us out!"

discourses!"

"They have infringed on our territory!" shrieked a godwoman who I had not seen till then, since they all had long hair, "All my disciples are now going for political meetings. They say they are getting their fill of godmen messages there!"

"And those lectures and messages are working," wept another committee member uncontrollably, as he switched on the TV monitor and showed me pictures of churches, mosques and even temples razed or burnt. They are able to do practically what we never achieved!"

"This is your first task!" shrieked the godwoman as a TV evangelist godman held her shoulders.



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"Don't worry," I said proudly, "with my super abilities, I'll see all other godmen institutes are off the radar, even before they get on the drawing board!"

"The competition is not from other godmen," wept a committee member even as he howled with sorrow, "It is from a most unexpected source. It's from politicians!"

Immediately, all the godmen committee members in the room started wailing like police sirens going off at a bomb raid, as I stood still waiting for the sad sound to stop. I then whispered, "Politicians have made a godmen school?" I whispered finally.

"Politicians have made the whole country into a godmen school!" said the chairman and the wailing started again, "The speeches and talks we gave to our disciples are now being said, broadcasted and repeated at every political meeting! Every political meeting has them talking about gods and goddesses, even instructing their people through religious

"Yes, your first task as principal of our godmen school!" shrieked all the other committee members of the godmen school, "To free politics off religion and bring it back to us!"

My wife was at the gate when I rushed back home, "What happened?" she asked, "You've left the job, I see!"

"They gave me an impossible task!" I said looking crestfallen, "They want me to compete with the most professional godmen teachers in the world, who have made the whole country their school! An impossible task!" I cried as the wife wisely whispered, "Stupid students..!" 🗣️

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



Bodhini: The School of Christian Meditation

PROGRAMMES - 2023

01. 6-Month Mindful-Contemplative Experiential Learning Programme [MCELP]

This highly beneficial mindful-contemplative training course [MCELP] will offer Biblical evidence-based tools, practices, and resources to prime your body and mind to feel more focused, to encounter challenging situations, to nourish your relationship, to ever maintain a peaceful and committed life.

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PART A: FIVE WEEKS

AUG. 14-18: QUALITIES OF A RELIGIOUS LEADER

1. Superior: Divine Conduit for Manifesting God's Will
2. Inspirational Leadership and the Essential Qualities of a True Leader
3. Fostering Inclusive Leadership in Religious Communities
4. Building Stronger Communities through Effective Leadership
5. Internal and External Missions of Superiors

AUG. 21-25: SELF DISCOVERY AND GROWTH OF A RELIGIOUS LEADER

1. Self-Concept of a Religious Leader
2. Developing Self Worth and Self Esteem
3. Personal Spiritual Search as a Leader-1
4. Personal Spiritual Search as a Leader-2
5. Integration

SEP. 11-15: TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

1. Transformational Leadership in Old Testament
2. Transformational Leadership
3. Decision Making and Discernment
4. Synodality: Walking together
5. Art of Spiritual Conversation

SEP. 18-25: SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

1. Communication skills (Verbal and Non-Verbal)
2. Understanding the Body language of the members
3. Developing Emotional Intelligence
4. Anger management
5. Team Building and Developing Rapport with Members

OCT. 9-13: LEADERSHIP MANAGEMENT

1. Leadership Management in New Testament
2. Administration and Time Management
3. Pastoral Time Management
4. Managing Mid-Life Crisis
5. Stress Management

PART B: FOCUS

Oct. 16-20: Psychospiritual and Psychosocial Dynamics

Nov. 6-10: Expectations on the Religious Leaders

Nov. 13-17: Leadership Models of Pope Francis

Dec. 4-8: Dealing with Challenges

Dec. 11-15: Paradigm Shift in Religious Leadership

Jan. 8-12: Organisational Management

Jan. 15-19: Spiritual Progress of Religious Leader

For any clarification, contact Director: Fr. Nithiya OFM Cap (+919445548000) nithiyas@gmail.com

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