

# Indian Currents

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## RESERVATION FOR DALIT CHRISTIANS



# TRAPPED AGAIN

Modi government's move to set up a Commission to study the status of Dalit Christians and Muslims is a tactics to bluff them. Their wait for reservation continues with every government trying to scuttle it by one way or another

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## ANOTHER COMMISSION, FOR WHAT



Yet another Commission to study the status of the Dalit Christians and Muslims is coming. There is nothing more pretentious than this move. The intent is doubtful as there is no dearth of such Commissions and their reports which are lying in the 'cold storage', exposing the government's apathy. To put the issue in the right perspective, Dalit Christians and Muslims, the victims of a flawed reservation policy, have been clamouring for Scheduled Caste status which is limited to their counterparts among Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs. Thus, Dalits converted to Christianity and Islam continue to be victims of a religion-based reservation policy, despite ample evidence that they too suffer from social and economic backwardness just as their counterparts who enjoy the benefits of Scheduled Caste status.

Coming to the Modi government's reported move to set up a Commission to study the status of Dalit Christians and Muslims, it is nothing but a tactics to bluff them. The government has in its possession reports which suggest that the status of Dalit Muslims and Christians is no different from that of the Dalits of other religious communities for whom SC status has been granted on different occasions. A 2008 study commissioned by the National Commission for Minorities found that caste divisions exist among Christians and Muslims just as they exist among their counterparts in Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist religions. Christianity and Islam – just as Sikhism and Buddhism – do not have explicit caste structure as in Hinduism; but the stigma of caste identity follow them even after their conversion. Though their religious affiliations change, their social status do not alter; their branding as Christians and Muslims of 'low origin' continues to stick with them, despite scriptural proscription.

Studies have brought out shocking state of the status of Dalit Christians and Muslims. There are places they have separate mosques and churches and burial grounds; inter-marriages hardly take places; and there is sparse interaction and cooperation. There is perceptible difference in education between Dalits and non-Dalits in both the communities; there is grave economic disparity too. The data gathered by the National Sample Survey Office too give credence to the glaring disparity between the Dalits and non-Dalits among Muslims and Christians. It is to be noted that no government has repudiated these findings.

It is hypocrisy that a government which is 'equipped with' reports containing data and statistics on the status of Dalit Christians and Muslims is considering setting up yet another Commission to study the same issue. It is nothing but a ploy to keep the issue endlessly in the 'cold storage'. The 'masters' behind the BJP regime would certainly not allow the issue to be settled in favour of Dalit Christians and Muslims for obvious reasons. The Dalit Christians and Muslims are not asking for any special favour; they are seeking their right which has been granted to their counterparts in other religions. It is another matter that the government reportedly filed an affidavit a couple of years back in the Supreme Court stating that Dalits who converted to Buddhism could not be compared to those who converted to Islam or Christianity. This indicates what is in store for them irrespective of the findings of the new Commission.

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

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## POWER QUOTES



You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough

- **Mae West**

• • •



The whole secret of a successful life is to find out what is one’s destiny to do, and then do it

- **Henry Ford**

• • •



When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left and could say, I used everything you gave me

- **Erma Bombeck**

• • •



Luck is a dividend of sweat. The more you sweat, the luckier you get

- **Ray Kroc**

• • •



Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all others

- **Winston Churchill**

• • •



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

- **Oliver Wendell Holmes**

• • •



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

- **Jack Canfield**

• • •



Education costs money. But then so does ignorance

- **Sir Claus Moser**

• • •



Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter

- **Martin Luther King Jr.**

• • •

# The Eluding SC Status

The wait of Dalit Christians and Muslims for Scheduled Caste status continues with every government trying to scuttle it by one way or other

BY JOHN DAYAL

With two important cases of its own before the Supreme Court of India, and an equally important case against it in the same court, the Christian community in India could well be faced with some very uncomfortable and even existential questions soon.

This has nothing to do with the recent statements of Mr Mohan Bhagwat, the supreme leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which trains with long bamboo staves and the occasional airguns.

In his speech in the beautiful north-eastern city of Shillong recently, a month after his now infamous meeting with five Muslim retired bureaucrats and generals, Mr. Bhagwat said, “all Indians are the inhabitants of Hindustan, which is in the south of the Himalayas, north of Indian Ocean, on the bank of the Indus River. The habitants of this area are traditionally called Hindus. This is also called Bharat.”

Mr. Bhagwat said the term ‘Hindu’ covers all those who are the sons of ‘Bharat Mata’, descendants of Indian ancestors and who live in accordance with Indian culture, Shillong Times and other media



reported. Mr. Bhagwat does not answer questions from the audience. Hence, the audience too does not ask questions to Mr. Bhagwat. So, any confusion in the minds of the people will remain unresolved till the next editorial in Panchjanya and Organiser, the official mouthpieces.

Mr Bhagwat’s statements are not new. In some form or the other, they have been the slogans of the Sangh ever since Independence, though during the premiership of Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee from 1998 till 2004, it had not trumpeted it with such vigour.

The RSS chief’s words are also not going to figure in the three separate cases, but in a way interconnected, that three separate Benches of the Supreme Court are now considering. But his thesis is comprehensively covered in the arguments made by the non-Christian and non-Muslim groups that are challenging the Christian positions on such issues as Dalit Christians, conversions, and targeted violence against Catholic churches and independent protestant pastors.

The Supreme Court Bench headed by Justice D.

Y. Chandrachud has asked several state governments to submit data, if they have any, on incidents of targeted violence against Christians in various parts of the country. The issue had been raised by Archbishop of Bangalore Peter Machado and a host of civil society groups after a spate of incidents in Karnataka in the wake of the enactment of the state’s anti-conversion law which targets both Christians and Muslims.

The archbishop’s petition said there was a “sinister phenomenon of violence” and “targeted hate speech” against the Christian community by vigilante groups and members of right wing organisations. Such violence had been rising because the state’s law and order machinery had failed to protect innocent and vulnerable citizens.



The central and state governments have not taken immediate and necessary actions against groups that have caused widespread violence and hate speech against the Christian community, including attacks on churches and educational institutions. The court has reminded government that it had in the past issued guidelines that covered mob lynchings and targeted violence against identified communities.

The state and central governments have convenient excuses to deny such charges. Since local police seldom register cases of targeted violence against minority communities, there are hardly any records of serious violence. Most cases of attacks even on house churches are registered as scuffles and law and order cases, with often the itinerant independent pastor and his flock painted as the culprits.

The Supreme Court has been sharp in asking Centre and state governments on why they are not “taking stringent steps to control fraudulent religious conversion by ‘intimidation’ and through ‘gifts and monetary benefits.’” Justices M R Shah and Krishna Murari have asked the Home Ministry and the Law Ministry to file a reply by November 14.

The petition was filed by advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay seeking direction to the Centre and states to take stringent steps to control fraudulent religious conversion by “intimidation, threatening, deceptively luring through gifts and monetary benefits.”

Mr Upadhyay says the “injury caused to the citizens is extremely large because there is not even one district which is free of religious conversion by hook and crook.” “Incidents are reported every week throughout the country where conversion is done by intimidating, threatening, deceptively luring through



gifts and monetary benefits and also by using black magic, superstition, miracles but Centre and States have not taken stringent steps to stop this menace.”

Experts have pointed out that while hearing a petition that challenged an earlier order of Madras High Court on “forceful conversion” Supreme Court justices Indira Banerjee and A S Bopanna had called such petitions “more about publicity interest than the public interest”. “You are actually disturbing the harmony with these kinds of petitions,” Live Law legal news portal had reported the judges as saying.

The fear of large-scale conversions from Hinduism to Christianity, and to Islam to a lesser extent, were at the root of the political decision that the government of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and his celebrated Law Minister and chair of the Constitution drafting committee, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, had been pressured into taking by powerful right wing lobbies in the Congress and others against giving political, employment and education quotas to Christian converts from the former untouchable castes.

The controversial decision, called the Presidential Order 1950, later inserted into the Constitution as Article 341 Part 3, said affirmative action of empowerment by reservations would be only for those who remained in the Hindu-fold, and not extend to those who converted to Islam, Christianity, and others.

Under pressure from Mazhabi Sikhs, a powerful block in Punjab, and Ambedkarite Buddhists of Maharashtra and Bihar, those two religions were also exempted from the ban on converts and now enjoy the fruits of the 15 per cent quotas which have

**Mohan Bhagwat “all Indians are the inhabitants of Hindustan, which is in the south of the Himalayas, north of Indian Ocean, on the bank of the Indus River. The habitants of this area are traditionally called Hindus. This is also called Bharat”**



**Since local police seldom register cases of targeted violence against minority communities, there are hardly any records of serious violence. Most cases of attacks even on house churches are registered as scuffles and law and order cases**

not only brought 85 members of the three communities to the Lok Sabha and an equal percentage to the state legislatures and panchayats but have also ensured them higher education, and a role in civil and police administration.

The 1950 order, which is being challenged for the second time in the Supreme Court by the Christian and Muslim communities, says “No person who professes a religion different from the Hindu, the Sikh or the Buddhist religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste.” It was amended twice in 1956 and 1990 to include Sikhs and Buddhists, respectively.

The Christian community in its earlier challenge had failed to convince the court that they suffered the same insults and inequities that Hindus of the same caste suffered at the hands of the upper castes in the towns and villages where they lived.

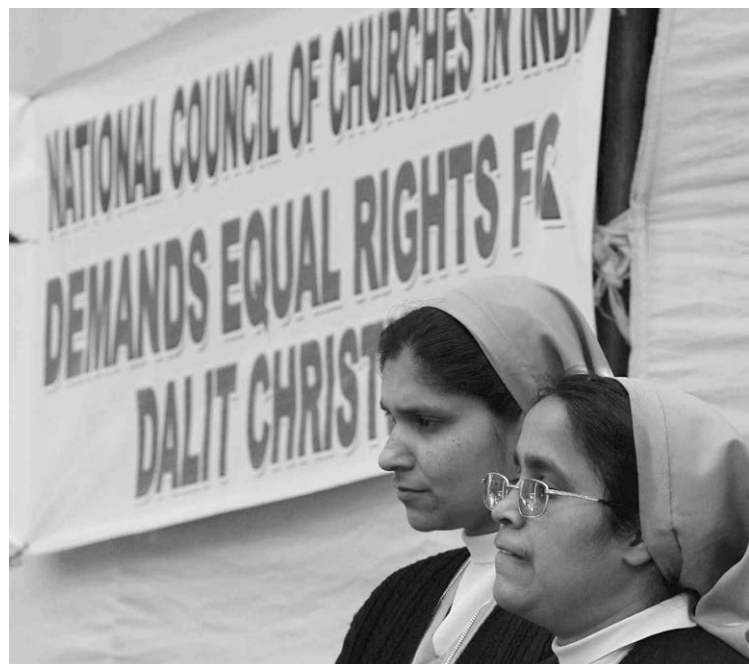
The church groups had no empirical data to show the real-life situation in education, employment, and social life, which includes such things as the inability to draw water from a common well, to issues such as

physical assaults, ostracization and targeted indignities in schools, colleges, or places of employment. For Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists, the anti-atrocity laws make all such issues criminal offences with police enjoined to take cognisance and courts to give strict punishment.

Many officers have had to face the law because they would not accept water at the hands of lower caste employee, or conversely, an upper caste junior staffer would refuse to execute orders given by a superior officer coming from socially lower castes. Sounds funny to someone not familiar with the Indian situation, but still not uncommon in India of 2022, specially in schools and offices in rural areas.

The plaintiffs feel their position is much stronger. They have done greater research and are now armed with official data from three important commissions and committees appointed by the government. These are the Justice Rajinder Sachar committee appointed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, with its report in 2007; the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities headed by former Supreme Court Justice Ranganath Mishra; and the National Commission for Minorities, then headed by Mr Buta Singh, once the Railways Minister.

An expert group headed by the internationally well-known sociologist, and Delhi University professor, Dr. Satish Deshpande had also whetted the data in a celebrated report to confirm that certain strata





of converts to Islam and Christianity still suffer from grave social discrimination that translates into education and employment infirmities.

Of the two main contending parties, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party, it is the Congress that has been more dishonest, if truth be told. Mr. Modi's BJP is ideologically opposed to granting of Scheduled Caste quota to Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians.

The BJP, whether it is Mr Modi leading it now or Mr Vajpayee and Mr Advani leading it in the last few decades of the 20th century, has been honest in saying there is no question of the party encouraging an exodus from Hinduism to Christianity or Islam among the Dalit population by removing the barrier of the 1950 Presidential Order.

In a speech delivered on August 14, 2004, in Mumbai, BJP patriarch L.K. Advani said, "For a long time, there have been demands for extending reservations to so-called 'Dalit' Christians and 'Dalit' Muslims. However, successive governments have not paid heed to these demands. Why? This is because the framers of the Indian Constitution were very clear in their minds that caste is a feature of the Hindu society. If some lower caste Hindus converted to Islam or Christianity in the past, it was because of the claim and the promise of these religions that they were casteless and hence offered an equal station to the converts vis-a-vis original Muslims or Christians."

Mr Advani admits caste is a problem of the Indian society. And though caste doesn't exist in Islam or Christianity as a theological issue, in actual societies in India, caste systems are prevalent among the converts.

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Former Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad had in fact told the Rajya Sabha, "Dalits who had shunned their faith and converted to Islam and Christianity would not be permitted to contest parliamentary or assembly elections from constituencies reserved for Scheduled Castes and will not be allowed to claim other reservation benefits."

The Congress has vacillated right from 1950, when its government passed the order. Mrs Sonia Gandhi, as chairperson of the United Progress Alliance, had once told me – in a private meeting with a priest colleague and I – "your best chance for Dalit Christians getting their rights is in the courts. I cannot help you. No political party can."

Despite civil society pressure, it never bothered to amend the 1950 order. Instead, it introduced a minority sub quota of 4.5 per cent in the lead up to the 2012 Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections.

Mrs Gandhi had been advised by her senior advisers, including a Christian Minister, that there would be aggressive opposition not just from the Hindu right, or upper caste Congressmen, but also from Hindu Dalits both within and outside the ruling group.

Dalit leaders have been coached to believe the "cake" of reservations is not large enough to share with better educated Christians were they to be given Scheduled Caste status.

No one bothers that the 1950 order communalises some important aspects of the Constitution by introducing religion as an arbiter of welfare and empowerment measures.

Justice Ranganatha Misra Commission's sole surviving member, Prof Tahir Mehmood, in a scathing article recently said the Congress government "had just slept over the entire report till it lost power seven years later."

## Mr Advani admits caste is a problem of the Indian society. And though caste doesn't exist in Islam or Christianity as a theological issue, in actual societies in India, caste systems are prevalent among the converts

“Going by the stand then taken on its report by the present [BJP] government of the country, I am at a loss to comprehend the surprise move to set up another similar body. Given their known policies, it seems to be somewhat paradoxical,” Prof Mehmood, who was earlier chairman of the National Minorities Commission and then a member of the Law Commission of India, said. He was referring to a news item that the government was going to tell the Supreme Court it will ask a new panel to study the matter of granting Scheduled Caste status to Muslims and Christians.

Activists of Minority religions say though untouchability has been officially abolished since the Constitution was brought into force in 1950, it remains very strong on the ground, and not just in the villages. In fact, as seen in recent court cases from university towns in the US, Indians have taken it with them to foreign lands in modern times.

The rape of Dalit women in villages and towns is a matter of national shame and official concern.



The lynchings and assaults on Dalit youth asserting their human dignity are legion. Government data has shown that Dalit, Tribal and Muslim men form a disproportionately large number of people in jail and awaiting trial.

Cases of crime against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have risen progressively in the years between 2018 and 2020, according to figures tabled by the Ministry of Home Affairs in the Lok Sabha. Cases registered for crime against SCs rose from 42,793 in 2018 to over 50,000 in 2020, and of crime against STs from 6,528 to 8,272 in the same period.

The secretary for Dalit affairs of the 103-year-old All India Catholic Union, Mr. Alphonse. G. Kennedy, points out that affirmative action is not about just educational and employment opportunities. It is a matter of representation in administration apparatus and in the making of legislation. Also, the Prevention of Atrocities Act ensures that oral or physical violence against Dalits, including ostracization, will invite strict punitive action from the government.

Christian and Muslim Dalits are clear they want nothing less than the offending section of Article 341 abolished. It discriminates against them and, in fact, introduces religious bias and bigotry in social justice meant for all. The two groups also do not want to be fobbed off by being given backward status, an overcrowded field, which does not give them the protection under law as given to Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits. ©

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JOHN DAYAL** is a veteran journalist and human rights activist.



## Church trains Northeast youth on entrepreneurship



The North East Regional Youth Commission has conducted a two-day workshop on career guidance, capacity building and entrepreneurship development for the young people of northeastern India.

The aim of the September 22-23 workshop at Inspiration Building in Guwahati's Kharguli suburb was to empower the youth to make informed career choice, said Sister Aluti Rabba, the coordinator of the commission's woman and youth.

"By the end of these two days of training, all of you will not only be able to make better career choice but also become job creators," the member of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians told the participants.

Ninety participants from various colleges and universities around Guwahati town attended the resourceful training program led by Anjan Chowdhury, senior training consultant from Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship and Ranjan Baruah, career mentor and skill trainer in Guwahati.

Commission chairman Bishop George Pallippar-

ambil of Miao says northeastern India has so much talent and that such training "will indeed help our youth to discover themselves, their strength and areas of interest."

The participants expressed happiness over the outcome of the training. Bratati Sarmah, a student from Handique College, Guwahati, said, "The training has enhanced my self-awareness, interpersonal and communication skills and has helped me to identify my areas of strength."

Apart from motivation and skill development, the training has helped the youth to enhance their entrepreneurial abilities to establish successful enterprises, said Mary Joseph, another participant from the University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya.

"I am glad I attended this workshop. I now return to my university with the right motivation to look forward to my future with positive spirit to make informed career choice in life," said another participant. ©

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)

# Faith and security History repeats itself

The Union government has appointed Lieutenant-General Anil Chauhan (Retd.) as the new Chief of Defence Staff. The question is why a retired person should be found to be CDS?

BY **A.J. PHILIP**

**W**ar is not new to India. Soon after it attained Independence, it had to face the organised intrusion of what is called “tribes”, which was a bold attempt by Pakistan to snatch the Kashmir Valley. They were driven out even before they could grab the Srinagar airport.

If the Indian Army was not able to reach the airport and safeguard it, the Valley could have been lost forever. Even before India could tackle the challenges of development as a sovereign, independent nation, China attacked her in 1962.

Every Indian citizen’s wish was that the result of the war was different. India was not prepared to face



such an onslaught even before the pangs of the Partition could be kept at bay. Nonetheless, we as a nation overcame the challenge, though our pride was a little hurt.

The 1965 war taught the Pakistanis a lesson that it could meddle with India only at the cost of its integrity. The 1971 war marked the founding of a new nation – Bangladesh – and the end of the two-nation theory. For once people knew that language and culture were more cohesive than religion.

Then there was the Kargil war, which was a treacherous attempt to destroy the communication link between Leh and Srinagar. The Pakistanis





**Lt.-General Anil Chauhan (Retd.) appointed as new CDS**

had the advantage as they were ensconced in their trenches on the hills but that did not prevent the Indian forces from driving them out and re-capture the hills.

What is noticeable in all these wars is that there was never a crisis at the leadership level. The Army, the Air Force and the Navy complemented one another, especially during the 1971 war. Of course, there were the defence minister and the prime minister the service chiefs could look up to in case they needed political support or guidance.

One reason why there was no one overarching leader to control the armed forces was the fear that it might lead to military coups. Along with India, many other countries also won independence, many of them in Asia and Africa. Most of them came under military rule.

In our own neighbourhood, the military crushed democracy in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, to name just three. Thanks to the growth of social media, military coups are no longer fashionable. Even in Pakistan, the military no longer wants to rule directly. It would like to hold the remote controller with a puppet regime, ostensibly in control.

As a party, the BJP has been obsessed with security. In fact, security has been an obsession for Indian rulers. Another obsession is faith. Though 75 years have passed since India attained Independ-

ence, we consider it easier to blame the British for all the ills India suffers from.

China does not blame Mongolia for terrorising the Chinese to such an extent that they were forced to build the Great Wall of China. Nor does Japan blame the Americans for dropping atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima during the Second World War.

They are today the world's second and third largest economies. But everyday our leaders like Narendra Modi and Shashi Tharoor blame the British for their loot. India was always a rich nation but the people were always poor. Why?

Visit any town in North India, be it in Rajasthan or Madhya Pradesh or Uttar Pradesh. You will find large forts. Enormous sums of money were required to build them so that the ruler and his or her retinue could live in comfort and security. Millions of people had to sacrifice their health to build these edifices which had nothing to do with the common people.

Similarly, huge sums of money were spent on temples, mosques, temple gates, gardens and mausoleums like the Taj Mahal and the Humayun Tomb. In other words, money that should have been spent for the welfare of the people was spent on non-essential items. Is it any wonder that the people remained poor?

The situation is much the same now. Ten percent of the people own more than 50 per cent of the wealth while 50 per cent of the people own only 10 percent of the national wealth. The disparity has been widening.

The BJP is one party which wants to spend a lot of public money to promote faith and security. As mentioned earlier, it is obsessed with security. When Atal Bihari Vajpayee came to power, he wanted to have a Chief of Defence Staff but for one reason or another, it did not fructify.

When Modi became Prime Minister, the proposal





**Bipin Rawat**

was suddenly revived. Because of turf wars and other reasons, he also could not do much. Finally, he took the decision in his own hands and he announced from the ramparts of the Red Fort that India would soon have a Chief of Defence Staff. No, he was not bluffing!

General Bipin Rawat was appointed as the first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The government spokesmen justified it on the ground that in situations of emergency, the CDS alone could take prompt decisions. He was the chief coordinator for all the three defence forces. The post was touted as vital for the security of the nation.

Unfortunately, General Rawat died in a helicopter crash in Tamil Nadu in December 2021. If the post was so vital, the government should have been quick to appoint his successor. True, General Manoj Mukund Naravane was appointed Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, a post that used to exist. In the past, the service chief who was senior held this post.

Finally, the government appointed Lieutenant-General Anil Chauhan (Retd.) as the new CDS. Of course, the government had amended the rules whereby a person of the rank of Lt.-Gen could be appointed CDS provided he fulfilled a certain age criterion. The post of CDS is for a maximum period of three years.

Lt.-Gen Chauhan would certainly be fulfilling all the amended criteria. Now, the question is why a

retired person should be found to be CDS. As CDS, he will be secretary to the government of India and will head the Department of Military Affairs.

The Armed Forces everywhere in the world are status conscious. Rank is of the essence in the services. To bring home the point, a staff nurse in the Army is given the status of a commissioned officer but she is not entitled to receive salute from the soldiers. Nor do the nurses get the salary of the commissioned officer. Then, why is the status of a commissioned officer given to her? "Otherwise, the jawans will not obey her". Imagine the scenario when a retired lieutenant general is commanding serving chiefs of the Army, the Air Force and the Navy!

Will the CDS be able to get the respect as he failed to make the grade to the service chief? The delay and selection expose the government's claim that CDS is vital for the security of the nation. Had that been the case, it would not have created the present situation.

In any case, the BJP is obsessed with retired persons. In fact, it can be called a party of retired people. If anyone who knows the situation in the country is asked the question, "who is the most powerful person in the government after Modi and Amit Shah?", he will immediately answer that it is National Security Advisor Ajit Kumar Doval.

All the dye in the world cannot hide the fact that he is now 77. It was on the ground that LK Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi were above 75 that they were not given a place in Modi's Cabinet in 2014. If the cut-off age is applicable to them, why is it not applicable to Doval?

He retired from the government one-and-a-half decade ago and was looking after an NGO associated with the Sangh Parivar when Modi appointed him to the post of NSA. Today, Doval enjoys Cabinet



## Today, Modi's government, too, spends money on temples and temple corridors, statues and central vistas while the poor are becoming poorer and the rich are becoming richer

rank. There are innumerable stories about his sleuthing capabilities like the stories taught in government schools in Karnataka that while Savarkar was in the Cellular Jail in Andamans, he used to fly like a bird to the mainland!

NSA and CDS are American-style posts. As I mentioned, the BJP is obsessed with security. When Vajpayee was the prime minister, he felt the need to have an NSA. He had a "very powerful" home minister in Advani. So, he looked for a person who could fill the post.

And he found one in Brajesh Mishra. He was from Madhya Pradesh, which is Vajpayee's own state. He was the son of DP Mishra, former Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, who was considered a Chanakya in Indian politics. It is a different matter that all Brahmin leaders were vested with this title.

What was indigestible was that Mishra was a diplomat, who was overlooked for the post of Foreign Secretary. In other words, a person who was not found competent to be FS and who had retired from service was appointed as the first NSA. As NSA, Mishra enjoyed more power than any Cabinet minister as he had the ears of the prime minister.

The Congress government which succeeded Vajpayee's government carried on with the post of NSA. It also found retired persons like JN Dixit, MK Narayanan and Shivsankara Menon to fill this post. Doval takes the cake, as he is now pushing 77 in a government where officers retire at 60. Nobody can question the incongruity of retaining him in service when he has the support of Modi who is not just the Prime Minister but the uncrowned king of India.

The BJP's problem is that it does not have any icons. The one and only icon is Savarkar, who wrote the book *Hindutva*, but the problem is that every time his name is mentioned, people remember the series of clemency letters he wrote to the British government to seek mercy when hundreds of freedom fight-

ers – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs – preferred to die than be the bootlickers of the alien rulers.

So, what the party has been doing is to include into their pantheon leaders who had nothing to do with Hindutva. For instance, Swami Vivekananda was one who never showed sectarianism in his writings or speeches or conduct. Yes, he was a Hindu but he did not hate Muslims and Christians.

On the contrary, the BJP has been promoting him as a Hindutva icon. Swami never even knew the word Hindutva which was coined long after he attained samadhi. A new icon in the BJP pantheon is Netaji Bose.

Bose differed with Nehru but they remained friends. There are innumerable letters and correspondences which bring out the esteem in which Bose held Nehru. The BJP thinks that Bose was a negation of Nehruism. He was a socialist who could not stand obscurantism and over-religiosity unlike the BJP leaders who shout Jai Shri Ram even in Parliament, forget the public square.

The other day while renaming the Chandigarh airport after Bhagat Singh, Modi showered praises on him. Does Modi and Co. know that Bhagat Singh was an atheist, an intellectual whose slogan was "Inquilab Zindabad"? He said that "any man who stands for progress has to criticise, disbelieve and challenge every item of the old faith". Far from that, Modi has been reinforcing old faith.

Another icon the BJP has is Sardar Patel, who was born a Congressman, lived a Congressman and died a Congressman. He was the one who first banned the RSS. Patel was an organisational man, unlike Nehru who was a people's man. Patel was always conscious of his limitations. Yet, Modi built the tallest statue for Patel little knowing that the US government did not spend a single penny on the Statue of Liberty in New York. It was built with the money Pulitzer's newspaper raised from its readers.

In the "glorious past" the Indian leaders squandered money on building magnificent temples and mausoleums while the people remained poor. Today, Modi's government, too, spends money on temples and temple corridors, statues and central vistas while the poor are becoming poorer and the rich are becoming richer. Yes, history repeats itself! ©

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# Appeasement as Strategy

The recent meeting between five 'Muslim intellectuals' and RSS Sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat turned out to be a damp squib

BY **ABDUL KHALIQ**

There are constant reminders that we are not a homogeneous nation, but one riven by caste and religious divisions, the most lethal of which is the Hindu-Muslim divide that, like a malignant contagion, has even spread to the Indian diaspora in its most vicious primeval form. The recent violent clashes in Leicester after the Asia Cup India-Pakistan T20 match and the heightened tensions between Hindus and Muslims in New Jersey following the showcasing of a bulldozer at the local Independence Day parade, have not surprised anyone in these "Howdy Modi" times. Nor has anyone been jolted by the Indian High Commission's official statement condemning the violence but clearly betraying its partisan concerns by highlighting the "vandalization of premises and symbols of Hindu religion", thereby equating one community's problems with the nation's problems, while blotting out the plight of fellow-Muslim Indians.

At home, the cracks are getting wider. As has



been happening in the last eight years, the communal cauldron is kept boiling. In a move that will only further exacerbate communal tensions, the government, in the early hours of September 22, swooped down on the Muslim-dominated Popular Front of India (PFI), arresting around 100

members from various parts of the country.

Founded in 2007, the organization describes itself as "a neo-social movement which strives for the empowerment of marginalized sections of India", and it is no secret that it has fashioned itself on the lines of the RSS in form, incorporating martial exercises and parades as part of the routine for its cadres. It gained notoriety in 2010 when some of its members chopped off the hand of a college professor for alleged scurrilous references to the Prophet. In the past, there have been violent clashes between the RSS and the PFI in Karnataka and Kerala. The latest crackdown on the PFI has provoked a howl of protests by Muslims across the country.







Gyanvapi Mosque

It is in this fraught context of communal disharmony that one needs to view the front-page news of a recent meeting between the RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat, and five “eminent Muslim intellectuals”, including one who was the hatchet man of this regime till his luck ran out. According to one of the eminences, the purpose of the visit to the RSS Delhi headquarters was to “bring up concerns of the Muslims and to know the issues that the RSS had with Muslims”; in essence seeking to build a bridge of understanding between two hitherto irreconcilable entities.

Anyone who has watched the inexorable, ruthless march of Hindutva to the very center of the body politic under the leadership of Mohan Bhagwat in the last few years, would dismiss such a venture, most charitably, as a fatuous exercise that will change nothing. Hindutva’s lifeblood is an implacable hatred of the Muslim who must pay for historical wrongs committed against Hindus. The relentless hate-mongering of the RSS and its cohorts that has seeped into the minds of an overwhelmingly large section of Hindus is going nowhere, and anemic petitions to the Hindutva papacy are nothing more than so many straws against the storm.

The hush-hush meeting took place at the end of August and the almost three-week-long silence thereafter was broken only when some snoopily journalists made the parleys public with riders such as “According to one of the members of the group who did not wish to be named...” Did they initially

have second thoughts about the wisdom of holding such a meeting that achieved nothing and possibly compromised the interests of one community? That’s not how these worthies construed the meeting when they eventually emerged from the closet.

Latching on to the crumbs thrown their way as concessions by the RSS Sarsanghchalak, they noted his acknowledgement that Muslim citizens are not to be called Hindu Muslims but Indian Muslims and that referring to Muslims as jihadis was wrong and hurtful. They would also like to believe that he conceded the impossibility of India’s Muslims

outgrowing and dominating Hindus or that they sought to do so. But they have got very naïve to believe that “*Ham paanch hamare pachees*” will no longer be a rallying cry of the bhakts because their leader has now been educated by the group on the realities of population growth, a fact that, they think, he was not aware of till this closed-door meeting. Their simple-minded evaluation makes me want to cry!

Playing along with these do-gooders and making concessions purely in the realm of semantic superficialities, the Sarsanghchalak succeeded in his intent of portraying the RSS as the embodiment of rationality, fair-mindedness and simplicity. One member gushed in admiration: “Despite being so powerful, he lives in a very simple room with very simple furni-

**The meeting with Bhagwat was so choreographed that no substantive life-and-death issues concerning Muslims were raised. The CAA, the abrogation of Article 370, and, most important, the ongoing controversy around the Gyanvapi mosque were clearly out of bounds**



## It is difficult to fathom the rationale for the meeting between the Sarsanghchalak and the group of five, especially when no substantive issue concerning Muslims was discussed

ture.” Mohan Bhagwat, and by inference the RSS, emerged from the meeting wearing a halo of accommodation and tolerance. The meeting with Bhagwat was so choreographed that no substantive life-and-death issues concerning Muslims were raised. The CAA, the abrogation of Article 370, and, most important, the ongoing controversy around the Gyanvapi mosque were clearly out of bounds. On the contrary, Bhagwat upbraided these self-appointed Muslim “spokespersons” for not amplifying his munificent message on the Gyanvapi Mosque controversy, that “there was no need to find a ‘shivling’ in every mosque and start a new dispute every day,” which he believes is a major concession to Muslim sensibilities, as was his imperious assertion that the Court’s verdict in the matter would be honored.

He was not reminded by the five supplicants that he was not above law or that the constitutional bench of the Supreme Court, in its 2019 Ayodhya verdict granting the Babri masjid site for construction of the Ramjanmabhumi temple, had categorically prohibited further conversion of any place of

worship and imposed a positive obligation to maintain the religious character of every place of worship as it existed on 15th August, 1947, in terms of the Places of Religious Worship Act, 1991.

One step at a time is clearly the Sarsanghchalak’s strategy. He knows that in the present environment, when faith (of the majority) has been placed above the law as in the Ayodhya judgement, it is more than likely that the Courts will privilege the Hindu hypothesis in the Gyanvapi mosque dispute. Meanwhile, he is working to soften Muslim resistance to change in the status of the functional Gyanvapi mosque. Of course, in the

event of the courts delivering justice on the basis of jurisprudence, the extra-constitutional methods, as applied in the Babri Masjid case, are ready at hand, despite his protestations about such a recourse.

It is difficult to fathom the rationale for the meeting between the Sarsanghchalak and the group of five, especially when no substantive issue concerning Muslims was discussed. Their unsolicited intercession on behalf of the beleaguered Muslim community with the RSS chief, was a damp squib. Whether intended or not, the only positive outcome of the meeting is that Mohan Bhagwat has emerged as the voice of reason and moderation, publicly and heartily endorsed by the Muslim interlocutors.

The group of five drew a blank. And yet in a recent interview, one from this elite group stated that 90 percent of Muslims endorsed their interaction with the RSS chief, with his compatriot going further in stating that 99 percent of Muslims he knew approved of the deliberations and their point of view. But surely these gentlemen know better than to think that they could make any headway with the doyen of Hindutva. In any case, as Karan Thapar pointed out, they should have approached the PM or Home Minister who are the arbiters on most issues agitating Muslims.

In the ultimate analysis, it was a meeting of unequals and a classic example of propitiation of the oppressor who calls the shots. And these Muslim luminaries should know that appeasement never works! ©

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# 'All are Hindus by Default'

Mohan Bhagwat's claim that the RSS does not convert people since everyone who lives in 'Bharat' is a Hindu is nothing but misleading

BY **ALBERT THYRNIANG**

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief, Mohan Bhagwat, on September 25, which by coincidence or design happened to be a Sunday, said in Shillong that everyone is a Hindu and a devotee of Hindutva, by default. He claimed that the RSS did not convert people since everyone who lives in 'Bharat' was already a Hindu. On his way back, Bhagwat, along with top Seng Khasi (indigenous tribal faith) leaders, prayed at the sanctum sanctorum of U Lum Sohpetbneng (Navel of the Universe) 15 km from the State Capital, thus confirming the link between the Seng Khasi and the RSS.

A social organisation called 'Thma U Rangli Juki' (TUR) condemned Bhagwat's statement emphasizing that the indigenous people of Meghalaya are not Hindus. The Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma of the NPP, however, played down the statement saying it was Bhagwat's personal opinion reminding everyone that the Indian Constitution is secular. Local BJP leaders who were present at the function in the state library saw nothing wrong with the speech. In the social media, people resisted Bhagwat's narrow view and proclaimed they are Khasis and Indians, but not Hindus.

The declaration of the RSS chief is, of course, nothing new. Reports of the carbon copy statement appear regularly in the press. On September 19, 2018 Bhagwat claimed that everyone who lives in India is Hindu by identity. On December 26, 2019 he even dared to pronounce that all the 130 crore Indians belong to the Hindu society irrespective of their religion and culture. In February this year, the head of the right-wing organisation contended that there were no more 'Ahindus' (non-Hindus) but only the 4 types of Hindus – 'proud, reluctant, unfriendly, ignorant.'

Wherever the supremo of the progenitor of the Sangh Parivar goes and speaks, he repeats his conviction to turn India into a 'one nation, one

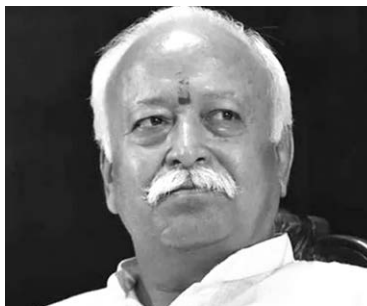


religion, one culture' country. The significance of his present statement is because he made it in Meghalaya, a state with a predominantly Christian population. He has now branded all Meghalayans -- traditional religious practitioners, Christians, Muslims and others -- 'Hindus'.

The topmost leader of the outfit is persuading people to believe that what he refers is a geographical area and not a religion. Under the guise that Hindus are referred to the people who live between the Himalayan mountain ranges and the Indian Ocean, works are on to club all others under the Hindu-fold. The RSS and others are the first to acknowledge that Hindus are not just inhabitants of the above geographical territory. They openly propagate that Hindus are those who follow a certain way of life. 'Way of life' is intertwined with religion. So, a Hindu is someone who practices Hindu religion. Hinduism is not just a way of life. It is a religion. It is, in fact, the world's oldest religion and the third-largest in the world behind Christianity and Islam.

The attempt of the RSS and other affiliates in clubbing everyone under Hinduism is to play down the existence of the unique history of indigenous tribal communities, their ancestry, culture and religion. The ancestors of Khasis were never Hindus. Khasis have a different religion and way of life. They (the adherents of Ka Niam Khasi) do not worship idols. They do not have temples. They do not consider cows as deities. There has never been a caste system here. The same is true of the Jaintias, the Garos, the Nagas, the Mizos, the Bodos and the numerous Adivasi tribes and sub-tribes all over India. They are basically animists with their own concept of God. They have no similarities with Hinduism.

In case of Khasis, their definition of God is 'U Blei, U Nongbuh-Nonthaw (God, the creator). It is a different matter that many tribal groups in the North East and in other parts



**Hindus, Muslims  
have same ancestry**  
- Mohan Bhagwat

of India have been influenced by Hinduism and have added the idol and the temple concept to their religious practices. But originally idols and the temples were alien to the tribal mind. I have seen the symbol 'OM' (ॐ) displayed in frames at the entrance of some houses of tribes. Certainly 'OM' (ॐ) was not part thier religion. Slowly, these indigenou believers would forget thier original practices and remember only the idol, temple and 'OM' (ॐ) elements. Ultimately they will identify themselves with HIinduism.

This objective has already been achieved to some extend in many tribal settings. That's the reason the Adivasis in Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam and other states have vehemently rejected that they are Hindus and are persistent in their demand that the Centre recognise their religion as 'Sarna'. In Meghalaya, a section of the Khasi society, it looks, is ready to embrace 'Hinduism' and more dangerously 'Hindutva' of the RSS.

To the point that we are all citizens of 'Bharat', the tribes of Meghalaya and the whole of North East were never a part of it. Pre-British rule, chieftains and kings were independent rulers. The Ahom kings, the kings in Manipur and Tripura, the Naga, Mizo, Khasi chiefs, the Nokmas in Garo Hills were independent outside the so-called 'Bharat'. The British annexed these highlands in the 19th century and when they left in 1947 the different princely states and territories became part of India under different circumstances.

In Meghalaya, the 25 Khasi states signed the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement on December 15, 1947 and March 19, 1948, respectively to be part of the Indian Union. So, reacting to Bhagwat, people in social media assert that their ancestors and ancestresses were never Hindus. Their land is the 'Hynniew Trep' (Land of seven Huts) which was never a part of 'Bharat' before the British conquered it in 1826. Today, they affirm they are Khasi/Jaintia and Indians and not Hindus by any stretch of imagination.

The RSS is a two-fold organisation. It is a political parent and mentor of the BJP. The BJP is its political wing. Its members actively campaign for the BJP. Without its support the BJP will struggle to win any election. The RSS is not a neutral social organisation. Meghalaya is not an exception. The objective of the RSS unit is to enable the BJP to rule the state. Secondly, RSS is a pro-Hindu organisation. It is quite anti-Christians and Muslims in its outlook. It is defined as a Hindu Nationalist group. So, for the Bhagwat events only BJP leaders and members of different Hindu organisations were invitees.

In 2023 you will see the RSS crusade for the BJP vigorously. If the RSS, which claims to be a social

organisation, is permitted to openly work for the BJP why not other pressure groups and church associations? Why should not church bodies support the Congress, the TMC, the NPP, the UDP, etc? Why should not the Church take a public stand against the BJP since the RSS effectively reject all other political parties?

The link between the Seng Khasi and the RSS is beyond doubt. The Seng Khasi has steadily grown over the years. The influence of the RSS is fast taking root in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The clout of the Sangh on the Seng Khasi is more and more visible. There is a possibility that the Seng Khasi will be completely 'sanghised' and 'safronised' (probably the process is already on). The RSS chief prayed with the leaders of the Seng Khasi (indigenous tribal faith) at the sanctum sanctorum of U Lum Sohpetbneng (Navel of the Universe). The Seng Khasi is a socio-cultural and religious organisation. But, inspired by the RSS, the organisation might transform itself into a political force in this part of the state. Either it will lend its support to the BJP or start its own political party.

Dismissing Bhagwat's statement as a personal opinion is at our own peril. Wishing away his view saying the Constitution is secular is a complicit act. The ultimate dream of the RSS is to change the Constitution. If the BJP gets the required majority in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha 'secularism' will be removed from the rule book and India will be declared a 'Hindu Rastra'. There are already noises to this effect from the Sangh family.

The Seng Khasi is soliciting the support of the RSS because of the perceived threat of Christianity. It has genuine concerns as a vast majority of the folks in these hills have turned their back on the Khasi religion and have embraced Christianity. The Seng Khasi is facing an existential crisis while the number of Christians swells. It is for this reason that the Seng Khasi has teamed up with the RSS. It is their wisdom but allying with another anti-Christian organisation to preserve itself is quite questionable.

Alleged to be inspired by Nazism of Germany and Fascism of Italy, the latest clubbing is the affirmation of the RSS ideology of the supremacy of the Hindu race (religion) and the subservient existence of all others under it. This supremacist dogma could even lead to suppression and 'second class citizen treatment' of others. ©

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# Towards Building Peace

The purpose of organizing a Peace Convention at the national level every year by the National Peace Movement is to create moral and intellectual solidarity in favour of peace. The 9th convention in this series will be held in Porbandar next January 30

BY **JACOB PEENIKAPARAMBIL**

**T**he war between Ukraine and Russia has shown unambiguously to the world that the impact of a war in any part of the world is not limited to the countries involved, but it affects all countries in one way or the other. All have to pay a price for war in any part of the globe. Rising energy prices due to the Ukraine war have accelerated the cost of living in many countries. According to the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, 1.2 billion people have become vulnerable to crises in food, energy and finance as a result of the Ukraine war.

Although there were some security concerns for Russia due to the decision of Ukraine to join NATO, the imperial ambitions of Vladimir Putin seem to be responsible for the attack on Ukraine and starting a war that could have been avoided. Hence, the opening statement of the preamble to the Constitution



of UNESCO is very much applicable to the Ukraine war. "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed".

In 1945, UNESCO was created in order to respond to the firm belief of nations, forged by two world wars in less than a generation, that political and economic agreements are not enough to build a lasting peace. Peace must be established on the basis of humanity's moral and intellectual solidarity. The very purpose of organizing a Peace Convention at the national level every year by the National Peace Movement is to create moral and intellectual solidarity in favour of peace.

Vested interests in many parts of the world, including India, create conflicts and divisions on the basis of religion, caste, race, language etc., to polarize people to achieve their nefarious goals. If peace-loving people remain inactive and indifferent



## CONVENTION



Fr. Alengaden Addressing the Convention

to the divisive and hateful forces in society, conflicts and violence are bound to increase. Believing in the dictum, "it is better to light a candle instead of cursing the darkness", a small group of Rotarians in Indore resolved to organize a National Peace Convention in Indore in 2015. They decided to hold this unique event on 30th January, the day Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated, in order to keep up the legacy of the great champion of peace.

After evaluating the impact of the first peace convention, it was decided to form a body, National Peace Movement, in view of organizing the National Peace Convention every year. Since 2015 annual National Peace Conventions have been organized in Dimapur, Goa, Kochi, Gurugram, and Bangalore. Due to the pandemic Covid 19, Peace Conventions were organized online in 2021 and 2022. In these two conventions, people from other countries also participated. Thus, the National Peace Convention became also global.

The 9th National/3rd Global Peace Convention will be held in Porbandar, the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi in whose honour the Peace Convention is organized. 400 to 500 people from different parts of India are expected to take part in the forthcoming Peace Convention. The 9th National Peace Convention will be organized by National Peace Movement in collaboration with Rotary International Districts 3040 & 3060, Nishiindo Foods Pvt. Ltd., Globethics.net, Indian Currents and Universal Solidarity Movement.

The very fact that people belonging to different religions, castes, languages and working in different professions coming together and interacting with each other in itself is a process of peace building. In the context of India being increasingly divided on the basis of religion, coming together of people belonging to different religions, castes and regions contributes to mutual understanding and bridge-building.

As many as 470 participants from 18 states of India took part in the 6th National Peace Convention held in Christ University Bangalore in 2020. The participants consisted of professionals from various fields, Rotarians, educationists, social activists, teachers and students. The 6th National Peace Convention 2020 had the highest number of participants and about 40% of them were young people, especially students from different parts of India.

The process of the Peace Convention consists of talks by experienced persons from different areas of social involvement, sharing by persons who have made a difference in the society, sharing ideas on peace by students, and group discussion for preparing action plans. Value-based cultural programmes also constitute a part of the Peace Convention.

Some of the topics on which the participants will be listening to and discussing among themselves during the 2023 Peace Convention are the following.

- Relevance of Gandhian Economy Today by Dr. Sudharshan Iyengar
- Working for Peace in an Atmosphere of Hate by Mr. Thushar Gandhi
- Peace Ethics by Dr. Jose Nandikkara
- Gandhi, Science and Education by Prof. Anamik Shah





Thushar Gandhi Addressing the Convention

- Global Peace Foundation by Dr. Markandey Rai
- Peace through Service by Rtn. Dharmendra Joshi
- Inclusion of Differently Aabled for a Peaceful Society by Rtn. Advocate Gyanendra Purohit.
- Gandhi as a Leader for Peace by Prof. Mathai M.P.
- How to Reduce Road Accident Fatalities by Rtn. Dr. K. A. Kuriachan
- Peace through Enterprise Education by Rtn. Dr. Pradeep Wagh
- Media Assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Sri Shravan Garg, former group editor of Dainik Bhaskar
- Gandhi: What Next? By Dr. Sugan Baranth
- Role of Kasturba in the Independence of India by Dr. Bharat Chhapparwal

In the light of the input sessions and interactions with the speakers, the participants hold discussion in groups. An action plan to be implemented at the personal level and institution/organization level is prepared on the basis of the proposals emerged from the group discussion. The participants go back to their respective places with the action plan to be implemented in their respective areas.

It has been a practice that the participants pay towards the expenses of the convention in the form of registration fee, besides meeting the cost of their travel and accommodation. No fund is solicited either from the government or donor agencies for meeting the expenses of the Peace Convention. All expenses of the convention are met from the regis-

tration fee paid by the participants. Some individuals or organizations or groups volunteer to sponsor certain items of the convention. For example, the cost of hiring a hall for the Peace Convention at Porbandar is sponsored by the Local Organizing Committee. The balance of fee collected from the participants is used for the publication of a souvenir of the convention. This, indeed, is an expression of commitment of the participants to peace building.

The National Peace Movement is an inspirational body. Its purpose is to motivate and inspire people belonging to different age groups and professions to work for peace. It is the task of the individuals and the institutions or organizations they represent to plan and implement various activities to promote peace. The action plans prepared at the end of the Peace Convention are only some guidelines or suggestions to the participating individuals and organizations.

Taking inspiration from the National Peace Convention, seminars or conventions are organized at the regional and local levels. For example, Rotary Club Sonkach in Madhya Pradesh organizes a programme every year on October 2. This year also Rotary Club Sonkach is organizing a programme on October 2. Adarsh Rotary Club Indore is planning a peace conference on 5th November 2022 in Indore. Peace Clubs are formed in schools from which students participate in the Peace Convention. The Peace Clubs of students plan and implement various activities in their respective schools for promoting peace.

The Ukraine war with its negative impact at the global level reminds people of all countries to make efforts to prevent wars in future. National/Global Peace Convention organized by National Peace Movement is a humble attempt to motivate people to create an atmosphere of peace, understanding and harmony in their respective areas by reducing/preventing discriminations, prejudices, exclusion, hatred and enmity. Peace-building is a continuous process, as John F Kennedy said. "Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures." ©

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# Women's Safety Still a Mirage

Enactment of Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act has not solved the issue fully

BY AARTI

**T**hat in economically challenged times many victims seem to believe silence is safer when it comes to reporting sexual harassment at workplace is a cause for concern.

The epicenter was Rishikesh, Uttarakhand. But the aftershocks were national. But for the massive public outrage, the recovery of the body of a 19-year-old from the Chilla Canal in Rishikesh this September 24, after she went missing on September 18, would have been just another death.

Well, her autopsy report found injury marks on her body before death, suggestive of blunt force trauma. However, the cause of death was due to drowning, nonetheless, it has brought to fore a classic real-life case of violation of fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India. That is the right to practice any profession as also live with dignity and honour.

The deceased teenager, daughter of an anganwadi worker, after securing 88 percent in Class 12, pursued a course in hotel management. To support her elder brother who was aspiring to become a chartered accountant, she became a receptionist at a resort in Rishikesh for a monthly salary of Rs 10,000. But sadly enough, she didn't live to receive her first salary.

**What is worrying is that sexual harassment occurs on public transportation, in park and similar public places, in educational and athletic settings, in homes, at social gatherings and in online groups**



What has been disclosed about her is more disturbing. Reportedly she was feeling insecure at her workplace after the owner of the resort where she worked put pressure on her to provide "extra services" (indulge in prostitution) and serve hotel guests. The enraged resort owner, according to his confession, after an altercation, pushed her into the canal. Suffice to say that the ongoing investigation by a specially constituted police team is expected to bring the offenders to book.

The workplace harassment experienced by the deceased teenager is just a tip of the iceberg. Remember five years ago how the daily sexual abuse suffered by women, led to the #MeToo movement and within a year, it is said that the hashtag had been used more than 19 million times. It is a global menace and atrocities against women is on the rise and India is no exception.

What is worrying is that sexual harassment occurs on public transportation, in park and similar public places, in educational and athletic settings, in homes, at social gatherings and in online groups. It gets conveyed in many ways be it face-to-face interactions, through phone, SMS, social media, or by e-mail.



What is disconcerting is that many women choose to remain silent despite experiencing sexual harassment. It's because the pressure to furnish proof, the fear of fighting a superior, its adverse impact on their career, etc



In 1997, the Supreme Court in *Vishaka and Others vs State of Rajasthan* had dealt with sexual harassment of women. For this purpose, sexual harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour (whether directly or by implication) as:

- a) physical contact and advances;
- b) a demand or request for sexual favours;
- c) sexually coloured remarks;
- d) showing pornography;
- e) any other unwelcome physical verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature.

The Apex Court also elaborated the preventive steps that all employers or persons in charge of work place in the public as well as private sector should take. Most importantly the Court recommended the institution of a complaint mechanism in the employer's organization for redress of the complaint made by victim of sexual in a time-bound manner. Broadening the Vishaka Guidelines, the Union Government enacted the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act in 2013. It has defined sexual harassment and laid down the procedures for complaints, conduct of inquiry and the action to be taken.

If news reports are to be believed, implementation of the law has not been quite effective. Let's take the case where recently the Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) pointed out the "sorry state of affairs" in the implementation of the Act intended to prevent Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace. According to DCW the Local Complaints Commit-

tee supposed to function in every district received 40 complaints between 2019 and 2021. Recommending the need for establishing an efficient complaint receiving mechanism online as well as offline, DCW's grouse is that the small number of complaints received by the LCCs were not dealt with in a time-bound manner.

What is disconcerting is that many women choose to remain silent despite experiencing sexual harassment. It's because the pressure to furnish proof, the fear of fighting a superior, its adverse impact on their career, etc.

Not long ago a 22-year-old woman who was allegedly raped by her employer, a powerful builder, for four years mustered courage and approached the police in Nagpur when she couldn't take it anymore. Though the builder was married, he wanted to continue to maintain physical relationship with her. In spite of repeated requests of the victim, the accused did not desist from sexually assaulting her. When she started refusing, the accused threatened to defame the victim in her own house and in her family by showing her photographs to her parents.

More recently, a 23-year-old female bus marshal allegedly tried to kill herself after facing sexual harassment at work. The bus conductor, in which she was deployed as a marshal, allegedly started asking her for sexual favours.

As many workplaces still remain unsafe for women, there is an imperative need to follow the Supreme Court's Vishaka guidelines in letter and spirit and create a conducive work environment. ©

# Forum's National Convention calls for Radical Discipleship

BY CEDRIC PRAKASH

The 'Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace' held its XVII National Convention at the Montfort Social Institute, Hyderabad, Telangana from 22 to 24 September 2022. The theme of the Convention was "Deepening our Identity as Religious: Responding to the Signs of the Times". More than sixty women and men Religious, from sixteen States and representing twenty Religious Congregations participated in the Convention.

At the Inaugural Programme, Sr. M. Nirmalini A.C., the National President of the Conference of Religious India (CRI) and also the Superior General of the Apostolic Carmel Congregation gave the keynote address on the theme of the Convention. Setting the tone for the Convention Sr Nirmalini's address was insightful and challenging, calling upon the participants to respond to the signs of the times through a deepening of one's spirituality beginning with self-transformation. She said, "*we need to go on an inner journey to re-discover interiority and capacity to appreciate what is important and to live it with passion, enthusiasm and energy. Each of us will have to go through a personal transformation and this is not magic but a slow intentional process. We will be asked to shift, adapt, change and live into the future that will not look the same as we see it now. This process is a gift from God and we have to be open by deepening our prayer, listening and discerning and*

*practicing radical availability to the signs of the times*"

Bishop Raphael Thattil of the Shamshabad Diocese also addressed the gathering and exhorted them to continue playing a prophetic role in the Church. Referring to Pope Francis' homily on the Good Samaritan, he said that many in the Church today put the emphasis on the 'cultic' and conveniently forget about being 'prophetic'. He appreciated the significant role that the participants play for the cause of justice in the Church and in the Country today.

Earlier, Buddhist monk Tashi Chodup, led the assembly in a meditation. The National Convener of the Forum, Sr Dorothy Fernandes welcomed the dignitaries (which also included a few local Provincials) and the participants. Br Varghese Theckanath SG, the host as Director of the MSI and a veteran of the Forum traced the history of the Forum since its inception and also explained the dynamics of the Convention. The other highlights of the Inaugural Session, included the release of a booklet 'The Kuravilangad Case: A Critical Study' which has been published by the Forum; and a very meaningful interaction by the participants with Sr Nirmalini.

Another resource person at the Convention was Meera Sanghamitra, a well-known activist who is actively involved with feminist, civil liberties, transgender rights issues as well as in the National Alli-



ance of Peoples Movements (NAPM). She provided the participants with an incisive picture of the many issues which grip the poor and marginalised today.

The Convention was marked with some deep and contextual sharing in groups and in the plenary sessions. The members re-elected Sr Dorothy Fernandes PBVM(Convenor), Fr Antony F Thekkiniyath Ofm Cap (Secretary), and Fr Anand IMS (Treasurer), the other members of the Core Team are Fr Cedric Prakash SJ, Fr John Bosco SJ, Sr Julie George

SSps, Br Varghese Theckanath SG, Sr Ancy CJ, Fr Devassay Kadaparambil SDB and Sr Anitha Chettiar DHM

A meaningful and contextual Statement (attached) unanimously passed by the participants before the conclusion of the Convention calls for radical discipleship! ☪

(\*This note is by Cedric Prakash SJ  
{cedricprakash@gmail.com}  
on behalf of the Forum Core Team)

## Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace XVII National Convention (September 22-24, 2022), Hyderabad

### STATEMENT

**W**e, members (63 women and men Religious, from 16 states representing 20 Congregations) of the **Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace**, came together for three days (22 - 24 September 2022) at the Montfort Social Institute, Hyderabad, Telangana for our XVII National Convention. We deliberated on the theme, 'Deepening our identity as Religious: Responding to the Signs of the Times', in mutual respect for one another's opinions, in profound moments of prayer and meditation, with valuable inputs and a shared life together in solidarity.

**Bishop Raphael Thattil** of the Shamshabad Diocese, participating in the inaugural session reminded us that we are prophetic people in a Church that is often defaced by the predominance of cult and ritualism. Further, he invited us, to be steadfast in the midst of tribulations that necessarily come from one's stand alongside the poor and the oppressed.

We were privileged to have in our midst, **Sr. M. Nirmalini A.C.** the National President of the Conference of Religious India (CRI) who gave us an insightful and challenging keynote address on the theme. Referring to Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter 'To all Consecrated People' (21 November 2014) she said, "in 2014 Pope Francis asked consecrated life 'to wake up the world, to witness to the world that there is another way of being, acting and living, a prophetic way of life. In order to wake up the world, religious need to be awake to the joys and cries of the world around us and to God's call. Where we stand, what we see, and how we listen, all matters. A prophetic way calls because when we look at the world, we will not only see incredible love, goodness, beauty and

generosity, we will also see people and earth suffering needlessly, begging for a response. We are called to respond."

**Meera Sanghamitra**, a well-known activist who is actively involved with feminist, civil liberties, transgender rights issues as well as in the National Alliance of Peoples Movements (NAPM) provided us with an incisive picture of the many issues which grip our people today. The possible way forward, she said, should be in Hope, Healing and Harmony, along with Struggle, Solidarity and Sustained engagement in the present socio, political, economic, cultural and religious context.

As religious committed to justice and peace, we express our concern at the deteriorating situation of our nation on every front. Fascism seems to have come to stay. We have reached abysmal depths on every parameter: be it social, economic and political. Recently, the 'Global Human Index' put India at a pathetic low rank of 132 out of 191 countries evaluated. There are several other global indices today which put India at rock bottom. The poor in India become poorer every day; the rich and powerful continue to profiteer at their expense and amass scandalous amounts of wealth. The Adivasis are robbed of their *jal, jungle and Jameen*. The Dalits and OBCs and other sub altern groups, are still denied the dignity, equality and justice, which are legitimately theirs. The minorities (particularly the Muslims and Christians) are targeted with hate speech and persecution, by a regime which systematically and continuously denigrates and demonizes them with a divisive and violent agenda. Intolerance is on the rise. Unconstitutional anti - conversion laws are centre- stage today. The four labour codes



go against the rights of the workers and clearly favour the profiteering big corporates. The pitiable conditions of the migrant workers came to the fore when the lockdown was announced in March 2020. The fisher workers of Kerala and other part of the country, are fighting against corporates who intend destroying their livelihood. Unemployment and spiralling inflation have greatly impacted on the lives of the poor.

The new National Education Policy (NEP) which has been pushed through, is clearly anti-poor and anti-minority and caters only to a small section of the rich and the elite. Corruption is mainstreamed, crony capitalism is rampant. India has been placed last (180 out of 180 countries) in the 'Environmental Performance Index (EPI) 2022.' Freedom of Speech and Expression is in the doldrums. Human rights defenders (HRDs), (including some organisations) and many others-like those incarcerated in the Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy case- who take a stand against the regime are hauled up, false cases are foisted on them, they are attacked, incarcerated and even killed (as we have painfully experienced in the death of our brother Stan Swamy who died whilst still in police custody) .... We are aware of much more!

We are also deeply pained at the silence of the Church: bishops, priests and religious on issues which are destroying the democratic, pluralistic and secular fabric of our country. When we talk of 'Synodality' today, Church leadership in India, has still not shown signs of shedding its clerical and patriarchal mentality. Caste discrimination is still practiced within the Church; besides, Church leadership has not demonstrated the courage and transparency to address some critical issues involving bishops, priests and religious. It is therefore, for good reason, we have released during this Convention a booklet entitled, **'The Kuravilangad Case: A**

**Critical Study'** which we hope will open the eyes and hearts of some and be read by many, with objectivity and compassion.

***We, the members of the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace, therefore resolve***

- that we continually deepen our identity as radical disciples of Jesus and have the prophetic courage to respond to the signs of the times
- that we realise and shall ensure personal transformation is the first step towards social transformation
- that we internalise and actualise the values enshrined in the 'Constitution of India' giving it due place in our formation, catechesis and in all our ministries.
- that we will continue to strive to build more inclusive communities, transcending the religious, caste, gender and ethnic divisions and every form of sectarianism

**Further,**

***We urge our Congregational Leadership and the Conference of Religious of India (CRI)***

- to ensure the mainstreaming and implementation of all General/Provincial Chapter documents and Catholic Social Teachings, which emphasize our accompanying and involvement in the life of the poor and the marginalized, the excluded, the exploited and the vulnerable. This will enable us to effectively and prophetically respond to the signs of the times for a more just and peaceful society
- to conduct programmes on the Constitution of India and Social Analysis with the necessary exposure to the realities of the poor, at all stages of formation
- to take an unequivocal, visible and vocal stand and to accompany the victims of abuse both within Church and in society at large

**Finally,**

***We members of the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace pledge***

- to encourage more and younger women and men Religious, committed to issues of justice and peace, to join and be active members of this Forum.
- to leave no stone unturned in playing a prophetic role in responding to the signs of the times

*(The above Statement was unanimously passed by the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace members who participated in the XVII National Convention held in Hyderabad). ©*

# “Vatican City” themed Puja Pandal welcomes goddess Durga

BY IRUDHAYA JOTHI

A puja committee in Salt Lake, Kolkata, has created a Durga Puja pandal (temporary shed) with the theme of Vatican City’s St. Peters Basilica.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee inaugurated the puja pandal on Sept 23 ahead of the Mahalaya on September 25, the first day of the ten-day Puja celebration. Mamata announced in her Facebook post, “Today, with a lot of joy, I inaugurated the Sree Bhumi Sporting Club Durga Pujo, Salt Lake FD Block Durga Pujo and Tala Pratyay Durga Pujo. As we all immerse ourselves in the festive spirit, I urge you all to be safe and to celebrate responsibly.”

Speaking to ANI news agency, Sujit Bose, the Independent Charge of Fire and Emergency Services of West Bengal and president of Sree Bhoomi Sporting Club, said, “Sree Bhoomi Sporting Club, which is celebrating 50th year this year, has the theme of Vatican City’s St. Peters Basilica.”

Many people, he said, often wish that they could travel to the Vatican City in Rome but only a few are

lucky to do so. The club’s pandal will help them fulfil their wish, he added.

Vatican City, a city-state surrounded by Rome, Italy, is the headquarters of the Catholic Church and the home to the Pope. Saint Peter’s Basilica -one of the four major basilica’s in Rome - dates back to 1626. It took 60 days and more than 100 artisans to complete the “Vatican City” themed Durga pandal.

Pandals are set all around the country for the week-long celebration dedicated to each form of Durga, a major Hindu goddess, worshipped as a principal aspect of the mother goddess Mahadevi. She is associated with protection, strength, motherhood, destruction, and wars.

The pandals of Kolkata bring new puja themes every year that are unique and innovative and devotees get to witness various themed Durga puja in the city. Themed-pandals in the north Indian belt have become an inseparable part of celebrating the festival. Durga puja symbolizes the victory of good over evil as it commemorates Durga’s victory over



Mahishasur, a deceitful demon who pursued his evil ways by shape-shifting. According to the legends, Goddess Durga appeared from the fusion of all the gods' energies in heaven to destroy Mahishasura. She had ten arms, and on each of them, she carried the most lethal weapon belonging to each god.

The festival falls during the Hindu calendar of Ashwin that corresponds to September–October. This year, Durga Puja begins September 25 and will end on October 5. Devotees dress in new garments, chant aartis, visit temples, hand out sweets, and clean their homes. Some even fast to express gratitude to the goddess during the festival.

The festival is particularly popular and traditionally celebrated in the Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Odisha, Tripura, and the neighboring country of Bangladesh. For the Bengali community elsewhere, Durga Puja is extremely important.

Durga puja is an important festival in the Shaktism tradition of Hinduism. Durga puja in Kolkata has been inscribed on the Intangible cultural heritage list of UNESCO in December of 2021.

The festival is also in part a harvest festival celebrating the goddess as the motherly power behind all of life and creation.

Durga puja coincides with Navaratri and Dussehra celebrations observed by other traditions of Hinduism, in which the Ram Lila dance-drama is enacted, celebrating the victory of Rama against Ravana, and effigies of Ravana are burnt.

The primary goddess revered during Durga Puja is Durga but the celebrations also include other major deities of Hinduism such as Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth and prosperity), Saraswati (the goddess of knowledge and music), Ganesha (the god of good beginnings), and Kartikeya (the god of war).

In Bengali and Odia traditions, these deities are considered to be Durga's children, and Durga Puja is believed to commemorate Durga's visit to her natal home with her beloved children.

The atheist, Communists, Hindus, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, naturists and animists join pandals hopping and the community celebration. ©  
(Courtesy: Mattersindia)



## Hijab row hits Catholic school in Kerala

The row over wearing hijab on September 26 led clashes and disruption of classes in Providence School in Kozhikode, a town in Kerala.

Some activists of the Students Islamic Organization of India stormed the girls' school in the morning and in the clashes at the entrance three police people were wounded. The police blocked the protesters and arrested 10 activists.

A new controversy arose in the century-old school managed by the Apostolic Carmel congregation after its management decided to ban hijab in the campus in line with their congregation's policy.

The immediate provocation for the protests was the college refusing entry to an eleventh grader wearing hijab.

"Hijab is not the part of their uniforms and girls should adhere to the uniform policy," the principal was quoted as saying by Janam Online, a news portal in Kerala. The same policy is being followed in the century-old St. Agnes School and College in Mangaluru, a major town in the neighboring state of Karnataka. Last year, several schools and colleges in an around Mangaluru was hit by the hijab controversy and the case is in the Supreme Court.

The Students Islamic Organization of India targeted the Providence School three days after Kerala observed a shut in protest against raids by the Enforcement Directorate on the Popular Front on India, another Islamic political movement.

The students organization demanded the derecognition of the Catholic school for banning hijab and hurting the sentiments of the Muslim community. "It is against the constitutional rights," the organization asserted. The principal clarified that parents and students were informed about the strict adherence to the school uniform during the admission time. They were also told that hijab was not permissible in class rooms, she added.

But some students insisted wearing the hijab in school and as a result, one student took transfer certificate and left the school a week ago.

Some organizations had protested the management decision even earlier.

Recently, the Islamic Republic of Iran was also in news when the native Muslim women protested compulsory use of hijab as against their fundamental rights. ©

(Courtesy: Mattersindia)

# Delhi archdiocese observes World Day of Migrants and Refugees

BY RANI PUNNASERRIL



About 200 migrants and 20 refugees September 25 celebrated the World Day of Migrants and Refugees with a get-together and Mass.

The program was organized by the Archdiocese of Delhi in collaboration with Conference of Catholic Bishops of India's Commission for Migrants at the Community Centre in the premises of the Delhi Archbishop's House.

The World Day of Migrants and Refugees is celebrated on the last Sunday of September every year.

The Mass and the gathering highlighted the importance of caring for migrants and refugees in the Church. The day also honored the contribution of migrants to the economy of the country. It encouraged the public to become aware of the problems of migrants and refugees and support them as they battle various challenges.

Daisy Panna, secretary of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, in her opening address explained the importance of the day and the message of Pope Francis that called for excluding no one.

The Pope said: "God's plan is essentially inclusive and gives priority to those living on the existential peripheries, like migrants, refugees, displaced persons, and victims of trafficking. The Kingdom of God is to be built with them, for without them it would not be the Kingdom that God wants. Building the future with migrants and refugees also means recognizing and valuing the contributions the migrants make in different ways in different areas."

Archbishop Anil J T Couto of Delhi described the archdiocese as a migrant diocese as the national capital has the second largest migrant population in India and the diocese welcomes all migrants and refugees for their spiritual nourishment. The archbishop expressed concern over those poor and needy who find it hard to make both ends meet. He recalled the plight of migrants during pandemic and said the Church stood with them and helped them meet their immediate needs.

The prelate also said it is the duty of every Christian to help the poor and needy and to be generous

to them. As a community from Myanmar was present to celebrate the day Archbishop Couto welcomed them and offered them every possible support.

The organizers pointed out that the interstate migrants in Delhi have come to the city for better livelihood and life. But many land up in unsafe migration because of the recruiting agents. They have become victims of human trafficking and bonded labor. The commission for migrants has intervened in many cases to rescue the victims especially during the pandemic. The commission's national secretariat has helped families with livelihood support as many had lost their jobs during the pandemic.

The archdiocese through its commission for migrants has reached out to migrants and refugees in distress or in need of immediate assistance of food and medication.

The commission noted an increase in wage theft, labor exploitation and harassment since pandemic started. The archdiocese has set up an advisory committee with the commission to study the matter and help the migrants and refugees. The 20 refugees who attended the program now face problems

related to work, house rent education and health.

However, the program provided a platform for the community to mingle with the archbishop, clergy, religious and the laity of the archdiocese.

Archbishop Couto in his address to the gathering stressed inclusiveness. The prelate reiterated the Pope's message and urged the community to welcome the refugees and migrants as brothers and sisters. He assured the refugees of his support and welcomed them to the archdiocese.

Their issues will be addressed through the migrants' commission that will try to help them the best way possible, he added.

The celebration of the World Day of Migrants and Refugees has ignited the minds of the participants of the Mass where the Pope's message was conveyed to them in the presence of the refugee community.

Pope Francis' message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, "Building the future with migrants and refugees" calls for recognizing and valuing the contribution of these communities to the countries of their settlement. ☺

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# Servant of God-Fr Alfred Roche OFM Cap **Lover of Children**

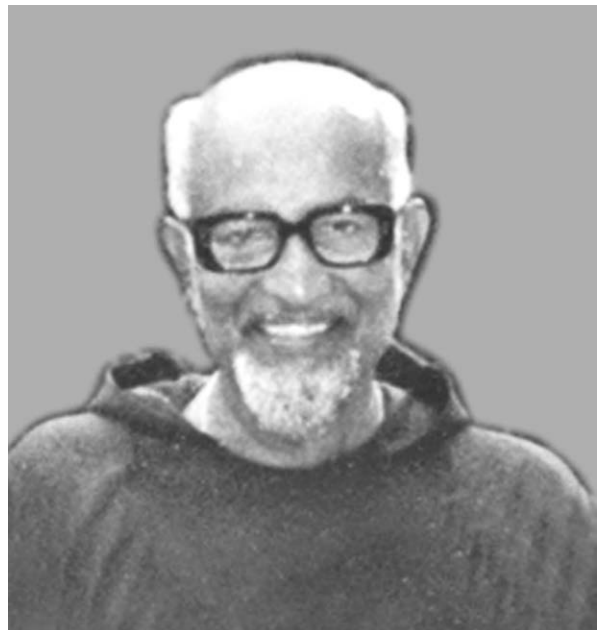
BY **PATRICK CRASTA**

**A**s we know Pope Francis is a lover of children. On different occasions we see him approaching children, lifting them up, and caressing them. It is a sign that he has a soft corner towards children. Why? We know what the adage says: 'As is the master so is the disciple.' Pope Francis has imbibed this divine attitude from the life-pattern of Jesus, the Master par excellence, who was a lover of children. He fondly welcomed them and made them feel at home in His Company. When He saw that His disciples were getting irritated, when they saw little children being brought to their Master, He said: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Mk 10, 14).

As we know, the Servant of God, Fr. Alfred Roche OFM Cap, was a kind-hearted, simple, and loving person. The all-loving Father had endowed Fr. Alfred with the divine grace of loving the little children in a very special way. Owing to this grace embedded in his nature, children were attracted towards him and spontaneously flocked around him. So much so, often the presbytery became children-home and youth-centre. Highly gifted in music, he taught them catechism, liturgical music, popular songs, and accompanied them for picnics, singing with them and eating with them.

In order to make the children happy and creative, he gave new names to them. Fr. Santa Lopes, who is presently the vice-postulator for the Cause of Beatification of Fr. Alfred, writes in his book, *Fr. Alfred Roche: A Capuchin After the Heart of Jesus*: "One thing, which I observed very much, was that he called children by various names, like doctor, engineer, musician, violinist, lawyer, judge, secretary and others...."

To be frank, though I did not have an office or files in my hands, and though I found it difficult to pronounce the word 'secretary', he called me his secretary. Oh! I was very proud of my title, whenever he called me secretary before others" (pp. 11-12). This was how he was instilling in them genuine interest to be someone great in life. This was Fr. Santa's



personal experience from St. Joseph's Church, Lower Kasarkod.

His pedagogy was one and the same from place to place where he served as a pastor. Sr. Lucy Rodrigues, Snehalaya, Solur, would like to add something more from her personal experience from Holy Family Church, Brahmavar: "Every Sunday Fr. Alfred would sit in the confessional and wait for the children. No child could escape his sight because he loved the little ones tenderly. He followed them very closely. He won the heart of the little ones. As for me, I could never hide anything from Father. All my inner secrets I used to reveal him. If I were to hide anything I would be disturbed, such was the holiness of this great person. Just looking at us he would know from our face" (witness no. 58).

While meeting and talking to the children and the youth, the common affectionate term that he used was 'PUTHA' (son/daughter); and while addressing the elders the affectionate terms that he employed were 'BABA' (brother) and 'BAE' (sister). That was the reason why everyone lovingly called him 'AMCHO PADRYAAB' (our father). ©



## Bob's Banter » BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

bobsbanter@gmail.com

# Muscular Leaders of Today..!

Maybe you don't know, or just maybe you don't want to read between the lines but before Putin went to war, he first saw to it that newspapers and magazines throughout the world showed him with his shirt off and his bulging KGB muscles. Now we realise there was a purpose to it, as he lives up to the muscular image he portrayed to the world.

"So when leaders show pictures of their biceps or talk of the width of their chest," said a gym instructor as he helped a politician climb onto a treadmill, "they're making a statement, saying that we've had enough of brains ruling the world but now brawn is fighting back and winning!"

"Ye gads!" I exclaimed, "this is a new thought!"

"Oh no, it isn't! It started with Clinton. Instead of having photographs of Clinton in the Oval room studiously studying a treaty or nuclear pact, under the picture of a former president, they had him running and jumping and cycling and finally the coup de grace; getting physical with an intern!"

"You're right!" I exclaimed.

"You want to be boss, have brawn!" said the gym instructor as he helped an eighty plus old leader to the treadmill. I watched as the old politician slowly and unsteadily started walking but nearly fell off the speeding machine. He looked with pleading eyes at his instructor.

"No sir, you'll have to continue. You do want to stand for the next elections don't you?"

"Yyyees!" whispered the aged politician.

"Then you'll have to get rid of that sagging flab, tuck in your hanging tummy, have soccer player like shoulders and get a hair transplant!"

"Hair transplant?" asked the wheezing old man.

"You want to win the elections sir? The electorate aren't happy with hair only from ears, chest and legs! They want hair where it can be seen!"

"But I'm old!" wheezed the old man.

"We'll have you standing by a pool. Our photogra-



pher will air brush your hair like they did with Trump!"

"What happened to leaders with brain?" I asked and watched as the old man let out a loud groan, collapsed and fell off the treadmill where he lay very still.

"Leaders with brain? I've not seen or heard of any lately!" said the instructor as he got down on his knees and with a helping hand from me pushed the politician to standing position, then propped him up and got him back on the mean machine.

"I think he's had a heart attack!" I said.

"Just hold the old man upright on the treadmill, will you, till our photographer takes a snap of him. He'll win the elections with this picture by the time he's out of hospital. Push his chest from behind till it looks the full fifty-six inches. That's the new standard everyone's keeping..!" ©

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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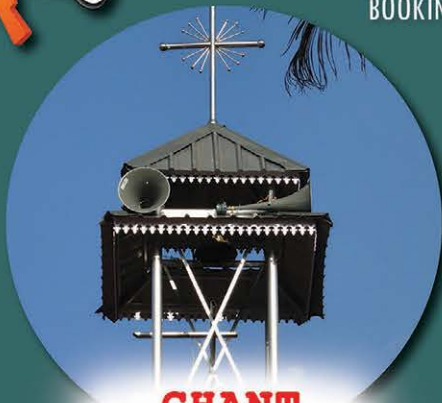
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