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India – A tri-colour nation, not Saffron!

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On the 20th February, 2015 Bangalore witnessed a unique event conducted by Ethos Institute, a premier Catholic research institution. The event titled Hindutva, Christianity & Conversion was organized and Rev. Fr. Dominic Emmanuel, advisory to Ethos and the spokesperson for Delhi Archdiocese and Director of Sadbhavana, Centre for inter-religious dialogue was the key note speaker. Fr. Emmanuel, the most interviewed personality in the Church, led the audience to a captivating message on the atrocities against Christians.

A meaningful opening prayer was led by Rev. Fr. Sagayanathan, the parish priest of St. Patrick's Church. The other contributors to the seminar was Mr. Prithvi Reddy, Karnataka State President for AAP, Mr. Kennedy Shantha Kumar, Karnataka General Secretary, BJP and Mr. Bharadwaj, State IT Head for BJP. Also, Rev. Aldrin Bogi, the India Chairman for YWAM gave the closing thoughts on unity in diversity. All in all, the occasion was blessed with a gratifying turnout of over 200 persons from all different walks of life.

Why was this event necessary?

Indian Christians have been witnessing mayhem over the accusations of conversion through fraudulent means, and this wrong notion had to be addressed.

Fr. Emmanuel stresses that self-styled Hindutva forces are plugging the line that only Hindus are patriotic and non-Hindus are ipso facto enemies of the country. These are pathetic and totally unfounded false allegations. Such manipulations only prove that these groups thrive on falsehoods and half-



ETHOS INSTITUTE

truths, with the ultimate aim of gaining political power and they have taken their targeting of the minorities on a war footing.

According to the 2001 Census report, the Christian population in India is 2.33 per cent; it was 2.34 per cent in 1991. At one point, the population of Christians in the country was close to 2.8 per cent; it has been consistently falling over several decades now. This means that the type of mass conversion that the Sangh Parivar alleges is baseless. In the last two decades, the Christian population grew by 17 per cent, whereas the Hindu population grew by more than 23 per cent.

Rev. Aldrin Bogi stated that, we are Christians and we are Indian. We are patriotic about our country and its well being and we are here to serve our country as we have been doing for centuries.

There have been Christians, well educated from all faculties who have converted to Hinduism, but this is not spoken about by periphery groups who claim that those who convert to Christianity are been forced and coerced through the use of fraudulent means by offering allurements.

Since the RSS, VHP and other groups have claimed that Christians have been converting the illiterate and poor, it was amazing to see at the event a highly educated lady, Deepa Naidu from the audience stand up and testify that she had become a Christian by choice through her personal encounter with Jesus in the Scripture. Another highly educated film producer Divya Bhatt testified that it was the Hindu sacred scriptures that led her to read the Holy Bible and in turn to become a disciple of Christ.

Mr. Prithvi Reddy from the AAP, during the event shared on the topic of "Has Indian democracy come of age" where he indicated that AAP follows the words of Christ that "they are here to serve and not to be served."

Rev. Fr. Ronni Prabhu, the PRO for the Archdiocese of Bangalore and Regional Secretary for Ecumenism, raised an issue about the legal dynamics of converting from one faith to another. He asked that if we desired to convert from the Congress to the BJP, would we need to get a court affidavit for that too.



ETHOS INSTITUTE

The aim of such consultations is in national interest - to help this ever participating nation to discern the deceptions of the Hindutva forces that have grounded their professed aim of establishing a Hindu Rashtra (nation) or the Indian edition of Pakistan, Iran, or Saudi Arabia, which are theocratic states. Even with such attempts to disfigure true Hinduism by fringe groups, with the Hindutva ideology, a majority of Hindus refuse to be misled by their malefic communal propaganda.

Ghar Wapsi – Home Coming : How is it in perfect harmony for Indian pundits and gurus to travel across to Western and European countries, open shrines, establish empires, teach Indian philosophy, yoga and transcendental meditation and convert Christians to Hinduism? Yet it is not in harmony for Christians to express our freedom of conscience and freedom of religion – to practise it and to propagate it in our own mother land?

Ghar Wapsi meaning Home Coming is a viciously orchestrated, political agenda in the guise of nationalism, to re-convert non-Hindus to Hinduism, which became the subject of public discussion in 2014. This campaign was organised with ulterior intent, by pseudo patriotic Indian Hindu organizations like the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) who orchestrated several Ghar Wapsi events in Kerala and Goa.

It is reported that more than 1200 people were re-converted to Hinduism in a Ghar Wapsi campaign organised by the VHP in Telengana. The Indian Express reported that Scheduled Caste Manjhi families demanded better facilities along with education and healthcare before they reconverted.

On 8th December 2014, Hindu nationalist groups affiliated to the RSS converted 250 Muslims to Hinduism in Agra. The incident was condemned by all the opposition parties and even by Hindus. The functioning of the Indian Parliament was log-jammed in December.

Dharam Jagaran Samiti (Religious awakening committee), a Hindu activist group affiliated to the RSS has an objective to "reconvert" Muslims and Christians. According to their ideology, all Muslims and Christians in India were originally Hindus whose ancestors had converted to other religions. Therefore, their conversion to Hinduism is regarded as a "re-conversion" or "homecoming." The re-conversion campaign was organised jointly with the



ETHOS INSTITUTE

Bajrang Dal, which is the militant wing of the largest Hindu organisation, VHP.

It was reported that the Muslim residents of the Vednagar slum in Agra were told by a local Hindu activist that, under a development programme of the Narendra Modi government, if they attended a havan (a Hindu sacrificial ceremony), they would get ration cards and other basic amenities. Some 250 people attended the ceremony. When the ritual was over, the participants were told that they had all become Hindus.

Ironically, isn't this conversion through deceptive means? These very groups that had accused Christians of converting people based on demography and economic strata seem to have convicted themselves of the accusation against Christians who have been pioneers of social service in India.

According to the Mail Today and Hindustan Times in December, 2014, Rajeswar Singh, the Aligarh area President of the Samiti, wrote an open letter asking for monetary help. He stated that the group had converted 40,000 Muslims and Christians in western Uttar Pradesh last year and started a target of 100,000 conversions for next year. He also stated that each activist who works to convert Muslims incurs an annual expenditure of INR 500,000 and one that works to convert Christians requires INR 200,000. He sought monetary help from interested parties to run the programme of conversions.

The Agra Police registered a FIR against Dharam Jagaran Samiti and its convener in the State, Nand Kishore Valmiki, and launched an investigation. Cases were registered under Section 153(A) (promoting enmity between different groups) and Section 415 (using fraudulent means) of the Indian Penal Code, based on a complaint made by one of the participants that was converted. The FIR states that ration cards and housing plots were promised for those who converted to Hinduism. Valmiki was subsequently arrested on 16th December.

The Uttar Pradesh Minorities Commission, which visited Agra on a fact-finding mission, has stated that the conversion programme was an "act of fraud."

Based on the relentless, yet peaceful agitation by the Church, on the 19th February, 2015, attempting to relieve the government's position on the



ETHOS INSTITUTE

controversial 'ghar wapsi' events organised by various Hindu groups, Urban Development Minister M. Venkaiah Naidu said "if religion conversion is wrong, than re-conversion is also wrong, If people convert on their own, then it's alright." He added that some parties are playing vote-bank politics on the issue.

India's Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been heavily criticised for not speaking out against religious violence, especially after the attacks on at least six Christian buildings, mainly churches, in the capital New Delhi since December. In his speech on the 17th February, 2015 at the national seminar on Challenges to religious life in India at the Vigyan Bhavan-New Delhi at a function to celebrate the elevation to sainthood of two great saints of Kerala – Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Saint Euphresia has finally broken his silence and expressed this: "I condemn violence against any religion. We will act strongly against such violence," "My government will not allow any group belonging to majority or minority to incite hatred against others, overtly or covertly." However, all said and done, not too many are willing to trust the PM's delayed statements, with no action taken, citing that he is of double standards, one of the Hindutva agenda and to other, being a secular Prime Minister.

Politics and the colour saffron

The central government, instead of living the tri-colour of our national flag, intentionally flags off the saffron agenda.

December 25, birthday of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Madan Mohan Malaviya, was observed as good governance day by the NDA government and immediately almost every government ministry had come out with a plan for celebrations. HRD Minister Smriti Irani took a lead and asked schools, colleges, universities and technical institutions including the IITs to observe the day. Institutions were instructed to hold essay writing and oratory competitions on good governance and to organise a seminar on the use of technology and innovations in promoting good governance. This meant that all Christian institutions would have had to function on Christmas day. After a human cry by the Christian community and my open letter to the HRD Minister, the HRD ministry had rolled back its circular on cancellation of holiday on December 25, and it was Christmas holiday as usual.

The Hindutva ideology is contrary to the preamble of the Constitution of India which clearly indicates "LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and



ETHOS INSTITUTE

worship." The Hindutva agenda is in violation of Article 15 in the Constitution of India 1949 which states: "Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. (1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them (2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition..."

NDTV had reported that two key Vatican officials who were to address the 27th national assembly of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI) in Bengaluru which began on February 3, 2015 had been denied visas. Cardinal Oswald Gracias, CCBI president, reported that 140 bishops from across the world are attending the assembly.

Archbishop Arthur Roche, Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, and Archbishop Protase Rugambwa, President of Pontifical Mission Societies and Adjunct Secretary to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, were key resource persons.

Though the two officials had applied for their visas in mid-December, their applications were kept pending till the last minute, even after the intervention by Vatican's Secretary of State. Their visas were finally rejected.

2015 has seen one Church after another, one Christian institution after another being vandalized and burnt while Christians were brutalized.

In the process of drafting this article, another accusation arose from the RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat on February 23rd, 2015 and this time, it was against the Saint of India's most treasured social worker, Mother Teresa, also the Nobel Peace Prize and Bharat Ratna winner. Bhagwat claimed that "Conversion to Christianity was the main objective behind Mother Teresa's service to the poor. He stated that "Mother Teresa's service would have been good. But it used to have one objective, to convert the person, who was being served, into a Christian," he said while speaking at a function organized by NGO Apna Ghar.

This time around, not only did Christians raise their voice, but the entire nation cried foul and the stench of such pungent words of a man who has



ETHOS INSTITUTE

never served a single person in suffering but has demonstrated his authoritarian persona in making demands from people.

Sunita Kumar of Missionaries of Charity rued the remark and said, "Sadly, Mr. Bhagwat is misinformed. Mother believed in all faiths, there was never any attempt to convert, the tradition continues even today. We are not worried with about the RSS chief's comment, we have nothing to hide, we live in peace."

BJP's Lok Sabha MP Meenakshi Lekhi has defended the RSS chief over his remarks and said that Mother Teresa was baptising on her death bed as well. "He (Bhagwat) is free to make any comment and there should be no controversy regarding this. Teresa was here (in India) on a mission to convert. Why is a controversy being created? The people should read about her baptising on her death bed as well," Lekhi, the MP from New Delhi constituency said.

RSS spokesperson and former Sangh chief MG Vaidhya backed Bhagwat's remarks on Mother Teresa and suggested that the work the missionaries were suspect.

Cardinal Gracias was of the view that the RSS chief has been misinformed, and that the Mother does not need any defence and hoped that Bhagwat corrected his statement.

The Opposition has lashed out at Bhagwat for his remark. The Congress said the Sangh Parivar says one thing while the PM says another. Party Member of Parliament, Ashwani Kumar said, "This is just an attempt to confuse people, hide real issues and polarise communities. We will bring a "calling attention motion" and raise Mohan Bhagwat's comments in Parliament and outside." He added that Indians should take pride on Mother Teresa's work rather than make such comments.

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Yogendra Yadav too objected to Bhagwat's statement and said the minority of the country are not dependent on the ruling party.

Well, Christians in India seem to be like a rubber ball – the harder we are hit, the higher we rise!