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India: Sangh Parivar's reconversion offensive a nasty threat to citizenship

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The Sangh Parivar has made a habit out of raking up divisive issues which most people thought were settled at the time of Indian Independence or shortly thereafter. For instance, India adopted Parliamentary democracy in preference to the presidential system after much debate. But the unitarian, pro-centralisation Bharatiya Janata Party has always been partial to the presidential form despite its unsuitability for a huge and diverse country like India.

When it first came to national power in 1998, the BJP-led government set up a high-level commission to review the Constitution. To give the commission minimal credibility, it had to appoint a legal luminary to head it. Mercifully, former Chief Justice MN Venkatachaliah refused to alter the basic structure of the Constitution.

Similarly, the (1946-1949 — editor's note) Constituent Assembly debated and settled the issue of equality of all citizens before the law irrespective of their faith, and affirmed the principle of equal, non-discriminatory treatment of all religions by the state (Sarva Dharma Samabhava) as a minimalistic definition of secularism.

But the Parivar, including the BJP, demands primacy and supremacy for the Hindus and equates Hindutva, a toxic communal ideology, with "cultural nationalism". It regards equal treatment of citizens as "minority appeasement"—despite glaring evidence of the deprivation and discrimination faced especially by Muslims, documented by the Sachar committee and numerous other reports.

Jammu and Kashmir would not have acceded to India in the absence of the autonomy guaranteed by Article 370 of the Constitution—and perhaps not even then. But the BJP cannot live with a relaxed notion of federalism or autonomy for the states, and wants to forcibly integrate Kashmir into India. This will only increase popular alienation and resistance, encourage brutal state repression, and foment social unrest which feeds separatist militancy.

Similarly, the Constituent Assembly debated the question of freedom of conscience at length and enacted Article 25(1), under which "all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion" subject to "public order, morality and health", etc., meaning the right would be exercised in a manner which won't create disorder and undue conflict. The right is not restricted to Indian citizens, but applies to all persons.

This was fiercely opposed by Hindutva proponents of the day, especially Loknath Mishra from Orissa, who contended: "Justice demands that the ancient faith and culture of the land should be given a fair deal, if not restored to its legitimate place after a thousand years of suppression... In the present context what can this word 'propagation'... mean? It can only mean paving the way for the complete annihilation of Hindu culture, the Hindu way of life and manners."

He added: "Islam has declared its hostility to Hindu thought. Christianity has worked out the policy of peaceful penetration by the backdoor on the outskirts of our social life. This is because Hinduism

did not accept barricades for its protection. Hinduism is just an integrated vision and a philosophy of life...But Hindu generosity has been misused and politics has overrun Hindu culture... The question of communal minorities ... is a device to swallow the majority in the long run."

Mishra's hysterical outbursts about Hindu victimhood and his plea against the right to propagate religion were strongly opposed not just by Dr Ambedkar, the chairman of the Constitution drafting committee, but also by other Assembly members, who clarified that the right would be available to all, including Sanatani Hindus, Arya Samajis and other Hindutva organisations already engaged in "Shuddhikaran": of "reconverting" Muslims and Christians to Hinduism.

Gandhiji had deep reservations about both conversion and reconversion, based on religious, not political, grounds: "I disbelieve in the conversion of one person by another. My effort should never be to undermine another's faith but to make him a better follower of his own faith. This implies belief in the truth of all religions and therefore respect for them..."

This is the opposite of what the Hindu-supremacist Sangh Parivar believes in. Gandhiji didn't share its view that Islam and Christianity are alien religions or were imposed by conquerors upon unsuspecting, naïve Hindus.

In fact, Christianity in India goes back to the 1st Century AD, and Islam to the 7th Century when the first mosque was opened in Kerala, whereas Hinduism in its present casteist-Brahminical form is a more recent 8th-10th Century phenomenon.

Had the Muslim clergy during Moghul rule over large parts of India or the Catholic Church in Goa (ruled by the Portuguese for four centuries) practised mass-scale forced proselytisation, a majority of their people would not have remained Hindu, as they did. Many embraced these faiths voluntarily—often to escape Dalit oppression sanctioned by actually practised Hinduism. They still do.

The rights to the freedom of conscience and to practise and propagate one's religion derive from fundamental considerations of citizenship embedded in a charter of democracy. They must be decoupled from people's religious-ethnic-linguistic identities, and also from the premise that all religions equally capture the divine truth or spiritual essence. The state must remain firmly agnostic on this and not assign equal or dissimilar values to different religions.

Religion is a deeply personal, intimate matter. In a free liberal-democratic society, the state cannot be allowed to dictate or interfere with it—so long as it doesn't infringe on other citizens' rights. Article 25(1) is based on this sound principle. Those in the Parivar who oppose it hold the mistaken view that Hindus, especially poor Hindus, convert to Christianity or Islam because they are ignorant, have no agency or mind of their own, and are lured or coerced into doing so.

This is a deplorably paternalistic prejudice typical of the largely upper-caste Indian elite, which also believes that the poor are incapable of making any rational choices. Granting them the right to vote is at best a favour, an unfortunate part of our claim to be the world's largest democracy. At any rate, they must be "brought back home" (*ghar wapsi*) through religious reconversion—for their own good.

This is not very different from the belief held by Christian missionaries during the colonial period that they were saving the soul of the heathen by baptising him/her, just as the imperial rulers thought they were on a mission of "civilising" barbarians. Such views are unworthy of a modern, civilised mind, but are widely held by India's elite.

These views have found an uncouth and violent expression in the Parivar's reconversion campaign.

In Agra, 300 wretchedly poor Bengali-speaking Muslims were lured with the promise of below-poverty-line identity cards and tricked into performing Hindu rituals. Some had red marks painted on their foreheads and were told they had become Hindus!

The campaign, led by RSS affiliate Dharma Jagaran Manch, is backed by the Modi government which demands an anti-conversion law as the price of reining in the rogues who run the *ghar wapsi* movement. This is doubly offensive. But it reveals something important. Behind the campaign isn't a lunatic fringe of extremists over which the Parivar has lost control. It's the BJP itself.

Mr Modi has brought RSS extremists into his government and party, and allowed them a free reign. As home minister Rajnath Singh said (Nov 22), responding to a question about RSS interference in governance: "The RSS is not an external force. The PM and I have been RSS volunteers from childhood and will remain so until our death... When we ourselves are members, then how will the RSS influence us?... One could have understood the argument of any organisation influencing the government if it had a different identity, a different ideology..."

The other day, Mr Modi told BJP MPs not to cross the red line with intemperate statements. The very next day, Yogi Adityanath spewed communal poison. Modi and Co have repeatedly condoned the vituperative utterances of Giriraj Singh, Sadhvi Niranjana Jyoti and Sakshi Maharaj too. They have encouraged extremism by changing the terms of public discourse, triggering a rising spiral of Hindutva intolerance.

Thus, Christians are made to feel insecure with the officially-ordered observance (since modified) of "good governance" day on Christmas Day, also the birth anniversary of Hindu Mahasabha leader Madan Mohan Malaviya and Atal Behari Vajpayee. And all secular people must suffer the pain of Ms Sushma Swaraj's advocacy of making the Gita the national scripture.

The message that emanates from these concentric circles of BJP leaders is clear: hate-speech is the new normal; lionising Nathuram Godse is no longer taboo; the communal lumpen's time has come; "our" government won't stop *ghar wapsi*; we'll temporarily postpone it, but take it up soon, under another name if necessary; if we could "accomplish" the Babri demolition and Gujarat-2002, nothing can prevent us from converting Muslims and Christians, whether in Aligarh or elsewhere, at a named price of respectively \$8000 and \$3000.

What's scary is not that all this distracts attention from the BJP's real agenda of "development"; but that shifting political goalposts through violent communalism has become its main agenda.

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P.S.

<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2014/12/25/Parivar%E2%80%99s-Re-Conversion-Offensive%3A-Nasty-threat-to-citizenship>