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## **Hindu Nationalism and Indian Christian Response!**

**Dhinakaran Savariyar**  
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*Indian democracy is fast recast as Hindu nationalism which neither honors the country's constitutional secularity nor upholds its tradition of diversity (religious, cultural, and linguistic), inclusivity, and pluralism. The forged uniformity avowedly seeks to construct the "one" India - one religion (Hindu), one culture (Hindu), and one language (Hindi). Falsely representing a Hinduism under attack from 'invader' religions, nationalist ideologues arouse the base emotions of the unsuspecting majoritarian community and stoke their fears against the minorities, particularly Christians. Conscientious challenging of such imposed homogeneity is met with charges of sedition and profiling as anti-national foreign stooge. At this critical juncture, various historical, theological, and contextual factors necessitate Indian Church's political response through representation in parliament and state legislatures and entering the bureaucracy, not just to counter the systemic spread of the hegemonic ideology but also to safeguard her identity, particularity, rights, and freedom.*

Keywords: Indian democracy, Hindu nationalism, constitutional secularism, Christians in India

*I Am A Troll* is a book by Swati Chaturvedi who enthusiastically volunteered for Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) digital army to oust the corruptive Congress regime in 2014 so that India will have a new beginning with Narendra Modi as its new prime minister. Nevertheless, when she was made privy to the manipulative, nasty, dirty, and terrorizing techniques employed by the power-mongering BJP to capture power at the center, she courageously decided to expose the lies and deceit of BJP and its online army (Chaturvedi, 2016). Although Hindu nationalistic agenda was still gaining on the Indian context, BJP's electoral victory in 2014 with an overwhelming majority largely achieved through the false propaganda, gave Hindu nationalist ideologues the needed edge to percolate their ideology systematically into legislation, governance, and bureaucracy. Noting the fact, an intuitive comment was made by the Indian Nobel laureate Amartya Sen: "Modi won power, not battle of ideas" (Chakraborty, 2019). But one wonders why Hindu nationalist ideologues, with all the power and might at the centre through their political wing BJP, would still play on "Hindu victimhood" (Chowdhury, 2021) stoking the othering of religious minorities like Muslims and Christians. There is a perceptive observation: "Whether an accurate characterization or a stereotype, it is widely said that Hinduism is a majority religion with the insecurity of a minority religion" (Schmalz, 2006, p. 218). Clearly, Hindu nationalists harp on their preferred agenda of intimidating the Hindu majority with an impending doom for their religion at the hands of minority religions.

The antagonistic constructions of Hindu nationalism against religious minorities, particularly Christians imperil their religious freedom which is both a constitutional and human right for the citizens of India. In the face of aggressive Hindu nationalism, an overview of Christian conception of religious freedom as a theoretical touchstone is necessitated for the analysis on factors that attempt to forge a religious homogeneity in India. Here, it does well to argue how Hindu nationalism instrumentalizes religion not only to retain political power but as well to weaken the very democratic principle by which India boasts of secularity and religious tolerance as the pillars

of a multireligious, multilingual, and multicultural Indian polity. Also, with Hindu nationalism reinforcing the idea of a pure Hindu state (Gettleman & Raj, 2022), the subaltern marginalization through caste system is set to continue as the cherished tenet of the Hindu faith even in the postmodern times. Indian Christianity finds herself at such critical crossroads where her life, mission, and rights are under constant threat of infringement. At this juncture, the Indian Church has to earnestly weigh in on political engagement not just to protect herself from the growing assault of the fundamentalist forces, but also to creatively evangelize in the public sphere in and through her commitment for justice, dignity, and transformation as a genuine witness to the Kingdom ideal. To this end, I divide my paper into two unequal parts. The first part of the paper begins with the Christian understanding of religious freedom, later contrasted with the anti-democratic, anti-secular (anti-minority and anti-Christian), and anti-Dalit logics of Hindu nationalism. The second part analyses the driving factors behind Indian Christianity's political engagement and concludes with providing some helpful indicators for the Church to accomplish political activism in India.

### **Christian Vision of Religious Freedom**

Paolo Carozza and Daniel Philpott manifest how the Church's relationship to human rights and democracy can only be understood through the dual dynamics of historical convergence and the persistence of tension. In their view, the Catholic conception of the common good led to the embrace of human rights and democracy, though the Church's efforts to advance her teachings regarding them were often met with resistance in the history on account of conceptual differences and problems rooted in institutional realities (Carozza & Philpott, 2012, pp. 16-7). Tracking down the evolutionary path, they indicate how for the Church, "To endorse human rights was effectively to endorse democracy since human rights were realized most effectively in states with democratic institutions" (Carozza & Philpott, 2012, p. 23).

Since I understand religious freedom as an inalienable right in a democracy, I would refer to the conceptual articulations of the Church regarding the same to portray its crucial relevance for a multi-religious country like India. Vatican II document *Dignitatis Humanae* holds unambiguously that "This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such ways that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 2).

Pope John Paul II broadened our horizons explicating how the right to practice one's faith has a fundamental place in a democracy. Emphasizing on the need to "give democracy an authentic and solid foundation through the explicit recognition of those rights" (*Centesimus Annus*, para. 47), the saint Pope asserts the primacy of the right to practice one's faith as follows: "In a certain sense, the source and synthesis of these rights is religious freedom, understood as the right to live in the truth of one's faith and in conformity with one's transcendent dignity as a person" (*CA*, para. 47). For David Hollenbach, securing human rights is inextricably linked with the Christian notion of common good. Establishing the free exercise of religion as a social freedom, he asserts that "The dialogic ethic underlying this claim means that protection of active engagement of religious believers in public life, not privatization of religion, is part of the substantive meaning of the right to religious freedom" (Hollenbach, 2002, pp. 161-2). He reiterates on the fact that the institutional

protection of the rights to freedom of religion, speech, and association as essential preconditions for the common good itself. To this end, he underscores that “The institutions of constitutional democracy, and the rights built into these institutions, are among the constitutive elements of a community where all citizens participate in the freedom of public life” (Hollenbach, 2002, p. 165). In the light of constitutional vision which upholds “free profession, practice, and propagation of faith” (*The Constitution of India*, #25), Indian theologian Felix Wilfred considers religious freedom in Asia as a community issue. He writes: “If religious freedom is, on the one hand, *immunity* of a religious community from unwarranted intervention by the state or other social and political actors or by the majority religious community, it is also, on the other hand, an issue of the *protection* of the identity of minority groups” (Wilfred, 2019, p.74). To this end, he concludes that “Religious freedom has to do with the recognition of religious identities and the establishing of the necessary socio-political conditions for a peaceful and harmonious coexistence” (Wilfred, 2019, p.74). Setting the brief outline on religious freedom as a theoretical yardstick, I would like to illuminate how the *Hindutva* ideology is profoundly anti-democratic, anti-secular, and anti-Dalit.

### **Anti-Democratic Discourse of Hindu Nationalism**

The genetics of *Hindutva*<sup>1</sup> or Hindu nationalism betrays a divisive make-up, toxic to the language and practice of common good, ideally intended through any democratic system of organization. As an ideology, it was nurtured and propagated by at least six hard-liners by name Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906-1973), and Sita Ram Goel (1921-2003) (Kuruvachira 2006, p. ix (preface)). Among them, Golwalkar developed a Hindu nationalism as an analogous concept of German nationalism. French political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot opines that Golwalkar’s concept of a nation was a distinct fall-out and illustration of “German ethnic definition of nationalism” (Jaffrelot 2005, p. 71). For Golwalkar, it followed a five-fold criteria: “Hindu *rashtra*, Aryan race, Hindu religion, Hindu culture, and Sanskrit language” (Kuruvachira 2006, p. 156) – synonymously meaning “geographical unity, race, religion, culture, and language” (Jaffrelot 2005, p. 71). This is why the celebrated communist leader Yechuri commented that “Golwalkar rejected everything modern in human civilization – liberty, equality, fraternity, secularism, democracy, and parliamentary institution – as alien concepts” (Kuruvachira 2006, p. 180). In sum, the symbolism of the term *Hindutva* is well captured by Peter Van Der Veer as follows: “*Hindutva* equates religious and national identity: an Indian is a Hindu – an equation that puts important religious communities, such as Christians and Muslims, outside the nation” (Veer 1996, p. 1). Here, it is beneficial to remember Jaffrelot’s analogy of German nationalism to *Hindutva*.

Lancy Lobo clarifies further that “Hindu nationalism appears as a political ideology and less of a religious faith. Consequently, one can distinguish two sides of Hinduism: religious Hinduism and political Hinduism. Hindu nationalists largely belong to the latter by trying to appropriate the former. Hindu nationalists politicize Hinduism in order to capture political power. They use political as well as cultural institutions to shape a proud Hindu nation” (Lobo 2002, p. 58). In order to achieve their task of a larger Hindu nation – Hindu *Rashtra* – each of the Hindu nationalist organization works in unison by focusing on the common agenda. Lancy Lobo again presents a capturing illustration of Hindu Nationalist Organizations comparing their work to the working of the palm of a hand. “The palm is the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS) (cultural), and the fingers

attached to this palm are the BJP (political), the VHP (religious), the Bajrang Dal (muscle power), Hindu Jagran Manch (focusing on tribals), and Shiv Sena. All these put together are known as the Sangh Parivar (family of organizations)” (Lobo 2002, p. 60).

With BJP gaining power at the center in 2014, Hindu nationalism enjoys its heyday almost in all the fronts of Indian political and civil life. Commenting on the rise of Hindu nationalism, Stanislaus Alla seems to approach the question realistically. In his view, just like any other nation on earth, India too had not been problem free then and now. However, the real threat today is that “as a nation India is trying to survive in order to be what it is: a multi-cultural and religious democratic republic, founded in 1950 on a constitution that guarantees freedom, dignity, and equality to all of its peoples” (Alla 2019, p. 61). By privileging the Hindu majority over religious minorities, *Hindutva* affirms the “rejection of the core democratic principle that all citizens are equal”<sup>iii</sup> (Blank, 2021). The divisive agenda of Hindu nationalists signifies only a truncated version of democracy that remains a menace to the nation’s unity. Indian political scientists Suhas Palshikar and Rahul Verma duly observe that “Perhaps at no time in the history of our nascent democracy have we been more polarized than today, revealing the divide of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ not only politically but also in everyday activity” (Palshikar & Verma 2017, pp. 14-5). Likewise, Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, a professor of political science alerts us to the sharper and unprecedented side of such polarization. He calls our attention to the much pronounced and clearly held distinction (division!) “between the idea of secular democracy (where diversity and democracy are celebrated), and *Hindutva* nationalism, which is promoting monolithic identity and cultural nationalism” (Neyazi 2017, p. 32). He concludes his thought by exposing the connivance of the digital media in abetting the political polarization in the current context.

The BJP’s agenda of a polarized democracy with an obvious gulf between the majority and minorities impels Jaffrelot to aver that the BJP is indeed taking the country on the path of an “ethnic democracy” where a regime remains in tune with its democratic constitution while the minorities are marginalized (Jaffrelot, 2017). Sri Lankan political scientist Uyangoda maintains likewise that the Indian democracy steadily recedes into “ethnocratization” not just by privatizing and outsourcing violence as a political weapon in the hands of *gau rakshak* (the cow vigilante) but also by making such miscreants the beneficiaries of a measure of impunity from consequences, which together suggest that the state institutions of law enforcement and justice have already been subjected to such a democratic backsliding (Uyangoda, 2017). He maintains that “ethnocracy does not abandon democracy altogether. It reinvents democracy as undemocracy” (Uyangoda, 2017).

Hindu nationalism with its relentless push for majoritarian, religious, and cultural homogeneity seeks to achieve a kind of forged uniformity by descending into control what Indians eat, wear, read, watch, who they love, and who they (must – only) oppose. Faced with this bleak prospect, Indian scientist Pushpa M. Bhargava raises a pertinent question about the future of the Indian democracy: “Are we moving towards a Hindu religious autocracy which would move the country away from rationality and reason and, thus, democracy?” (Bhargava, 2015). Lamenting the failure of democracy especially under *Hindutva* forces, Felix Wilfred says, “Democracy has become simply a huge blanket spread over the nation under which rapacious wolves have been preying on defenseless lambs” (Wilfred 2009, p. 192). Pope Francis talks of democracy as retreating into a new form of cultural colonization. He says, “Nowadays, what do certain words like democracy, freedom, justice or unity really mean? They have been bent and shaped to serve as tools for

domination, as meaningless tags that can be used to justify any action” (*Fratelli Tutti*, para. 14). One can see that the nationalistic takeover of Indian democracy could be diametrically opposite to what was envisioned as a democratic system by the Church. Unambiguously manifesting the Church’s preference for democratic systems, John Paul II opined that “The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate” (CA, para. 46). Thus, a brief look at Hindu nationalism with its hegemonic design for Indian democracy manifests something foreboding for minorities living in the context.

### **Anti-Secular Logic of Hindu Nationalism**

When it is secularity that is endangered, then the neutrality of the state towards religions tilts toward one side. In other words, the anti-secular framework of *Hindutva* ideology, with its aggressive promotion of Hinduism as the religion of the state, essentially pointers to an anti-minority, in our case, anti-Christian outlook in India. While secularism could generally mean the state maintaining equal distance from all religions, the Hindu nationalists in India aim at abolishing the ‘secular’ so that India will be a ‘Hindu’ state and ‘Hindus Only’ state. Protestant theologian Gnana Patrick comments thus: “Indian secularism, as given out in the Constitution, is positively oriented towards religion, protecting the religious rights of individuals and communities even while protecting the State from the dominance of religion” (Patrick 2020, p. 98). Speaking from the perspective of the marginalized Dalit people, Felix Wilfred even attempts a redefinition of secularism as “freedom from the control of religion and its ideology that dehumanizes them and defines their lives; it is a freedom from the hierarchical religious ideology” (Wilfred, 2010, p. 19). However, with Hindu nationalism the idea is to enthrone all that would symbolize “Hindu” while simultaneously to dethrone all that would stand for other religions. In at least three different ways we can perceive the *Hindutva* agenda unfolding in the context: assertion of Hindu symbols, removal of the symbols of other religious traditions, and creation of new forms of oppression.

To begin with, there has been a vigorous assertion of Hindu symbols especially after 2014. Since the time BJP assumed power at the center, there is an increased insistence on nation and *desh bhakti* (allegiance to the nation). In movie theaters, national anthem is being played before every movie across the country to ensure patriotism (Roy, 2017). Under Modi’s rule, India has planned for two tallest statues in the world: ‘Statue of Unity’ in honor of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel who reportedly became suspicious of Muslims (Iwanek, 2017) and the statue of Hindu Monarch Shivaji who established a strong Maratha kingdom (Iwanek, 2017). Although these two are projects of different state governments, they are not without political implications. Former external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj represented the claim of Hindu nationalists to seek national scripture status for *Bhagvad Gita*<sup>iii</sup> (holy book for Hindus) (“Sushma Wants Gita as National Book. Do You?,” 2014). While the building of Ram Temple in Ayodhya in the place of the demolished Babri Masjid mosque is fast progressing to be open before the next parliamentary elections in 2024 (Pandey, 2021), the *Hindutva* think tank puts forth the legacy of Sanskrit language as “a marker of cultural and religious continuity, a mode of acquiring intellectual legitimacy and forging a sense of Hindu national unity” (Lal 2009, p. 16). Rajasthan High Court offered a recommendation to the government that the cow should be declared as national animal (“Declare Cow as National Animal: Rajasthan High Court to Centre,” 2017). Similarly, quoting yoga as part of *vedic* culture and therefore part of Hinduism, a sudden emphasis has been accorded to International Yoga Day on

June 21, actively participated by Prime Minister Modi himself (Ali, 2015). These are some of the instances through which Hindu nationalism made its identity and agenda obvious by formulating new icons of national unity.

If these are about assertion of *Hindutva* symbols, the abolition of the symbols of other minority religions is equally true. The BJP government has devised ways to rewrite the history of India in a move to rejuvenate the old priority of the Hindu nationalist movement. Part of rewriting the history begins with changing the names of historically important places - Mughalsarai railway station to Deen Dayal Upadhyaya<sup>iv</sup> (“Mughalsarai Railway Station Renamed After Deen Dayal Upadhyaya: A Look at Stations That Have Been Renamed Recently,” 2017). Because it is an explicit Muslim identity of Mughal emperors, foreign dignitaries visiting India are nowadays presented with copies of *Gita* and *Ramayana* instead of the traditional Taj Mahal replicas<sup>v</sup> (“Taj Mahal Doesn’t Reflect Indian Culture: Yogi Adityanath,” 2017). If the above-mentioned Hindu nationalist strategies were anti-Muslim, Christians suffered in tacit ways too. Modi government decided to introduce and popularize Good Governance Day on Christmas Day (which required people to work on a national holiday for Christians) as if to ridicule Christian religious sentiment (Anwar, 2014). Hindu nationalism well-plays its agenda of abolishing the minority icons clear from history as well as from memory of the people.

The BJP government did not just stop with the assertion of Hindu symbols while abolishing the rest. The minorities became its immediate objects of target. Viewed thus, beef ban in India<sup>vi</sup> was not just to protect ‘holy’ cows but also to send a warning signal to Muslims to align their food culture (along with that of the majoritarian Hindus). Beef ban was a conspicuous instance where the government flexed its muscle to decide the menu of the people rather than ensuring their food (Mohan, 2017). To add to this, Adityanath Yogi, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh ordered madrassas (Muslim schools) to videotape their Independence Day celebrations as if to subject them to patriotism test (Siddiqui & Rai, 2017). Modi government also claimed credit for implementing Triple Talaq Ban citing inequality and discrimination of women in Islam. Now the moot question is ‘will it do the same to appeal to temples,<sup>vii</sup> when there are scores of them, with a proclaimed note, banning the entry of women and Dalits?’ (“10 Indian Temples That Still Don’t Allow Entry of Women,” 2016). Some critics rightly suspect that the BJP government’s successful ban on triple talaq has put it on the highway to meet its pet agenda of passing the bill on Uniform Civil Code (Shekhar, 2017) which hoards the agenda of intervening and infringing upon religious freedom and practices under the guise of implementing a common vision of society which, however, has to emerge out of consensus between religions and ideologies and should the state forget it, it may step on the toes of one or other religion or ideology. Therefore, Michael Amaladoss asserts that “given the ground reality of majorities and minorities in the country, “Uniform Civil Code” may be an imposition of the majority point of view on the minorities” (Amaladoss 2010, pp. 72-3). This being the fact, the BJP government seems to act with a vested interest towards curtailing the minority religious freedom in the name of winning justice and equality from discriminatory practices found in minority religions (“Why India Doesn’t Have a Uniform Code,” 2017), although the backbone of Hindu religion the *varna* or caste system and the resultant evil of caste discrimination and other Hindu religious superstitions are left untouched. A sufficient analysis of Hindu nationalist strategies demonstrates how they are anti-democracy and anti-minority by weakening the constitutional secularism of India only to move the *Hindutva* ideology to the centre stage.

### **Hindu Nationalism Formulating New Forms of Hegemony**

Yet another inalienable concern of Hindu nationalism is to construct new forms of exclusion that deny equality to all members of the same religion. By reinforcing all that actively represents 'Hindu', the nationalists have solidified *varna* or caste system as the foundational tenet of Hindu religion, thereby dealing a deathblow to the aspirations of liberation for Hindu Dalits from millennial evil of caste discrimination. American ethicist James F Keenan has an insightful observation on the oppressive ideology of caste: "It's a small wonder that when dehumanization and terror are accomplished, longstanding internalization of the inherent superiority of the dominant caste and the inherent inferiority of those of the bottom rung is achieved" (Keenan 2021, p. 88). Therefore, a critical and evaluative look at Hindu nationalist re-construction of caste system offers the needed help to sharpen our perspectives.

The constitutional father of India and visionary leader of Dalits Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was highly critical of Hinduism, especially the Brahminical takeover of the religion. In Ambedkar's opinion, *Brahminism* used Hinduism to formalize casteism giving it a religious spin. For *Hindutva*, *Brahminism* is the ideological mentor. Hence, Ambedkar was highly critical of *Brahminism* and its agenda of inversion.

"The priestly class must be brought under control by some such legislation as I have outlined above. This will prevent it from doing mischief and from misguiding people. It will democratise it by throwing it open to everyone. It will certainly help to kill *Brahminism* and will also help to kill caste, which is nothing but *Brahminism* incarnate. *Brahminism* is the poison which has spoiled Hinduism. You will succeed in saving Hinduism if you will kill *Brahminism*. There should be no opposition to this reform from any quarter" (Ambedkar, 2014, no. 24.4).

The *Brahminical* model of Hinduism rings a death knell for Dalits by its prospect of perpetuation of caste stratification with no respite. Seth Schoenhaus cautions how *Hindutva* strategies that target Dalits as its vote bank could well define their role as just 'voters' and not as 'Hindus' who have found perfect communion like any other upper caste Hindu. He writes, "As groups existing below the caste system and outside common society, Dalits have been increasingly flocking to the *Hindutva* message of caste unity, especially without a strong Ambedkar-like leader to remind them that the Hindu caste system and the upper-caste *Hindutva* supporters had oppressed them in the first place" (Schoenhaus 2017, p. 65). The causal relationship between Hindu nationalism and the sustaining of caste system as its predominant agenda can be explained from the burgeoning attacks against Dalits on the one hand, and the construction of Dalits as mutineers against caste stratification sanctioned by the Hindu religion on the other. Thus, the nationalist ideologues have successfully duped the unsuspecting victims among Dalits to continue with the ideology of oppression on the one hand and to oppose the dissenters with ones of their own flock on the other. Representing quite well the automated, divisive, and hegemonic command of the workings of caste, American writer Isabel Wilkerson analogously speaks of it as "the wordless usher" (Wilkerson 2020, p. 17) whose voice carefully monitors that we belong to where we should be, thus ensuring that we not just occupy 'only' 'our' seats but consciously refrain from occupying those of 'others' who symbolize the occupants of higher rungs in the social ladder.



This near impossibility of the prospect of emancipation for Dalits from caste discrimination within Hinduism led Ambedkar, the intuitive leader to posit Dalits as “subjects of suffering defined by a permanent antagonism to the caste Hindu order” (Rao 2009, p. 23). Historian Anupama Rao holds that Ambedkar wanted to achieve this by three resolutions: a political resolution (through separate electorates for Dalits), a religious resolution (through conversion out of the Hindu fold), and a constitutional resolution (through Dalit disenfranchisement and abolition of untouchability central to Indian civil rights) (Rao 2009, p. 23). Despite these historical cautions present, the lack of Dalit leadership in the modern times has facilitated the successful inroads of aggressive Hindu nationalism into Dalit life that finds itself in the crosshairs of the caste war.

Nevertheless, what explains the newly building up anti-Dalit tension from the dominant upper castes is Dalits’ recipe of success in educational and economic realms. On the side of caution, we cannot feel overly optimistic about Dalit resurgence for the simple fact that Dalit life continues to remain vulnerable to ideological marginalization and vicious atrocities in the name of caste. Seth Schoenhaus maintains that “Caste tensions and even warfare, while nothing new in Hindu society, were undoubtedly exacerbated with the affirmative action policies toward the end of the twentieth century” (Schoenhaus 2017, p. 60). Echoing the same, British social anthropologist David Mosse believes that the idea of Hindu nationalism is a reaction to the liberative missionary practices towards Dalits in the Indian context. He opines, “The development of a homogenizing, some say “Semitized,” Hinduism with unified creed and cult was above all a mimetic reaction to the Christian missionary “other” (Mosse 2012, p. 199). Extended to the suffering of minority Christians, the upper caste anger that is directed against the minority Christians is thus the ‘earned reward’ for Christian liberative praxis within the context of India, though the painful truth of casteism and caste-based discrimination within the Church is both tangible and real.

### **Indian Christian Response**

With Hindu nationalist ideologues relentlessly advancing their ideal of a theocratic Hindu state, Christian response is crucial in the context not just to keep the rise of Hindu nationalism under check but very much in response to assert the reign of God in and through a public engagement which is mandated within the political context of India. The non-negotiable need for Indian Church’s experiment with politics has arisen at least because of three factors: historical, theological, and contextual.

Prof. Rowena Robinson has a meticulous historical account of what transpired in the post-independence period resulting in the Christian community staying away from representation in the legislature (Robinson, 2014). The same is attested by Gnana Patrick who demonstrates that Indian Christians preferred the minority rights to communal representation in the post-independent Indian parliament. At the time, “Christian leaders were more concerned about ensuring the religio-cultural rights of Christians, while foregoing the opportunity to send representatives to the legislature. Minority rights, they thought, would enable the Christians to cultivate their religio-cultural traditions and live by them with freedom and dignity” (Patrick 2020, p. 48). However, with the passage of time, the promise to the Christian minorities was not remembered and to make it worse, minority rights were infringed upon by the negative influence of Hindu nationalists. As a result, Christians as a minority community are at the mercy of some good-willed regional and national parties and representatives to voice out on their behalf. According to a 2014 data, while Muslim minorities are better represented in the Indian parliament with 4.24% representation, the concerns

of 2.5% Indian Christians go unheard and ignored largely due to a very poor representation falling below 1% (Raghavan, 2014), (although the recent dwindling of Muslim representation in legislatures is related to the rise of the BJP (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2018). Indian Christianity has of late arrived at the realization that the historical decision needs a corrective in the context by obligating Christian presence in the legislature.

Besides the historical, a theological awakening has reshaped the mission of Indian Church in the context. Theologies from the West and particularly from Latin America have exerted a considerable influence on the theological methodology currently embraced in the Indian Church. Christian anthropology's emphasis on the human person acquiring meaning in interaction with others (Thomas, 2008) has enlightened Indian theology to not just opt for evangelization but to combine it with the praxis of liberation for the marginalized humanity. Such a theological prominence has been jointly undertaken by both catholic and protestant theologians as they envisage a Church actively participating in and contributing to a public political sphere.

From the West, Jurgen Moltmann argued for the inseparable intertwining of evangelization and liberation as not just complementing each other but also forming the ecclesial identity. In his view, "Christ's missionary charge and the revolutionary imperative; the preaching of repentance and the transformation of unjust economic and political conditions into better justice; peace with God and the struggle for a peaceful world" (Moltmann 1994, p. 28) belong indissolubly together. For him, mission is an indivisible whole of evangelization and liberation. Therefore, he maintains, "The Church is an evangelizing and a liberating community. If it is not, it is not Christ's Church – nor indeed a Church at all" (Moltmann 1994, p. 28). For both a comparative and complementary perspective, I turn to Latin American liberation theology which has certainly offered a new opening to the way of doing theology in India. One of the insightful contributions of Latin American Jesuit liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuria is his intentional formulation of "taking responsibility for reality" (Sobrino 2008, p. 2) in the context of oppression and marginalization. Ellacuria's realization comes with an honest appraisal of the reality with a compelling conviction that to be a Christian is to transform the oppressive reality into a liberative praxis.

Picking up on Moltmann's transformation of the Church into becoming an "extroverted Church which takes its bearing from the kingdom of God" (Moltmann 1994, p. 27), Felix Wilfred names political mission as the praxis dimension of faith. "The Church is challenged to give a political expression to its faith. Politics and faith are not opposed to each other" (Wilfred 2009, p. 189). Acknowledging the pioneering role of Soosai Arokiasamy in advancing an indigenous liberation theology done in favour of Dalits, James Keenan comments on the notable contribution of Indian catholic theologians in the following manner: "In addressing the great caste distinctions in India, Arokiasamy and others have argued that until the option for the poor embraces the most marginalized, the *dalits*, its theological ethics will not realize its call to be liberating" (Keenan 2011, p. 209).

Protestant theologians like Gnana Patrick invoke upon Church's political mission in the public sphere especially because living with minority rights has come under serious strains today. He writes: "These suffocating experiences of the minorities bring back the question of the need of their voice being heard in the legislature, the political decision-making body. This is one of the salient concerns that the Indian public theology of mission will have to grapple with" (Patrick

2020, p. 49). Moving on, he clarifies how the political mission of the Church should champion the cause of the marginalized. To this end, he adds, “Politics need not be understood only as that practice leading to partaking of parliamentary bureaucratic and legal power, but also of constructing and deconstructing the symbolic-cultural power from the lifeworlds of the subaltern people of India” (Patrick 2020, p. 13). Theologies and theological positions such as these certainly highlight the unavoidable and indispensable political mission of the Indian Church.

Just as the historical and theological developments, contextual realities too have underlined the necessity of Christianity’s political role in the context. A recent example is the custodial death of 83-year-old Jesuit tribal activist Fr. Stan Swamy<sup>viii</sup> on whose behalf the Christians could only appeal to authorities but could not adequately push for ensuring his humanitarian treatment in the prison (although all he needed was a sipper!) or call for his release citing his ill-health. His death is a dark reminder that the political agency of Indian Christians remains but a dream (Alla, 2021).

### **Indicators for Political Mission of the Church**

The Christian response to stifle the threat of Hindu nationalism will be relevant and fitting in so far as it can rightly diagnose the problem at hand and figure out the trajectory accordingly. To begin with, the mission of the Church in the public sphere should prioritize two levels of participation: representation in parliament and state legislatures and entering the bureaucracy. The urgent need for a concentrated and organized action is deeply felt now. Fr. Christhu Raj, a priest of the Archdiocese of Madras laments the conspicuous failure of the Church’s political representation. Although a minority at 2.5% of Indian population, Christianity is still a larger majority compared to Sikhism and Jainism. However, Sikh and Jainists (respectively 1.72% and 0.37% of the population) (Nayak, 2017) enjoy a good attendance and representation, thus having a decent impact on Indian administration. Unfortunately Christians are not. Fr. Raj cautions us that “If we remain silent and avoid participation, we may [tacitly approve] decisions that negatively affect our rights and privileges” (Nayak, 2017). To this end, “We are obliged to participate actively in political administration in order to protect the interests of our community and to safeguard our rights and religious identities” (Nayak, 2017).

If Hindu nationalist takeover of politics is problematic, equally so is its penetration and “saffronisation<sup>ix</sup> of bureaucracy” (Kolhatkar, 2021). In a shocking manifestation, the former Chief Minister of Karnataka H.D. Kumaraswamy spoke of the tactical hijack of Indian bureaucracy by the RSS. He claimed: “The present government is not representative of people’s aspirations. It is only run at the behest of RSS. This is not Narendra Modi’s government. This is RSS government” (Sastry, 2021). He also attacked RSS as pursuing the “Taliban Culture.”<sup>x</sup> He said: “RSS does not believe in democratic values. Its leaders and members have no faith in human values. They act like demons while enforcing their communal, divisive ideology. I strongly believe that those who don’t have faith in democracy or don’t treat other human beings as equals are Talibanis” (Chitnis, 2021). Such disturbing facts mandate the organized effort of the Church toward a political mission without further ado. But we are not left clueless completely. A rare instance of political experiment and success, probably the first of its kind from India, comes from Kerala to embolden our spirit regarding the political mission of the Church. In the village body elections in Kerala, in 2015, nominees of the Church-supported High Range Protection Council won Kattapana Municipality of Idukki district, bagging 14 out of its 34 seats. The Communist Party of Kerala supported these Church candidates and have pulled through the impossible in the context. Citing the instance,

Jeemon Jacob argues that “What occurred in this small village of Christians could have great lessons for the people across India in their attempt for political assertion. How communists came to support them, without the church asking for it, also should get the attention of church and political leaders” (Jacob, 2015). Although a local-body election victory cannot be turned into a credible recipe of success for the entirety of the country regardless of the contextual challenges in each part of India, yet it is a worthwhile model of imitation for Indian Christianity to embark on the inevitable mission with this successful precedent in mind. A similar show of commitment and organized effort is required on the part of the Church to help the Christian youth occupy the various rungs of bureaucracy that has been languishing under the nationalistic ploy. Like me, many may be aware of the regional, diocesan, or individual efforts to train the Christian youth to enter into bureaucracy. Irrespective of all the hurdles to implementation and coordination of such a massive initiative, the efforts have to turn summarily collective not just to thwart nationalism taking a heavy toll on Christian life and mission in India but also to successfully accomplish the political mission of the Church in the national stage of Indian democracy.

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### Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> The term *Hindutva* is the ideological representation of hegemonic Hinduism or Hindu nationalism in India. Its variants are spoken of as being cultural, religious, and political in manifestation.
- <sup>ii</sup> The Preamble of the Constitution of India unequivocally declares that “We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a [sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic] and to secure to all its citizens: justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the [unity and Integrity of the Nation].” Available online at: [legislative.gov.in](http://legislative.gov.in).
- <sup>iii</sup> True to the secularistic ideal of Indian polity, the State has never privileged any one religion. However, the nationalist ideologues, in their attempt to rewrite the narrative anew, push forward the claim of national scripture status to *Bhagvad Gita* (the holy book of Hindus), thus intending to nullify the country's secularistic stance.
- <sup>iv</sup> Trying to recast Indian history shorn of Islamic colonial roots, the Hindu nationalists renamed the ‘Mughalsarai’ railway station – an apparent Muslim appellation in honor of ‘Deen Dayal Upadhyaya,’ a former proponent of *Hindutva* ideology.
- <sup>v</sup> Thus far, Indian officials gifted foreign dignitaries a replica of the Indian world wonder *Taj Mahal* as the cultural symbol of the country. Now nationalist ideologues disdain the practice stating that the Muslim monument of love does not reflect the values of ‘Hindu’ India.
- <sup>vi</sup> Beef ban was an initiative of the Indian Environment Ministry of Modi government. Often masqueraded under protection of cows, the sacred animals for Hindus, what it aimed at more was

to discriminate against and enmitize the Muslims' habit of eating beef. Hence, 'beef ban' is more a Hindu-versus-Muslim issue – majority vs. minority - beyond the seeming claims of prevention of cattle slaughter. As a historical precedent, it is good to recall the lynching of Mohammed Akhlaq in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh for suspicion of slaughtering a cow. In consequence, the sharp rise of 'cow vigilante violence' in the country can be seen as the close follow-up. Beef ban has been passed into a law in most of the BJP states.

<sup>vii</sup> Although it is not a written law, several Hindu temples across India deny entry for women and Dalits.

<sup>viii</sup> Fr. Stanislaus Lourduswamy, popularly known as Stan Swamy was a Jesuit priest who dedicated his life to champion the rights of indigenou and marginalized people in the state of Jharkhand, India. He was not granted bail despite repeated appeals citing his deteriorating health. He was arrested for alleged links with Maoist insurgents who were said to have been behind the caste-based violence in Bhima Koregaon village in the state of Maharashtra in January 2018. Acutely suffering from Parkinson's disease, he had to patiently wait for weeks to get his request for a sipper legally processed.

<sup>ix</sup> Saffron is the color of the RSS, the nationalistic Hindu right-wing outfit. The word is widely used by Indian authors to describe the infiltration and takeover of *Hindutva* ideology in the field of reference. This particular reference to "Saffron terror" was made by the then Home Minister P. Chidambaram to testify to the saffronised bureaucracy that misled people by tilting the emphasis on Islamic terror and Pakistan instead of highlighting the truth of Hindu terror. (Kolhatkar, 2021). Also see: (Mahajan, 2018).

<sup>x</sup> Kumaraswamy's statement evoked a strong reaction from BJP leaders. But the main basis of the controversy is a book from which Kumaraswamy had claimed to have quoted. (Narayanan, 2020)