

Religious Conversion, Re-Conversion & Indian Constitution

Prof. Faizan Mustafa
Vice-Chancellor
National Law University, Orissa
India

Repression of and discrimination against minorities is as old as recorded history itself. It seems we no more believe in what Supreme Court of India had said in the famous national anthem case that "Our tradition teaches tolerance, our philosophy preaches tolerance, our constitution practices tolerance. Let us not dilute it." 'Reverse proselytisation' or 'homecoming' or 're-conversion' is fast emerging as the only safe bet for the persecuted Christian minority in the state of Orissa. They are embracing Hinduism in desperate bid to bury the communal hat chef and return home. As a matter of fact, poor Christians living under terror have no choice but to change faith. Re-conversion ceremonies took place last year at several places in the remote villages, of course away from the media galore. The ceremony normally involves eating basil leaves, drinking cow dung mixed water, and tonsuring of the head.

The term 'conversion' is as old as the religion itself. The history known to us connotes that it was used primarily in Judaism and Christianity. Change of religion is mainly a product of propagation and missionary activities. The great living missionizing religions are Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. They aim to bring a 'social transformation and revitalization of purpose sparked by spiritual impulses. The metaphysical- moral vision induces a passion for transcendence that intellectually, morally and emotionally frees its adherents from local deities and cults, from familial, tribal, clan, caste or ethnic loyalties from fixed political, economic conditions and from traditional 'paganisms'. They lay a new foundation and give a new discipline, one that liberates from evil and falsehood and binds a good and truth. Each conversion indicates a desire for change i.e. a change from the existing cruelties to recognition of individuality and self- respect.

Hinduism represents a special and exceedingly complex case, for while it is similar to non-missionizing traditions in many respects, and while it seems to have spread essentially by a process called Sanskritization, the gradual adoption of Vedic practices and Brahmanic authority by non- Aryan people does indicate that it too has had periods of vigorous missionary activity. But the broad consensus is that Hinduism is a closed religion. Gandhiji and Radhakrishnan did assert that Hinduism is not a proselytizing religion. As a matter of fact rejection of proselytism is an important and essential part of tolerance. Thus ISKON(Hare Krishna) is just an exception. But Shuddhi Movement is a militant re-conversion movement that actively seeks to win back to the Hindu fold Christians, Muslims and others. It is indeed actively proselytizing movement involving also the conversion of those who had never been Hindus.

Historically, most conversions in India, from the ranks of the economically poorest and socially most defenseless Hindus, to Islam and Christianity, took place under the influence of Muslim

and Christian conquerors. This is the context in which the converts, converters and the conversions, were seen by the vast majority of Hindus, who had remained faithful to their religion despite defeat in battle. They saw the converts as people who had betrayed the nation by going over to the side of the conqueror, and they saw conversions as the conqueror's device, oiled through coercion and lure, for subverting Hindu society by dividing it against higher Hindu castes, which has resisted what many Hindus saw as a religio-cultural invasion by foreign conquerors. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the conversions were condemned most and re-conversion to Hinduism was mostly preached by organizations, which prided themselves on their nationalism.

Conversions, it has been argued, most virulently by the extreme right among other groups, are generally coercive, 'involuntary' and singularly 'subversive'. However, 'voluntary' conversions have also not been taken to kindly and have brought many social tensions in their way. As the converts mostly belonged to the lowest castes and converted to escape the notorious oppression of the higher castes, the conversions further accentuated the demarcations between castes. Political affiliates of the higher caste Hindu parties, therefore, are the bitterest about original converts and most aggressive in trying to reconvert their descendants and bring them back into the folds of caste Hinduism. Thus, the threads of conversion lead to many fault lines in India's polity and society. To the historical divides of castes, to the trauma of the historical conquests and their contemporary fallout, to the divide between the poor, rural, tribal people, and the grabbing of their land and other resources by their richer, urban, non-tribal neighbors and above all they lead to the justifiably jealous concern for the country's unity and integrity.

Article 18 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights(UDHR) explicitly states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought; this includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching; practice, worship and observance. UDHR, though not a binding treaty yet its universal acceptance signifies its importance in the International Law. Indian Constituent Assembly while drafting its Constitution was naturally influenced by the broad principles of UDHR.

India is the world's most complex and inherently pluralistic society harboring a variety of races, tribes, castes, communities, languages, customs and living styles. The words "profess, practice and propagate" of the Indian Constitution, therefore assume immense importance in Article 25 (1) of the Constitution which guarantees freedom of religion. To profess a religion means the right to declare freely and openly one's faith. To practice means performance of acts in pursuance of religious beliefs. Rituals and observances, ceremonies and modes of worship considered by a religion to be an integral and essential part of it, are also secured. And finally, 'propagation' means to transmit or spread one's religion by the exposition of its tenets. It is interesting to note that the visionary framers of Indian Constitution conferred the right to propagate not only on Indian citizens but also on foreigners as the words used in Article 25 are "all persons" and not "all citizens." Thus, constitutionally speaking, we cannot complain against foreigners for indulging in the 'propagation' of Christianity because this is the right they have

under our highly liberal Constitution. Where propagation ends and conversion begins is difficult to say. But the law as it stands today because of the apex court's controversial decision is quite clear that 'propagation' does not include 'conversion'. At the same time we need to remember that term 'conversion' was dropped from Article 25 because the visionary members of our highly enlightened Constituent Assembly in their wisdom thought that there was no need to specifically mention this word as term 'propagation' is already too wide. Is not "choice" central to democracy and if yes then this choice surely includes right to choose one's religion. However, in the scramble for conversions and re-conversions and the ensuing debates on immediate circumstances, one forgets to ask some basic questions.

Why do individuals/communities convert? Missionaries succeed in their task not because Christians are more philanthropic but because Hindus are discriminating of their co-religionists by following the corrosive and anachronistic tenets of the caste system. If the feudal landlords blocks well water to dalits, who should be blamed for conversions. As long as tribal people are not treated as equals, there will be a strong incentive for many to escape through the embracing of a faith that at least ideologically, does not perpetually condemn them as inferior. Dignity is a basic human right and if this is denied by one set of beliefs, then the 'victim' will seek it elsewhere. While recognizing that conversions are a complex issue, which also happen sometimes starkly involuntarily and sometimes less-apparently-involuntarily like taking leverage of a person's economic situation or superstitions etc., it is safe to say that as long as caste-based discrimination continues, so will the motivation for conversion. It is high time to initiate social reforms on the lines of Jyotiba Phule and Narayan Guru.

While extreme right openly asserts that the current violence is all about conversions, Christian organizations forcefully deny the allegation. It is indeed somewhat strange that despite the rule by Christians for nearly two centuries, Christian population in the country is less than 3% and is further declining. The reason probably lies in what St Paul said in his first epistle to the Corinthians, "For Christ has sent me not to baptize but to preach the Gospel". Thus missionaries have the mandate to merely evangelize not proselytize.

A number of states, including Orissa, have already enacted the anti-conversion laws and now there is a demand to make the rules more stringent. But even though Orissa has Anti Conversion law for more than 40 years, one is tempted to ask how many cases of forced conversion due to coercion or inducement were filed in last four decades? What is the conviction rate?

We need to ask ourselves why laws banning bonded labor, rural indebtedness and abolishment of untouchability have not been implemented in full force in interior areas. No missionary can be blamed for these problems. Those with a vested interest in the poverty of the dalits and tribes use the Hindutva façade to continue perpetrating the cycle of poverty and any improvement in the lives of the people then becomes a threat to them. It is to be noted that Christian missionaries succeeded in areas where the government failed to provide good education and health facilities to the marginalized. It is necessary to remind ourselves about the India Mahatma Gandhi dreamt of. He said, "I do not expect the India of my dream to develop

one religion, that is, to be wholly Hindu or wholly Christian or wholly Mussalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side.”