

Smoke and mirrors

Religious conversion is a ruse for vested interests



It is time we stopped using the conversion bogey to divert the attention of the people deprived of their rights.

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According to news reports, the advocate, Ashwini Upadhyay, had approached the Supreme Court with a plea that the Central and state governments should take action against forced conversions, especially of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and against people involved in them. Court records show that the same person had approached the Supreme Court earlier with an identical petition. The bench headed by Justice (Retd) Rohinton Nariman was perturbed by the frivolous nature of the petition and asked the petitioner to either withdraw it or face its dismissal with costs. His counsel, Gopal Sankaranarayanan, then sought to withdraw the petition with the liberty to file a representation before the Law Commission of India but the bench rejected his prayer and asked him to decide immediately on withdrawing it. So he withdrew the petition.

Upadhyay has now returned to the apex court with the same plea. However, according to news reports (*The Telegraph*, November 15, 2022), Justices M.R. Shah and Hima Kohli, who heard the petition on November

14, took cognizance of it and asked the Central government to file an affidavit by November 22 on what it has done or what it is planning to do to control forced conversions. The comments of Justice Shah, as reported in the media, give the impression that he believes that fraudulent conversions are taking place. No proof has been produced to prove this allegation other than the statements of the petitioner but the bench is reported to have spoken of forced conversions as a threat to national security.

That seems to be the stand of the Central government judging from the statement of the solicitor-general that the hunger of the poor is being exploited through inducements like rice and that such conversions are a threat to national security. In October 2022, the *Global Hunger Index* stated that India's rank on hunger has risen by several slots to 107 out of 119 countries graded. Reacting strongly to it, the Central government said that the report was a conspiracy to malign India and questioned both the data sources and the methodology of the study that led to this conclusion. But in its volte-face before the court, the same government acknowledges that there is hunger in the country but adds that some people are exploiting it to induce people to convert and that it is a national issue (*The Telegraph*, November 29, 2022).

Thus, the Centre has finally acknowledged that there is hunger in the country. But in its tradition of 'shooting the messenger', it finds fault with those who bring relief to the hungry by accusing them of exploiting hunger to convert the poor and adds, for good measure, that they are forced conversions. In that stand, the government seems to forget that food is a fundamental right and that it is its duty to ensure that every Indian gets two square meals a day. Health, too, is a right but most medical care in the country is beyond the reach of the poor. Some civil society groups, including the churches, try to compensate for the failure of the State through welfare measures such as food distribution and dispensaries. But they are accused of exploiting poverty for forced conversions. I, too, believe that those who provide such relief are making a mistake. Instead of giving the government a good conscience by relieving hunger or providing free healthcare, they should organise people deprived of their basic needs to demand these rights from the State whose duty it is to attend to them. Instead of living up to this mandate, the State accuses those who provide these services of offering inducements for forced conversions.

Linked to it is the accusation that women and the SCs and the STs are victims of such forced conversions. The assumption in this accusation is that women and the SCs and the STs cannot think for themselves. If they take a decision, they do it because of inducements. This is typical of our caste and patriarchal society according to whose beliefs women have to be subordinate to men and that the SCs should leave all decisions to men from the dominant castes. Many persons who make such accusations have studied in Christian schools and have remained Hindus. But then they belong to the dominant castes so they can think for themselves. Only women and those from the subordinate castes cannot take their own decisions, or so goes their argument. This is racism at its best, and I do not want to add any comment to it. But the allegations are unfounded. According to the United Christian Forum, attacks on Christians have increased from 279 in 2020 to 505 in 2021 and to 511 till October 2022. No action has been taken against the attackers but 90 Christians are said to be in jail without trial on accusations of forced conversions.

The solicitor-general repeated on November 28 that conversion is not a fundamental right. He does not have to state it because everyone knows that conversion is a personal choice. The Constitution confers on every citizen the right to propagate his/her faith. The myth of conversions is created by people with a vested interest in poverty and women's subordination. Let us look at the census figures to understand the claims of conversion by force or fraud. Christians were 2.5% of the population till 1961. They have come down to 2.3% after it and have remained at this percentage for decades. The main reason is that fertility is the lowest among Christian women. It is high in the Hindi belt that has very few Christians. How do those who make allegations of forced conversions reconcile them with the census figures? One can also ask whether the State that accuses Christians of offering inducements is in reality inducing the SCs to remain Hindu by denying reservation privileges to Dalit Christians and Muslims. If not, how does the government of a secular State justify such discrimination purely on religious grounds?

It is time we stopped using the conversion bogey to divert the attention of the people deprived of their rights. The Supreme Court has interpreted Article 21 of the Constitution on right to life as every citizen's right to a life with dignity. Our patriarchal and caste-ridden society continues to deny such rights to women and to the poor. Instead of diverting

attention from such injustice by making unfounded accusations, it is time all of us got together to demand our right to a life with dignity.

I am writing this not as a Christian but as a person concerned about the denial of such rights to women and to marginalised communities.

Walter Fernandes is Director, North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati

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