

Can *Hindutva* Survive the Persecution of Christians in India?

A personal analysis and some recommendations.
—Vishal Mangalwadi

Interpreted literally as “Hindu-ness,” Hindutva increasingly carries connotations of a radical vision for a Hindu nation. Provided here are excerpts from an open letter to India originally published in April 1999 in the aftermath of the gruesome death of Graham Staines and his two sons.
—The Editor

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THE PRESENT PHASE of persecution, at its roots, is a testimony to the effectiveness of the work of the missionaries at the front lines, most of whom are located in South and North-East India. They, therefore, need our prayers and support as they seek to bless also the northern parts of India at tremendous personal risk and cost.

Most front-line missionaries don't seem to understand the power of their own work. They don't realize that their work is an historic threat to the socio-economic power equations that have existed in India for over 2,000 years—ever since Hinduism marginalized the

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lower castes and tribals. Hinduism has kept these people by force as marginalized, ignorant, and vulnerable to oppression and exploitation. The missions are giving them a new identity, self-respect and new principles for individual life, family and social organization.

Can Hindutva Survive in India?

Providence has polarized the public opinion in India as a clash between Hindutva and Christianity. It will be tempting for many Christians, especially the nominal Christians and new converts whose worldview remains Hindu/animist, to retaliate in self-defense. I would urge Christian leaders to prepare them not to retaliate. They need to understand that in the present phase of persecution, at stake is not the question of the existence of the Church in India. It is Hindutva's survival that is at stake—and no one understands this as well as the Hindutva's leadership. If we choose the way of the cross—the way of self-sacrificing love in the midst of suffering—if we continue to love, serve and preach fearlessly, irrespective

of the cost, we will hasten the end of the last ideological challenge to the Gospel in India. Gladys Staines has given us a tremendous model. Many of us, through our personal cross bearing and tragedies, will need to reinforce that perception of true Christianity. The nation needs to see that all religions are not the same; that the Gospel and Hindutva, Gladys Staines and Dara Singh, stand as opposites. If we follow Christ and Gladys Staines, the light of the Gospel will shine even brighter when the religious violence does turn into political violence of fascism.

At present, it seems to me that much of the Church is trying to take shelter under the cover of “secular” parties. This, I believe, is a serious mistake. Hindutva came to power precisely because secularism had already failed.

Therefore, my first strategic recommendation is that we need to resolve to take the bull of Hindutva by the horns, and allow the issue to remain as Gospel vs. Hindutva instead of making it secularism vs. Hindutva. (India needs to remain a tolerant and pluralistic society. But it is the Gospel, not secular political parties, that will provide the real, solid basis for building a tolerant, pluralistic society where every individual's right and conscience is given equal respect. I have argued this point in my book of letters to Arun Shourie, *Missionary Conspiracy: Letters to a Postmodern Hindu*. Here I only need to remind us that the Sikhs and Muslims rejected the Congress party because they rightly perceived that it was not as “secular” [pluralistic] as it claimed. Its obsession is with power, not with principles.)

Needed: A Theologically Informed Vision for India

As I have shown in my books (e.g., *India: The Grand Experiment*), from Charles Grant and William Carey up to the time of Stanley Jones there was a distinctly Christian vision for building a great India. It was Christianity, not the Gandhian struggle, that gave us the rule of law, democracy, fundamental rights, universal education and health

care, corruption-free administration, equality of sexes and castes, economic freedom, opportunity and infrastructure and religious and journalistic freedoms that we enjoy at this moment. From the very first advocate of a missionary movement for India—Charles Grant—the missionary movement had a “singular focus”; but contrary to what Arun Shourie says, that focus was to bless India, not to count how many bodies had been ducked under baptismal waters. The “battle” between Hindutva and the Gospel is a battle between fascism and freedom. This Christian vision for a great India did indeed become weak as the large part of the Church gave up the biblical worldview in the 20th century, by a surrender either to liberalism or to an anti-intellectual, individualistic, privatized, pessimistic, un-Biblical evangelicalism. This evangelicalism has weakened the Gospel by perverting it. Allow me to help us recover the focus:

What is the Gospel? Is it a message about my soul going to heaven, or is it a message about the Kingdom of Heaven coming to this earth in the person of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords? Is the Christian battle for heaven? Or does God already rule in heaven, and therefore, the battle is for this earth? Who will rule on this earth, God or Satan? If it is the latter, then should the passion of our lives be to go to heaven—and take others there—or should it be “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in India as it is in heaven”?

So my second recommendation is that as the nation flounders we need to articulate a clear Christian vision for India. Such a vision will include a vision for an “Akhand Bharat”—a United States of South Asia (USSA). The logic of Hindutva seeks to unite South Asia with the help of nuclear weapons, because the Hindutva has no spiritual resources to lead the subcontinent towards repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. The Gospel is capable of creating a united India, a “USSA”—the greatest nation on earth.

It is necessary to articulate afresh a



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Christian vision for India because the language of the “spiritual warfare” movement has become the main justification for the present persecution. (If a tiny section of the American church has declared India to be an “enemy territory” that has to be “conquered,” surely the target group has a right to defend itself.) Is our mission driven “by the love of God that constrains us”? Is God seeking to bless India or to conquer it? The Indian church needs to have theological maturity to stand up to the teams of naive young missionaries from America who today assume they are the ones to define what “spiritual warfare” is all about. Their naivete derives from a theology of spiritual warfare that is

neither from the Bible nor from Church history, but from Frank Perretti’s excellent fiction. Understandably, it does confuse the focus of some Indian Christians.

Taking the Bull by the Horns

The BJP government will not like engage in overt persecution in the immediate future. Because of this, it is imperative that we do not allow each other to go off to sleep. The next phase of attack is not likely to be against the missionaries and new converts; it is already directed against Christ and the Christian faith.

Therefore, my next recommendation is that we turn that attack into an opportunity to expound, defend, and commend the faith. While the hatred has to be countered by love, and force by suffering, the propaganda must be countered by a fearless presentation of the truth. The evangelists, church planters, and social workers get honor, recognition, and funding. The Indian Christian tradition has little space for apologists. But this is their moment. We need well-crafted letters to the editors in responses to what writers such as Arun Shourie write.

To begin with, as Professor Guptara argues, such letters need to correct the terminology being used today. The press is wrong when it talks of “Hindu fundamentalism” or “Hindu zealots.” There are no “fundamentals” in Hinduism to which Hindutva can lead Hindus. A good Hindu can choose to be a strict vegetarian, but he can also choose to be a tantric that kidnaps and sacrifices a neighbor’s child. Hindutva is about zeal for demolishing mosques and burning Bibles, but it is not about a zeal for Hindu spirituality. The appropriate terminology, therefore, is “Hindu fascists” or “fascist Hindus,” because Hindutva is about incorporating Italian fascism and German Nazism into Hinduism.

We are seeing seeing hundreds of articles in the media and millions of pamphlets circulating against our faith. These should not be ignored. We need to study them, debate them, formulate thoughtful responses, write and publish.

We need a feature film on the martyrdom of Graham Staines that explains Christian service, the Gospel and conversion to the Indian masses.

We need well-produced documentaries on what the Gospel has already done for the tribals in Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and other parts of India.

We need well-documented TV documentaries on what the Gospel has done for the untouchables in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

We need a feature film on Pandita Ramabai—not to raise money for the Ramabai Mukti Mission, but to counter propaganda with an effective presentation of the truth.

The above is to say that as demonstrated in my various books, the Gospel has already done more for India than all other ideologies put together. The nation is forgetting it because the leadership of the Indian Church has not honored, encouraged and supported the creativity of her young people. Many of our professors of Church History teach only what they learn in the Western seminaries—so, sadly, even our own pastors and preachers do not know what the Gospel has done for India. However, it is obvious that the challenge of today—the challenge of providing a fresh hope to India—cannot be met without discovering fresh talent and supporting it.

Incidentally, the negative factors have to be watched too; a prominent leader of the National Council of Churches in India [NCCI] has already gone on record in the press with a statement that the mainstream church in India does not believe in conversions. Obviously, I cannot fully rely on what the press says about a fellow Christian. Depending on what is understood by the word “conversion,” I may even agree with the gentleman. Some Christians may be sincere in their opposition to the word “conversion” and we can respect them even if we do not agree with them.

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However, some in the “mainstream” are so addicted to corruption that they cannot be committed to any kind of conversion—even when the word means a turning from sin to God. These church leaders will create great problems for the brothers and sisters on the front lines, as their counterparts did during the Third Reich in

Germany and under communism in the Soviet block. For the sake of their positions and security they would be willing to legitimize an oppressive regime that tortures and persecutes God’s faithful servants.

We need to stand up to these church dignitaries now and expose their hypocrisy, since they may be in effect implying that their forefathers who turned from their sins to the living God were fools. The tribals and lower castes today, like their forefathers who may have genuinely “converted” to righteousness in Christ, believe that they need the Gospel. Some of the tribals may be assuming that in the interest of their personal and eternal future, and in the interest of their future generations, they need to get out of a false, enslaving and exploitative socio-religious system.

We may even disagree with the understanding of “conversion” that the potential converts have. But surely, neither the Sangh Parivar, nor the church dignitaries can be allowed to keep these folk in their present moral, cultural and philosophical bondage. No one, except for those committed to corruption, would deny that spiritual/moral transformation is the greatest need of a nation as corrupt as India. Hinduism—whatever its strengths—has singularly failed in strengthening the moral muscles of our society. As I have shown in my book, *The World of Gurus*, the mainstream Hindu philosophy cannot provide even a framework of moral absolutes, let alone the power to regenerate our sinful hearts.

Needed: Structures for Countering Persecution

For years the National Council of Churches had a “Secretary for National Issues” based in Delhi. Hardly anyone knew of the existence of such an office. Now that the need is really acute, the NCCI has not been able to fill the vacancy! In September 1998, about 200 of us helped launch the “National Forum for Reconciliation, Religious Liberty and Social Justice,” under the umbrella of the Evangelical Fellowship of India. So far, its performance has been disappointing and some of my friends are beginning to wonder aloud if they were merely used for public relations and fund raising purposes. Nevertheless, the EFI does need to dispel the suspicions that are beginning to surface. This may well be the last opportunity the EFI has to save its profile in India. The India Missions Association (IMA) is doing from Chennai (Madras) what it can do, but they are not yet structured and equipped to meet the challenge of this magnitude.

Consequently the most vigorous leadership in countering persecution so far has come from John Dayal, a Catholic and the convenor of the United Christian Forum for Human Rights. In a meeting in New Delhi on Easter Sunday, he expressed some of his needs to build a proper documentation and analysis center. It would be unwise for me to put some of his felt needs in a public document such as this report.

However, if you want to know what are some of the needs for prayer, or would like to help, you could write to me or directly to him.

The needs are immense, the challenge is great, risks are fearsome—but the rewards can be unimaginable. We need courage and wisdom because this persecution has raised a serious question—not about the survival of the church in India, but in the short term about the survival of the rule of law and democracy in India, and ultimately about the survival of Hindutva as an ideological force. And, I repeat, Hindutva is the last remaining ideological rival to the Gospel in India. 🌐