

Privilege and resentment: Religious conflict in India

by [Vatsala Vedantam](#) in the [April 14, 1999](#) issue

St. Stephen's College in New Delhi carries on its walls the Sanskrit prayer "Satyam Eva Jayate Na Anritham" (Truth alone triumphs supreme, not Untruth). Taken from one of the principal Upanishads (sacred texts) of Hinduism, it stands side by side with another prayer--one from the Gospel of St. John: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me shall not walk in darkness." The inscriptions are dated 1896. The college, founded by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and now one of the three constituent colleges of Delhi University, also established studies in Sanskrit, the language of the sacred Hindu scriptures, under the stewardship of the Rev. Samuel Scott Allnutt.

A few months ago, 103 years after Allnutt's founding of the college, a Baptist missionary from Australia and his two young sons were brutally torched in a village 660 miles southeast of New Delhi. Graham Stuart Staines was in Baripada in the eastern state of Orissa to preach and do social work. Whereas Allnutt had dispensed education to the country's elite, Staines dispensed medication to poor leprosy patients. Both had a mission to fulfill. One completed a glorious career, the other met with an appalling end.

What could be the reason for this dramatic contrast in the fate of the two missionaries? According to some observers, the recent attacks on Christian evangelists in India are merely stray incidents--the handiwork of senseless terrorists--that could occur anywhere. Others suggest that a change in Christian evangelical strategies has provoked a Hindu backlash. Still others see this sudden religious collision, eagerly publicized by the media, as a sinister attempt by forces inside and outside the country to destabilize the government by making it appear a party to atrocities.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with its nationalist agenda, is generally recognized as unfriendly to Western interests. (Its recent assertion of nuclear

strength is seen as an added threat.) As the political wing of powerful revivalist parties dedicated to the concept of Hindutva (or Hinduness), it is also viewed as inimical to the cause of religious minorities. These factors may have influenced Western perceptions of what the Western media describe as "religious" clashes. However, communal clashes in India are not triggered by religious differences alone. They are rooted in deep resentments related to public policies. But more about that later.

The reality and seriousness of the recent violence cannot be denied. Five Baptist women were beaten by an angry mob in Allahabad on January 15, the holiest day in the Hindu calendar. Reason? Defying police orders, they were found distributing Christian literature to Hindu pilgrims who came to bathe at the confluence of India's three sacred rivers, called the Sangham.

In October, Father A. T. Thomas, a Jesuit priest, was kidnapped, tortured and beheaded in the northern state of Bihar. Motive for the ghastly murder? He had gone to court to intervene in land disputes between agricultural landlords and their workers.

A month earlier, Father Christudas, a teacher, was beaten and paraded naked on the streets in western Maharashtra. Why? He reportedly had committed sodomy on one of his own students, and neither the police nor the law courts would intervene.

Father A. Jeevendra Jadhav, another Catholic missionary in the same state, was attacked violently in his residence on February 14, but escaped death. He had launched a lawsuit to claim lands for the 1993 earthquake victims.

In Gujarat, a mob set fire to a Pentecostal prayer hall at Ahwa during Christmas week. Provocation? Christian zealots had earlier entered the temple of Hanuman in nearby Borkhet and desecrated the image of this god worshiped by millions.

And so the stories of unprecedented assaults on Christian missionaries mount up. The violence cannot be condoned--not even on the grounds that Hindus and their institutions also have been targets of similar outrages. From Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Kerala, cases have been reported of Christian missionaries grabbing land from Hindu religious places, desecrating Hindu temples/gods and using forcible methods to convert poor tribals and plantation workers. Vigilantism is unacceptable. Hinduism has never believed in the creed of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Are these incidents the result of a new Hindu resurgence? Such an explanation does not account for the peaceful coexistence elsewhere in the country of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and those of other religions. The current Hindu attacks against Christians seem to be restricted to some pockets of the country and do not spill over into others.

Take South India, where I live, and where most of India's 23 million Christians live. I frequently hear and read about dissension within the church or between the various Christian denominations. Religious orders may be the focus of hierarchical conflicts and power games--especially those that have generous foreign funds flowing into their coffers. Conversions have also led to struggles within the churches over which language should have supremacy. Come Christmas or Easter, Tamil-speaking Christians lock horns with Kannada-speaking Christians in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (two neighboring states of South India) over which language should be used in the celebration of mass. With 16 official languages, in addition to 24 unofficial ones (each spoken by more than a million people), there are endless controversies. But one rarely hears of Hindus fighting Christians or vice versa in these states.

Furthermore, in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and elsewhere one finds orthodox Hindus who offer candles and prayers in churches. And one finds devout Catholics who celebrate the Hindu festival Deepavali by placing oil lamps in their chapels and by setting off fireworks in their parishes. Pilgrims of all creeds flock to the holy town of Velankini in South India to seek the blessings of the Virgin Mother. Hindu families are known to attend Christian church services for weddings and funerals. Christian families invite their Hindu friends to participate in Christmas celebrations. For that matter, Christian missionary schools are mostly patronized by Hindu families, to whom a "convent education" is considered the hallmark of excellence.

Some have argued that extremist or fundamentalist Hindus object to Christian missionaries converting poor, "untouchable" Hindus, known as Dalits. But the converts themselves might have more reason to complain. Officially, Christians do not recognize the caste system, nor are they included in the government's policy on castes. A Dalit who converts to Christianity loses his status as a member of the deprived classes. Ironically, this means he is no longer eligible to claim his constitutional rights as a member of a deprived class. (Meanwhile, he will probably continue to endure subtle forms of discrimination within the church.)

Hindu society is a complex hierarchy of castes and subcastes. The most deprived among these are the Dalits, meaning "oppressed." In 1950, the Indian constitution officially abolished untouchability and designated these castes as "scheduled castes and tribes." It also provided for a system of affirmative action whereby 22.5 percent of all government and semigovernment posts, at central and state levels, are reserved for these castes. This includes seats in Parliament and state legislatures and admission to schools and colleges all over the country. In 1980 the policy was extended to cover the remaining 3,743 backward castes in the country, thus making more than 50 percent of the population the beneficiaries of these reservations.

Christians, who claim that they do not have caste hierarchies, are not included in the quotas. This means that Dalits who convert to Christianity fall between the cracks. Calling themselves "Dalit Christians," they have now appealed to the government to extend to them the benefits of its reservation policy in order to improve their employment opportunities.

But the question remains: Why should Christianity, and especially Christian evangelism, which has been an active force in India for centuries, suddenly become a bone of contention? A plausible explanation for the outbreaks of violence against Christians and Christian missionaries is that their increasing political and social activism has come to be perceived as interference in local affairs. At least three of the recent murders have been associated with perhaps the most significant and potentially explosive issues in rural India--land and property. Also, in some places clergy are trying to reduce the exorbitant interest rates imposed by moneylenders.

When missionaries turn to activism, they run the risk of antagonizing the power structures. Father Ambrose Pinto, executive director of Social Change in New Delhi, confirmed in a recent interview that the Christian presence in tribal, Dalit and other backward areas is apparently "disturbing the social edifice." Commenting on the recent atrocities, he stated that Christianity is perceived as a symbol of egalitarianism, and "forces that are averse to change have found a scapegoat."

Missionaries like Mother Teresa, in spite of her uncompromising views on abortion, never got embroiled in local politics, to the chagrin of some social activists in the West. But, like Mother Teresa's order, the Missionaries of Charity, thousands of Christian pastors all over India are engaged in simple social service. The Jesuits also offer a good example of a constructive and prudent Christian activism, especially in a country where, as historian David Frawley has put it, the expansion of Christianity

has become a "multinational missionary business involving billions of dollars." The Jesuits look after their parishes, run their hospitals and schools and enjoy a warm relationship with all religionists in the communities they serve. Whether one agrees or disagrees with such a model of Christian mission--of the church living in and for the world--it is a model that seems to work in India.

While certain kinds of Christian activism may have incited people to violence, there are other factors to be considered as well. Many Indians perceive Christian missionary work as a cloak to hide the promotion of insurgency activities. This perception, right or wrong, is closely linked to the secessionist movements to be found in the hilly northeastern states where conversions have been taking place since 1947. Nagaland is one such example. The American Baptist Churches/USA not only maintains close relations with the 2 million tribal population, but it even encourages the converts there "to battle with India for their cultural and religious survival." This is tantamount to urging the Nagas to view India as another country that is oppressing them. In his article "Abuses in Nagaland" (Christian Century, July 15, 1998) the executive director of the ABC's international ministries, John Sundquist, even states that Nagas are a vital Christian nation facing severe pressure from the Indian government.

The U.S. State Department has reinforced India's apprehensions in this regard by proposing to address these issues in its annual Human Rights Report, citing the International Religious Freedom Act passed by Congress earlier this year. If previous Indian governments allowed seditious activities to go unchecked, such as those that have been ongoing in Nagaland, it was for reasons of political expediency. In India's parliamentary system, politicians ride to power on the backs of religious minorities, and they are slow to alienate any potential constituency. Action against political unrest in Christian areas in the northeast could cost votes among Christians in the south. But whatever the government's actions in the past or the present, many Indians view what is going on in Nagaland as an insurrection in religious camouflage.

Probably the major cause of communal hostility in India is the country's mind-boggling cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity. Muslims, who form its largest religious minority, account for 11 percent of the population. Christians form a small but distinct minority at 2.3 percent. Other religious groups, including Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Parsis and Jews, make up a mere 4 percent.

Despite an overwhelming 83 percent Hindu population, Muslims and Christians are still a strong presence. Together they form a strategic voting bloc, since the Hindu vote cuts across several party lines. With at least 40 political parties vying for 545 parliamentary seats, it is not surprising that each party bends over backwards to woo these two communities.

Most glaring among the privileges given to Christians and Muslims is the right to live according to their "personal laws"--a policy that is resented by the Hindu majority. While sweeping reforms have been introduced to change Hindu laws governing marriage, divorce and inheritance, Christians and Muslims are allowed to follow their own family and community codes, even when they conflict with constitutional requirements.

The infamous case of 73-year-old Shah Bano, whose husband divorced her with no maintenance after 43 years of marriage following the traditional Islamic Shariat law, dramatically highlighted this dichotomy. The Supreme Court of India decided to award her a meager monthly maintenance in 1985, but the mullahs (Muslim clerics) protested against this supposed infringement on their Islamic faith and forced the government, then headed by Rajiv Gandhi, to revoke the order. The government also shelved a proposal for establishing a uniform civil code in the country.

The absence of uniform civil laws has hurt Muslims and Christians themselves. It has made their women and children vulnerable to social atrocities with no legal redress. Child marriage, high rates of maternal mortality and teenage pregnancies, as well as a lack of personal choice in matters like abortion, are some of the features of their lives as constructed by the personal laws.

Hindus are on the warpath against this policy, which privileges some religions while inhibiting others. For example, whereas management of Hindu temples, including their revenues, is controlled by the state, Muslim mosques and Christian churches are free to pursue their own rules of governance, with no public accountability. Even in matters of artistic expression there are different norms. A Muslim artist, M. F. Hussein, was allowed to exhibit a nude painting of Saraswathi (the Hindu goddess of learning) in a state art academy on the grounds of aesthetic freedom. A controversial film, *Fire*, about two Hindu lesbians named Sita and Radha (the names of the divine consorts of the Hindu gods, Rama and Krishna), was approved by the government censor board for the same reason. Yet Salman Rushdie's magnum opus *The Satanic Verses* was promptly banned in the whole country because it was

deemed blasphemous to Muslim beliefs.

It seems that only minority sensibilities are carefully guarded in India. When Muslims or Christians protest against what they consider to be sacrilegious, governments take note. Even the media support them in a show of pluralism. But when irate Hindus demonstrate their anger against Hussein for insulting their goddess or lay siege to a cinema theater for showing what they consider an offensive film, this is branded by the same media as religious bigotry. And the governments turn a deaf ear to their anger.

Such inconsistencies have resulted in a dangerous vigilantism among certain sections of the Hindu community for which the Indian government and media must share the blame. Again, such dual standards--actually, multistandards--of governance have also engendered feelings of bitterness and alienation among the majority Hindus. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of education and health care.

The framers of India's constitution sought to give minorities an identity by guaranteeing them certain fundamental rights. These included the right "to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice." There is widespread indignation that some Christian and Muslim institutions have deliberately misinterpreted and abused these safeguards to gain social and economic benefits. Claiming constitutional immunity, they do not hold themselves accountable to the state or the public even when they enjoy state and public support.

Whereas Hindu groups that run schools, colleges or hospitals are subject to state intervention, Christian and Muslim institutions--even if poorly managed--go unchecked. In addition, a Muslim or Christian college is permitted to reserve 50 percent of student placements for students of its own religion. But a Hindu group, like the Ramakrishna Mission, which has schools and colleges all over the country, cannot do that. No wonder that Ramakrishna was driven to seek minority status in the Supreme Court.

Christian missionaries in India have excelled in education and health care. They have established outstanding schools, colleges and hospitals. But one should also remember that these efforts have been made possible by the liberal gift of vast lands, building funds and voluntary donations that these religious organizations received during the days of Britain's rule over India. Even today, in addition to the

church funding they receive, they benefit from significant support from public donations and government grants--which may in fact account for the largest portions of their budgets. Christian schools receive voluntary donations from their non-Christian pupils. Christian colleges and teaching hospitals are affiliated with prestigious state universities, which bring other benefits. Yet they are not subject to any kind of public audit because of their constitutional immunity.

When Christian schools divert public land and money toward profit-oriented commercial ventures, no questions are asked, even though these lands were given to them free or at subsidized prices purely for educational purposes. And when Christian colleges--even though affiliated with state universities--deny admission to qualified non-Christian students, no voice is raised in protest. While all other professional colleges in the country have to employ standardized entrance examinations, Christian institutions are allowed to have their own selection processes. Thus we have different sets of regulations for minority and majority institutions within the same universities!

In India, undergraduate education is provided by public and private colleges, which in turn are affiliated with state universities. Colleges managed by religious minorities are known as minority institutions which enjoy a constitutional immunity within those universities that is denied to others. Not surprisingly, this kind of reverse discrimination has triggered feelings of isolation and anger among those institutions managed by the majority Hindus.

India watchers should examine these issues to get a better understanding of the country's communal climate. Western understanding of religious persecution in India, fed largely by exaggerated and biased media reports, is woefully distorted. This lack of understanding becomes even more troubling in light of efforts by Christian missionaries in India to gain an international forum for a solution to their problems. By turning to Western countries for support, Indian Christians may be undermining their own interests. Misapplied policies from the West, based on inadequate information, could actually work to alienate Christians from their own society.

Surely, 800 million Hindus cannot feel threatened by 23 million Christians. After all, they have lived with each other peacefully these last seven centuries, conversions or no conversions. True, there may be fanatics among both Hindus and Christians. But they do not represent their communities as a whole. Besides, it must be

remembered that in a country where 53 percent of the population lives on a few cents a day, and where more than three-quarters of the people do not have access to proper shelter, sanitation or drinking water, religion is not always of first importance. When the stomach cries for food, it matters little whether salvation comes through the temple, church or mosque. Therefore, these institutions easily become vehicles of exploitation for politicians and religious power brokers.

India's politicians have realized that if they appease religious leaders, they don't have to do much for their communities' welfare. In turn, religious leaders know that they can make and break governments by influencing their flock. A quid pro quo is established by which political leaders gain votes while the religious leaders retain their hegemony in their houses of worship. Whereas the Congress Party in the past solicited Christian and Muslim votes by placating those communities with political favors, the ruling BJP and its allies have decided to play the Hindu card in order to ensure their political survival. Indian politicians have mastered the art of exploiting pious sentiments for political mileage. The country's vast playing fields, with their myriad ethnic groups, provide ample space for it.