

# **SOCIAL ACTION**

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## *Editorial*

### **INSECURE CITIZENSHIP**

Attack on minorities has increased manifold. Evidences show that after the regime change at the centre, in the last 300 days or so a damaging climate of panic and alarm has crept in among the minorities, especially the most vulnerable communities across villages and towns, even in states where regional parties are in power. Different interpretations and justifications have been offered by various stakeholders to understand this scenario. However, the blatant reality is that 'minorities do feel insecure'; rather 'a feeling of insecurity and alienation is palpable among many from the ordinary to retired officials among the religious minority communities, be it Christian or Muslim'. Consequently a related question is raised; is this country shifting towards majoritarian form of governance driven by a fundamentalist ideology, at the cost of the secular-democratic principles of our Constitution? While a case by case interpretation may lead us to different conclusions, the overall climate seems to be a matter of great concern for all concerned citizens. At times the discourse is marred by political gains instead of delving deeper and adhering to the constitutional vision. It is also claimed that extra-constitutional bodies have become hyper-active at present.

While, all attacks on churches, mosques and members of minority community may not be labelled as propelled by communal agenda all these cannot be boxed as mere criminal acts. If an act creates physical injury a pattern creates trauma among a community.

Brutal assault on minorities, historically, is neither new to India. In the post-independent India, partition narratives, Hyderabad massacre of 1948, Gujarat riots 1969, Bombay riots 1992, Dang 1998, Gujarat 2002, Kandhamal 2008, Muzaffarnagar riots 2013, and many other incidents of violence that took place in Jammu, Punjab, Tripura, Assam, etc clearly are manifestations of emergence of religious intolerance and anti-minority phobia in India. Apart from group and mass violence, many individuals have also been targeted and killed.

Expression of majoritarianism in any form, at the peril of minorities, is a blot on the democratic ethos of India. Despite the majority of the population of this country across religions continue to uphold the

constitutional paradigm of building a secular and democratic India, there have been fringe elements that do not value or respect the constitutional principles. Though these fringe elements are a minority in absolute number, whenever such groups are emboldened through electoral democracy they not only vociferously propagate their hate ideology but follow a pattern of instigating, attacking and terrorizing the minorities to achieve their end often through extra-constitutional measures. During such instances, state actors have turned a blind eye.

Everyone has condemned the brutal gang rape of a 71 year old religious woman in Kolkata. This incident is a heinous crime on women, violation of human rights of an individual and attack on a minority woman. Every violation has to be analyzed from all angles. Article 15 of the Constitution of India states that no one can be discriminated on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. Taking refuge under one identity, when citizens live with multiple identities, will not take us forward in understanding and responding to such dreadful crimes. Neither blame game nor political rhetoric is warranted; it is only a sign of weakening of democracy.

In February, 2015, the Prime Minister told, “My Government will ensure that there is complete freedom of faith. Everyone has the undeniable right to retain or adopt the religion of his or her choice without coercion or undue influence. My Government will not allow any religious group to incite hatred against others overtly or covertly.” This statement is to be viewed in the backdrop of various attacks on churches in Delhi and vandalizing properties and desecration of places of workshop. Despite CCTV footages the criminals have not been booked, even after 100 days.

Moreover, calling communal and caste tensions as well as social inequality as evils and sins, the Prime Minister called for a ten-year moratorium on communal and caste violence on the Independence Day in 2014. Unless this commitment is converted into concrete actions the trust deficit among the minorities will only increase. In the last 10 months the peaceful religious minorities lived in fear which cannot be dismissed. The views of former IPS officer, Julio Rebeiro are only the tip of an iceberg. One could hear many subdued voices, especially from the women of religious minorities that they live in fear and are scared of venturing out in public.

Some state in central India, especially where dalits and tribals are

predominant, are targeted by *Sangh Parivar* outfits. The Prime Minister must speak to those who say, “Every Indian is a Hindu, and minorities will have to learn their place in the country. Hindutva is the identity of India and it has the capacity to swallow other identities. We just need to restore those capacities”. It is not enough to make assurances from the podiums. Due process must be strictly followed and culprits are to be taken to task. Increase in security for places of worship and minority run institutions cannot be long term and sustainable solutions. The answer lies in following the Constitutional principles, in letter and spirit. The state and district administration cannot function as onlookers. Will the Prime Minister, walk the talk?

In this background this issue of Social Action carries the theme Citizenship and Minorities.

Heredia’s article forms a good background to the theme. Titled as ‘Spinning Myths and Confronting Realities’, the author discusses the results of 2014 general election and its implications for the nation, especially for the minorities, from corporate-communal agenda of the BJP. His analysis of the trend that big business would expect a huge pay-off from Modi’s Gujarat model of development is becoming evident day by day. The author also argues that as a right leaning party the BJP can best be described as pursuing a neo-liberal capitalist development with Hindu characteristics! This scenario is clearly demonstrated by various attacks on religious minorities, fueling religious intolerance. The author submits that the only remedy is to fall back on the Constitutional paradigm and commitment to build an egalitarian, pluralist, secular, democratic state.

‘The health of the democracy of the country can be judged only by the security and equity of religious minorities’, asserts Puniyani. Based on historical evidences the author brings out that Indian democracy has been eroded by the upsurge of communal politics. While communal politics had been on the margins throughout India’s freedom movement, it came to surface in a stronger way from the decade of 1980s. The Shah Bano Judgment, the opening of the locks of Babri Mosque, the Mumbai violence, the Gujarat carnage and Kandhamal violence have been the peak points. Compromising role of states and the silent sanction by large sections of society are matters of great concern. The author concludes stating that as citizens we need to reassert the rights of all sections of society, the weaker sections in particular, to see that a humane

democratic society comes to the fore.

Tehmina Arora brings out clearly legal contradictions in her article on 'How Freedom of Religion Laws restrict Religious freedom in India'. The law makers thought that these laws would act as a deterrent against fraudulent conversions. However, reports from the various minority communities and human rights agencies reveal that these laws foster hostility against minority communities, one of the major reasons being vague and overly broad definitions. After analysing Freedom of Religion Laws of different states threadbare the author concludes that far from promoting or protecting religious freedom, these laws have served to undermine the religious freedom guaranteed under Article 14, 19, 21, 25 and 26 of the Constitution and international law and covenants to which India is a signatory. Consequently, such laws undermine India's overall economic and social development.

Attempts have often been made to emphasise that the 1984 violence was not Hindu versus Sikh. But Anusha Saluja, clearly establishes that communal sentiments exerted a considerable sway then and the mobs indulging in violence were in the ultimate event fairly communalised. She states that it is critical to be aware of the varying dimensions of Hindu communalism and to remain alive to its workings in subtle as well as blatant forms. In assessing incidences of communal violence including 1984 as well as 2002, what need to be taken into cognisance are the diverse ways in which majoritarian Hindu communalism was at work demonising particular communities.

Ethnic Minorities in Development Discourse of Sikkim: A case of the Lepchas brings out the assertion of the marginalized communities in their struggle to live with dignity. Benjamin presents historical description of famine relief workers and works in Bombay presidency from 1899 to 1900.

It is hoped that this issue of Social Action will stimulate discussions among the readers to understand and respond to growing exclusion and alienation of religious minorities and the need to build secular democratic ethos of this country.

**Joseph Xavier**