

Statehood Bills introduced in LS

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, July 25. — The Statehood Reorganisation Bills for the creation of Jharkhand, Uttaranchal and Chhatisgarh were introduced by the Union home minister, Mr L K Advani, in the Lok Sabha today.

Members of the ruling National Democratic Alliance in the Lok Sabha were divided on the issue. The RJD, joined by CPI-M, failed to stall the Bills at the introduction stage.

Some Samata Party, JD(U) and BJD members joined Mr Raghuvans Prasad Singh (RJD) in opposing the creation of Jharkhand, betraying a lack of unity in NDA despite an earlier resolve that no member of the ruling alliance would oppose or deviate from the agreed common agenda.

The number of MPs opposed to the creation of Jharkhand within the NDA, however, is not enough to obstruct the pas-

sage of the Bill when it comes up for voting after a lengthy debate in both Houses of Parliament.

Mr Advani's remarks that the government would try to seek maximum support from all sections and that there was no hurry to push the Bills has raised doubts if the three Bills would be passed during the monsoon session of Parliament.

The creation of Jharkhand attracted maximum opposition from members. While there was no objection on Chhatisgarh; the opposition raised by Samajwadi Party members to the inclusion of Hardwar and Udham Singh Nagar in Uttaranchal did not carry much conviction.

Interestingly, Miss Mayawati (BSP) said she would support the creation of the three new states but urged the government to ascertain the peoples'

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views on Hardwar and Udham Singh Nagar also before passing the Bill on Uttaranchal.

Replying to the members' charge that the government was introducing the Bills for the creation of new states on a "pick and choose" basis ignoring the claims of other regions, Mr Advani said the broad criteria for the creation of the three states was the vast expanse of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh — all Hindi speaking states — which created problems for better governance.

"Administrative and economic viability besides the overwhelming aspirations of the people of the region for the creation of the new states were the only criteria for introduction of the Bills," Mr Advani said in the Lok Sabha.

BJD members, Mr Trilok Kanungo and Mr Prasanna Acharya, raised objections to the geographical boundary of the proposed Jharkhand state saying two districts — Saraikela and Kharsawan, where Oriya speaking people were in large numbers — should be merged in Orissa.

Mr KP Singhdeo, the lone Congress member in the House, supported Orissa's claim over the two districts.

Advani sees 'anti-India' elements behind attacks

By Vinay Kumar

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NEW DELHI, JUNE 28. The Union Home Minister, Mr. L. K. Advani, today hinted at the possibility of involvement of "anti-India" elements in the attacks on Christians and places of worship of minorities, and exhorted State Governments to "promptly get into the depth of these cases and punish the guilty whoever they are."

"These incidents do not appear to be emanating from any tension between the communities as the sequence of events indicates. The possibility of anti-India elements trying to create disaffection in society and give the country a bad name cannot be ruled out. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to find out the truth," he said.

The Home Minister was addressing a day-long, high-level meeting of Chief Secretaries and police chiefs of States here, convened by his Ministry to review internal security.

The meeting was a precursor to the proposed August 5 conference of Chief Ministers, to be chaired by the Prime Minister, Mr. A. B. Vajpayee.

Mr. Advani described the attacks as "very unfortunate" and told the top officials from States that the Centre was conducting its own probe on the incidents. It was the responsibility of the Government to treat every citizen equally.

"Every citizen in this country, under our Constitution and laws, has a right to be treated equally in every way without any discrimination and we must ensure that nobody feels otherwise. That is the responsibility of the Government and administration,"

he said. While referring to the proxy war being waged by Pakistan, its agents, mercenaries and the ISI, Mr. Advani deplored the talk of "jihad" (Holy War) by asserting that there were more Muslims living in India than in Pakistan.

In his formulation, Pakistan's aim "is not confined to annexation of Jammu and Kashmir but dismemberment of our country." Pakistan was not likely to change its policy but "we have to ensure their failure in this misadventure."

On internal security, he said State Governments should treat it with utmost priority. The other areas of concern highlighted by the Home Minister were the North-East and situation in Bihar.

'Total agreement'

Later, briefing presspersons, the Union Home Secretary, Mr. Kamal Pande, said there was "absolute and total agreement" among States on the need to have an anti-terrorist law. The Law Commission's draft on anti-terrorism law had been sent to all the State Governments and their comments on it would reach the Centre by June 30.

Another area of general consensus, barring a few States, was the need to set up a Federal Law Enforcement Agency (FLEA). A massive revamp of intelligence gathering network could well be on cards, the Home Secretary indicated. Mr. Pande said the States also agreed to amendments to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) to check access to anti-national elements, diversion of funds and allow free flow of funds to genuine organisations for public welfare.

THE HINDU

29 JUN 2000

Equal respect for all religions

By Anil Nauriya

THE PRIME Minister has spoken of his Government subscribing to the concept of equal respect for all religions. The Union Education Secretary, whose Minister is an accused in the Babri Masjid demolition case, has also recently spoken on similar lines. How should the secular forces respond to these propositions? Should they be ready to abandon every concept that Hindutva appropriates, as has already happened to some extent with nationalism?

Some writings from the secular side of the debate in the last 15 years or more were dismissive of the concept of equal respect. It was rubbished variously as the "Ram-Rahim approach" and as "Hindu ecumenicalism". The reference to the "Ram-Rahim approach" was used to suggest in the independence context that those adopting it had taken no interest in providing constitutional safeguards to the minorities or that their approach did not provide for a religiously neutral or secular state. Both these propositions are contrary to the record. Similarly, the dismissal of the equal respect concept as "Hindu ecumenicalism" was fallacious. It seemed to imply, albeit unintentionally, that religions apart from Hinduism did not have the intellectual and emotional resources to support a multi-religious society based on mutual respect.

How then do we relate to the equal respect concept? First, it is useful to specify whether what is being discussed is the individual, society or the state. The norms to be expected at the three levels are a set of complementary ideas which cumulatively support one another. But these do not need to be identical ideas. So if the state is religiously neutral it is not necessary for its sustenance that all individuals should be, say atheists. They could be religious. Individually they may, and many probably will, give priority to their own faith. What is required of them here is no more than a sense of humanism or respect for difference. Similarly, at the level of society at large it is not necessary, even if it may in one view be desirable, that the religious element be eliminated. It is enough that groups and individuals, or the vast majority of them, are prepared in their social intercourse to meet on a par, without claim-

Feelings of mutual respect among the communities are the ultimate safeguard. The moment that respect goes, no Constitution can substitute for it.

ing in civic space priority over one another on account of their religion. Equal respect for all religions is primarily a concept of the social domain, though the state may seek to internalise it consistent with other applicable obligations.

At the level of the state, additional norms apply. Yet the religious neutrality of the state and equal respect for all religions are not inconsistent ideas, as the Union Education Secretary seems to believe, but are complementary ones. It is only by its religious neutrality that the state expresses its equal respect for all communities. The state must make this claim good in its attitude to governance, with the protection of the lives and property of, and provision of opportunities of growth and development to, all sections. Obviously, protection would in the first instance be for the ones threatened. In focussing on them the state not amount to bestowing a special favour. When the Prime Minister reacted more than a year ago to the violence against Christians in Gujarat by merely asking for a debate on conversions, it was not evidence of equal respect for all religions on the part of the state or his party.

Yet another aspect of the equal respect concept is sometimes overlooked. When the concept was promoted in the independence period it did not mean that all practices and ideas propounded in the name of the various religions were entitled to respect. When Gandhi undertook his anti-touchability tour in 1933-34 a significant section of Hindus opposed him wherever he went. It was claimed that untouchability was part of the Hindu religion and that Gandhi had no business to interfere with this belief. In Bihar his car was attacked and stoned, and the windshield broken. In Banaras he was greeted with black flags; in Pune, heartland of Hindutva, an attempt was made on his life and a lethal bomb hurled, injuring several persons.

Equal respect for all religions is not a concept which offers any shelter to beliefs or activities that violate the civil rights of others. The Bajrang Dals cannot hide behind the equal respect concept. The concept implies equal respect only for the humanistic tendency in each religion. It is not a passive, static or hold-all concept, as the BJP seems to believe, but an active, dynamic and discerning one. It strives continually to seek out the humanist underpinnings of society.

Is this the concept to which the Prime Minister claims to subscribe? While he speaks of equal respect for all religions, he retains as his Home Minister yet another accused in the Babri Masjid case. And is it merely coincidental that the attacks on Christians have become frequent and systematic after Mrs. Sonia Gandhi became the leader of the Congress()? Are these attacks not politics by other means and are not the BJP Government's low-key condemnations of them a confirmation of this?

Compare this party politics with what the equal respect concept in fact entails politically. Had the outlook underlying Hindutva as also the Huntington clash-of-civilisations thesis, which recently originated in the U.S., been allowed to define Indian nationalism, it would have taken very little to give an anti-Christian twist to the Indian freedom struggle. That this did not happen despite the repeated colonial jibe that the Congress was Hindu-oriented is a tribute not only to the contribution Indian Christians such as Joseph Baptista, Madhusudan Das, S. K. Rudra, J. C. Kumarappa, S. K. Datta and many others had made to aspects of the struggle; it was also a momentous triumph of the concept of equal respect for all religions.

A struggle against the Raj conducted for nearly three decades at the mass level did not take on an anti-Christian character. On the contrary, the message of the Sermon on the Mount was popularised by Indian nationalists in a manner that has never hap-

pened in any country not predominantly Christian. The Hindutva organisations, on the other hand, as their track record after Mrs. Sonia Gandhi came to the fore in the Congress(f) suggests, are incapable of internalising the concept of equal respect.

At the state-level, equal respect for all religions cannot mean a state without humanism. Humanism is the key element in the making of a secular state. That the state in independent India would be religiously neutral was stipulated in the 1931 Karachi resolution to which Gandhi, Azad and Nehru were all party. Neutrality does not mean that the state would stand by while people did what they liked in the name of each religion. It cannot be neutral between humanistic and anti-humanistic religious impulses. It would respect religion; but it would also offer a humanistic critique of it.

Constitutional safeguards for minorities are important. But they too rest upon the existence in society of feelings of equal respect for all religions. To appreciate the relationship between such safeguards and the concept of equal respect, consider this: suppose prior to independence all demands, including the most extravagant, raised on behalf of every sectional minority had been conceded. What guarantee would there be that the compact would be maintained after independence?

Feelings of mutual respect among the communities are the ultimate safeguard. The moment that respect goes, no Constitution can substitute for it. No safeguards will count if society does not find it within itself to live by them. That is why Hindutva is so pernicious a phenomenon. If it undermines mutual respect in society, what it does do: does not do to the state will only be consequential to the damage it would already have inflicted. That is also why the notion of equal respect must be carefully understood. It may be further refined. It may be supplemented. It must never be dismissed. In some respects it goes beyond many European secularisms which rest primarily on a reduced visibility of the religious element even as the idea of privileged official-religion is retained in the state and the laws, as in the case of the blasphemy law in England.

MARGINAL CREATURES

Tribal conversion, bogey targets Hindus

REPORTS of VHP ^{16/3}paranoia about conversion of tribals to Christianity in Rajasthan once again proves, if proof were necessary, that the issue of religion, given certain conditions, is not a matter of faith. It is a trade-off with divine authority and its earthly representatives for material and social gains. Tribals rarely ever practiced Hinduism. They were always outside the pale of caste Hindu society. Macro-level social interactions with "Hindu" society was inherently conflictual. They increased under colonialism when increasingly India became one market, into which groups that had always been outside or on the margins of the exchange economy were integrated. The social and economic relationship that colonial rule established was viciously exploitative of tribals. And the man who represented that exploitation was the "Hindu" (or Muslim) contractors, traders and moneylenders. Tribals are not only not Hindus — they were animists until they started converting to various religions — but are in conflict with mainstream Hindu society not only because they were, and still are, exploited, but fundamentally because by its own definition the Hindu world excludes tribals as the inferior other.

The missionaries provided the tribals an escape route from social marginalisation and economic deprivation by providing material comforts and decent education which could open doors for hitherto hopeless people. And, above all, a sense of dignity they were denied in the name of religion. There was nothing ambiguous about the trade-off. And there is nothing ambiguous about it today. To people who have been benumbed by poverty and degradation, any religion which offers a measure of dignity will be an attractive proposition. The VHP's argument against "material inducements" is nonsensical. The VHP can convert or reconvert people to Hinduism if it does not use force. It is free to give tribals and Dalits status in Hindu society; it is free to treat them equally and extend a measure of dignity; and it is free to set up NGOs to work among them for their uplift. But that is not the VHP's agenda. To the VHP the tribals are not in themselves the object of anything — they are not even a target vote bank. They are important because the bogey of conversion helps consolidate the Hindu vote.

THE STATESMAN

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RSS flays church leaders for 'anti-Parivar' campaign

New Delhi, May 14

THE RSS today hit back at church leaders and Christian MPs accusing them of indulging in "anti-Sangh Parivar propaganda" and said they should "verify the facts" before going public.

Apparently unnerved by the allegations levelled on Parivar outfits over the recent attacks on Christians across the country, Prajna Pravah, the intellectual wing of the RSS, has shot off an open letter to all members of Parliament exposing the "intentions" of the church and accusing it of "making an issue out of non-existing events."

The letter, coming in the wake of the for-

mation of Christian MPs Forum, quotes extensively from "church publications" to prove the RSS charge that missionaries were engaged in mass-scale conversions.

The Christian MPs Forum had expressed serious concern over the recent spate of attacks on minorities and "free distribution of hate literature" by Hindu organisations.

"The church leaders should realise that this cannot go on. They must verify facts before going public, if, of course, their intentions are clear. They should also look into the church propaganda and literature, which is often derogatory to non-Christians to the point of being offensive," says the letter written by Rajendra Chadha, joint co-ordinator of the

RSS intellectual wing.

"The church and its leaders have been using all means, fair and foul, to sell their gospel and falsehood about India and Hindus... They are in the habit of making an issue out of a non-existent event," the letter says.

Citing the case in which two nuns were hit by a scooter in Rewari district of Haryana, the RSS letter says, "The United Christian Forum for Human Rights alleged and raised a hue and cry that militant Hindu miscreants attacked the nuns in a planned and systematic manner." Later, even the nuns and local Christian leaders expressed surprise as to how such an incident could be converted into an attack on Christians.

Referring to the recent attack on Christian missionaries in Nagala Ajita near Agra, it said, "The fact is that the local population mainly consisting of scheduled caste Kanjar community opposed the move of some Christians who landed in that village that morning and entered their temple with their shoes. However, the event was portrayed as an attack on Christianity."

"Even a small theft in a Christian house these days is being claimed to be part of the anti-Christian drive," it said, adding, "why they (Christians) are not raising their voice against rape and attack on religious institutions of other communities. Why do not they cry on religious atrocities in Kashmir."

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

15 MAY

New turn to row over U.P. religious bill

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, APRIL 7. The controversy over the Uttar Pradesh Regulation of Public Religious Buildings and Places Bill, 2000 has taken a new turn with demands being made that similar laws, enacted by the Congress(I) governments in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, also be repealed. Whereas the Congress(I) has mounted a political offensive against the proposed law in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP and its supporters have argued that the Uttar Pradesh law was merely replicating the laws prevailing in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

A section of the Congress(I) believes the party was being needlessly condemnatory of the proposed law in Uttar Pradesh; now, Maulana Asad Madani, president of the Jamaat-Ulama-i-Hind, a pro-Congress(I) organisation, has written to the Congress(I) president, Ms. Sonia Gandhi, demanding that "repeal of laws relating to places of worship in force in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan". The Maulana believes that only then would it be possible to secure the cooperation of secular forces to prevent the UP Bill becoming a law. Maulana Madani is an influential voice among the Muslims of north India, and it was with much fanfare last year that the Maulana was welcomed back to the Congress(I) at a grand "minorities convention" at the Talkatora Garden. His return was cited as evidence of minorities' return to the Congress(I).

Even before Maulana Madani's statement, a debate has been going on within the AICC whether its Department of Minorities Affairs (headed by the senior Working Committee member, Mr. Arjun Singh, and who was the Chief Minister when Madhya Pradesh enacted its law) has wrongly advised the Congress(I) president, to make an issue out of the Uttar Pradesh "religious bill". Ms. Gandhi has already written to the Prime Minister, objecting to the proposed legislative measure in Uttar Pradesh.

An in-house study of the Rajasthan Religious Buildings and Places Act, 1954, the Madhya Pradesh

Sarvajanik Dharmik Bhawan Tatha Sthan Viniyaman Adhiniyam, 1984, and the Uttar Pradesh Regulation of Public Religious Buildings and Places Bill, 2000, is doing rounds among the AICC functionaries. In fact, on balance, the UP bill appears somewhat less draconian. The following points of comparison are cited:

First, Section 5 of the Rajasthan Act and Section 3 of the Madhya Pradesh Act make these laws all encompassing and cover all buildings, even those which are already in use. The Uttar Pradesh Act in Section 3 has a saving clause and does not apply to buildings being used for a religious purpose before the commencement of the Act.

Second, both the above provisions also deal with what is called a "temporary" religious place. For example, a place used for an occasional religious function like a Katha or a Jagrata would be covered by the laws in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh; the Uttar Pradesh Bill does not envisage to cover any temporary religious activity.

Third, both the Rajasthan and MP laws give sweeping powers to the Collector to permit or deny use of public land for religious activity, the UP bill circumscribes the District Magistrate's power; under the UP provision, the DM is bound not to grant permission if (a) it is necessary to do so in the interest of public order, morality and health; (b) it will interfere with the right of any other religious denomination freely to profess and practice religion or to manages its own affairs in the matter of religion.

The only count on which the UP law is more draconian is that it imposes a stiffer penalty: imprisonment upto one year and fine of Rs. 5,000 or both, whereas the Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh laws stipulate imprisonment up to three months and a fine of Rs. 500 or both.

Now, Maulana Madani's demand for repeal of laws in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan has come at a time when the Congress(I) leadership appears to be on the defensive.

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Communal by chance?

UTTAR PRADESH seems to be the hotbed of coincidences. If the State home department is to be believed, the spate of attacks on missionary schools there over the last three weeks is just a series of unconnected random events. While two attacks in Mathura have been explained away as "altercations between the school management and parents over the issue of fee hike and admissions", the others have been fitted into the category of "robbery" — as if both explanations can calm the nerves of potential targets. However, from the first reported incident in Bulandshahr where the principal was manhandled and the school ransacked, to the latest in Meerut where armed men raided a convent school, the attacks convey the disturbing impression of targeting a group, specifically Christian missionary schools.

As far as empirical evidence goes, one has to assume — until proven otherwise — that there is a campaign being carried out against such schools in the State. It does not take a conspiracy theorist with acute levels of paranoia to detect what is really happening in Uttar Pradesh. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad's Giriraj Kishore continues to stress the need to remove all hurdles for the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. The Chief Minister has expressed similar views. There has also been a continuing effort by the saffron lobby for quite some time to depict all Christian missionaries as usurpers of Hindu souls making Mephistophelian pacts under the garb of social service and education.

Keeping all this in mind, a clear pattern seems to be emerging. The official explanation that the attacks were just another form of "secular violence" fails to explain why only a certain type of educational institutions is being targeted. The deduction that there is no concerted action against the Christian community simply because not all missionary schools have been attacked — three in Mathura were supposedly spared because they were Hindi-medium schools — is as inane as writing off Dara Singh as an "ordinary" murderer. The Prime Minister has asked for an explanation for this recent spate of violence from the Uttar Pradesh Government. One must be on guard to ensure that the word "robbery" does not re-enter the lexicon as a euphemism for something far more sinister.

22 APR 2000

anti-Christian attacks spark huge LS row

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, April 24

ATTACKS ON Christians in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana rocked the Lok Sabha today with the Opposition demanding dismissal of the Ram Prakash Gupta Government in UP and the Centre assuring the House that it would spare no effort in fulfilling its Constitutional duty of protecting the minorities.

After Trinamool's Sudip Bandopadhyaya raised the matter during Zero Hour, the Congress and the Samajwadi Party MPs came down heavily on the Government for its failure to protect the minorities.

The latest incidents were part of a "pre-meditated and perverse" plan hatched by the Bajrang Dal to "eliminate" the minorities, they said.

The demand for a ban on the Dal by Mr Jaipal Reddy (Congress) drew loud protests from the BJP and Shiv Sena Members.

However, in response to Deputy Leader of Opposition Madhavrao Scindia's call for sanity and collective action in the face of the grave threats posed by an increasingly "atomised" polity, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pramod Mahajan said the Centre would extend all help to State Governments in dealing with such incidents.

"Our Government's top priority is to fully protect the minorities wherever they are," he announced. He added: "To accord protection to the minorities is a Constitutional duty of the Centre and the State Governments, regardless of which party is in power."

Sharing the Opposition members' concerns over the incidents in Agra and Rewari, Mr Mahajan said he would request Home Minister L.K. Advani to hold talks with the chief ministers of the States concerned to prevent recurrence of such trends.

The Minister also found merit in Mr Scindia's proposal for a meeting of the National Integration Council to evolve a political consensus against "fanatics on all

sides". He said he would convey the Congress leader's suggestion to the Prime Minister.

Raising the issue, Mr Bandopadhyaya sought exemplary punishment for all those involved. He said the Government must investigate the involvement of the Bajrang Dal or any other political group in the crime and suitably punish the offenders.

CPI-M Leader Somnath Chatterjee said these incidents were not "solitary" and it seemed that a "jihad" (holy war) has been launched against the minorities.

Mr Reddy pointed out that the Agra episode came close on the heels of the attack on a priest and two nuns in Mathura and described the Bajrang Dal as a "terrorist organisation" which should be banned.

Samajwadi Party MP from Agra, Raj Babbar, rushed into the well. Together with Mr Rashid Alvi (Bahujan Samaj Party), he regretted the burning of the Bible during the attack.

"We are against all fundamentalists, be it the Shahi Imam or Bal Thackeray," declared Mr Babbar in response to BJP's V.K. Malhotra's charge that Opposition parties tended to ignore provocative actions and statements by fundamentalists among the minorities.

Mr Malhotra said he was all for action against those behind the recent attacks. But he regretted the Opposition's silence on violence against Hindus in J&K and the open declaration by Imam Bukhari of Jama Masjid that he was an agent of the Pak ISI.

Calm had descended on the House following Mr Mahajan's matching response to Mr Scindia's sober intervention despite repeated interruptions by Ms Uma Bharati (BJP):

But SP leader Mulayam Singh's argument that minority communalism was "less dangerous" than majority communalism triggered another uproar by the Treasury side, forcing Speaker G.M.C. Balayogi to adjourn the House.

BJP condemns attack — Page 9

Six arrested for Agra attack

SIX PERSONS have been arrested in connection with the recent attack on a Christian group and the burning of religious literature at Nagla Ajeeta under the Jagdishpura police station. The Government has also asked the Bareilly Commissioner to conduct a probe into the complaint lodged by a lady teacher against Christian priests under the Hari Parvat police station.

In another major development, the head of Hari Parvat police station, who was recently transferred, has been recalled and given his earlier charge.

HTC, Agra

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

25 APR 2000

THREAT TO HINDUISM

AMULYA GANGULI SAYS
THAT THE ABSENCE OF
AN INSTITUTIONAL FORM
CAN ENABLE POSEURS
TO MISUSE THE RELIGION

THE PROponents of Hinduism have always taken pride in the fact that the religion — or “way of life” as it is sometimes called — does not have a prophet or a holy book. This absence is considered a blessing, for it has left Hinduism free to evolve in accordance with its own genius and has not tied it down to specific rituals of a certain period in the past.

It isn't that Hinduism does not have sacred texts. But its scriptures range from high philosophy to mundane instructions about worship and even daily life. But the crucial difference from other, more formalised, religions is that none of this is sacrosanct. The followers of Hinduism may, or may not, obey them. There is no punishment for disobedience. Indeed, the instructions themselves can provide an escape route from adherence to rituals.

For instance, a manual on *sraddha* ceremonies, after providing details keeping in mind the spending capacity of the mourner, says that the indigent can sit alone in a room and cry — that will denote enough respect (*sraddha*) for the departed soul. To be honest, there is the concept of *prayashchitta* or atonement for sins but it is more a man or priest-made custom than one with divine sanction.

It is the remarkable freeness of spirit which has ensured Hinduism's survival through the turbulence of many centuries. As has been said, it is perhaps the only system of thought which can boast of the fact that its devotees among the “twice born” have chanted the Gayatri *mantra* for 3,000 years. Apart from the continuity, there are also remarkable examples of individuality, even in expressions of variance with the accepted beliefs.

One school of thought is, of course, totally atheistic. One of its celebrated proponents, Ajita Kesakambala, is credited with this stark passage: “There is no (merit in) almsgiving, sac-

sive view of Vedanta, which he saw as informing all religious faiths.”

In today's India, sundry godmen have taken advantage of the natural religiosity of the Hindus to proffer salvation — each in his own way. Not all of these “holy men” can pass the test of spirituality, certainly not those whose names have been associated with politicians. But the most blatant example of the hijacking of Hinduism in recent years has been by the RSS and its fraternal outfit under the Sangh parivar umbrella, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which have been encouraged by the BJP's rise to power.

It is nothing short of an outrage that these avowedly xenophobic organisations with the clear political agenda of establishing a Hindu *rashtra* in direct contravention of the secular Constitution should appropriate to themselves the right to speak for Hindus. It is another matter that their influence is limited and is mercifully dwindling as the admission of RSS leader KS Sudarshan about declining attendance at the organisation's *shakhas*. What is nevertheless objectionable is not only that they should be speaking for Hindus but also acting in a manner which can convey an entirely wrong impression of this great religion.

For instance, the demolition of the Babri Masjid has been attributed by the Sangh parivar to the “anger” of the Hindus against Muslim depredations in the medieval ages in general and the specific act of Babur's in building a mosque after destroying a temple dedicated to Ram. But the Supreme Court has denounced the act and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who is a member of the *parivar*, has expressed regret more than once for the incident, as have other members of the BJP, one of whom recently described it as a political act. The outrage had also shocked the conscience of a countless number of liberal-minded Hindus. But the world would still regard it as an act perpetrated by the Hindus.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Hinduism was seen as a priest-ridden, superstitious cult which had to be reformed by reformers like Vidyasagar, Rammohun Roy, MG Ranade and others. In the 21st century, it seemingly faces a threat from retrogressive political elements who would like to use it for their own not very laudable purposes while genuine adherents to the faith watch with dismay and horror.



A sadhu blows the conch: Charlatan or genuine?

rice, or offering, no result or ripening of good or evil deeds. There is no passing from this world to the next ... There is no afterlife.”

But this cold rationalism does not stand in isolation. There is a passage in the *Rig Veda* which says: “Whence all creation had its origin, he, whether he fashioned it or whether he did not, he who surveys it all from highest heaven, he knows — or may be even he does not know.” As a scholar has noted, “the poet of this hymn shows ... an incredible sophistication when we remember that this hymn was composed ... no later than 900 BC.”

Apart from the sophistication, what passages such as these underline is the individualism of the writers. The composer of the hymn demonstrates a modern, cynical refusal to concede the omniscience of the Creator, suggesting that “may be even he does not know” how the universe was created. It is only the free-wheeling nature of Hinduism

which can allow such apparent heresy. No other religion will permit it. Such philosophical speculation is possible because there is no single holy book, regarded as the Word of God, in Hinduism. It gives scope to the sages, therefore, to propagate their vision of the Ultimate Reality. As Vivekananda pointed out, however, the “yellow cloth” worn by sadhus did not sanctify everything. “There is no reigning sovereign in India who dares to sit down when the ‘yellow cloth’ is there. He gives up his seat and stands. Now, that is bad, so much power — even in the hands of good men.”

And when they are not good? Just as the absence of an institutional framework also allowed intellectual efflorescence, it also allowed degenerative practices to take root, of which the most horrendous was sati. What is more, it received religious sanction and is still extolled in a BIMARU state like Rajasthan which abounds in sati tem-

ples. When Rammohun Roy urged Lord Bentinck to legislate against the cruel practice, the self-appointed champions of Hinduism, who were also the leading lights of society, protested against the move. In recent times, it is possible for unknown groups to project Dara Singh, arrested in connection with the murder of Christian missionary Graham Staines and his children, as a saviour of Hinduism.

As Prof Tapan Ray Chaudhuri recalls in his *Perceptions, Emotions, Sensibilities*, much of what Vivekananda said and wrote were “uncompromisingly critical” of what he “rejected in the Hindu social reality, both past and present ... His attitude towards the caste system, his concern for the oppressed masses, his view that the upper caste educated Hindu had no role in future India, his contempt for aberrations like child marriage and his total rejection of ritualism hardly fit the image of a Hindu revivalist. Nor does his inclu-

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Sikhs reject RSS assimilation

THE RSS's strategy of riding roughshod over India's diversity is part of a wider objective of making India more Hindu. Having taken on the Muslims and Christians, it has now turned to the Sikhs. Some time ago KS Sudershan told a convention of an RSS front organisation, the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat, that Sikhs were basically Hindus. Sikh organisations protested against the RSS's attempt to deny Sikhs their separate identity. And representations are being made to the Akal Takht jathedar about RSS designs. What should worry the saner elements — if there are any — in the Hindutva brigade is that the RSS's rhetoric could trigger off a Sikh backlash. It is significant that one of the organisations that protested is Akali Dal (Mann). Its leader, Simranjit Singh Mann, is in the forefront of attempts to keep the spirit of militancy and the Anandpur Sahib resolution alive. Militancy has died down, but it would be unwise to assume that scars have healed or that the militants' cause is dead. Punjab has traversed years of bloodshed which it must want to forget.

The RSS's assimilationist rhetoric will certainly not help Punjab to move in that direction. It would be puerile to assume that the movement for Khalistan was primarily about substantive and material issues. It was fuelled by a sense of an identity besieged by majoritarian invasiveness. What Punjab needs now is good governance, which it is not getting under the Akali Dal-BJP government. It also needs a strengthening of the moderate, liberal political space, so that Punjab can move more rapidly towards political normalisation. If the RSS goes forward with its assimilationist programme, Sikhs will resist. This will not only be grist for the militants' mill, it will also force moderate elements into extreme postures. Among them will be the BJP's ally — the Akali Dal. Since the BJP's relationship with the RSS is not the best kept secret, relations between the BJP and Akali Dal will be strained. In electoral terms, the only party to benefit will be the Congress which has taken the advantage offered.

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