News Commentary
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Commission's Bid to Keep Peace In Kanyakumari May Infringe on Religious Freedom

Persistent violence and "communal clashes" in Kanyakumari since 1963 provoked the Tamil Nadu Government's appointment of a one-man investigation in 1982. The outcome was 34 recommendations dealing with a wide range of issues. Some proposals are severe-even rash - as Swami Jyotirmayananda explains in the following commentary. The core points: the banning of religious procession, the banning of conversion, the harnessing of the RSS and the introduction of a common civil code.

Swami Jyothirmayananda, Madras

Venugopal Commission's findings constitute a clever balancing act. They concede the major demands of the Hindus but knock out the basis of those demands. They praise the contribution of Christian missions and characterize proselytization activities as generating rifts and disintegration in our society. They denounce the alleged communal propaganda of the RSS and recommend the creation of a communal constituency for the Christian fisherfolk. The Commission, by trying to sit simultaneously on several different and opposing stools, crashes to the ground, severely bruising its own judiciousness.

The recommendation of the Commission to ban mass conversions and conversions by foul and fraudulent means is positively welcome. It has also rightly urged that the Tamilnadu Government request the Centre to enact an all-India legislation in this regard. The Commission has recommended legislation for a uniform civil code in respect of civil rights for all citizens in the country. The recommendations to control funds being received by Christian individuals and utilized for proselytizing activities are also welcome, so far as it goes. However, it is strange that institutions receiving foreign money and using it for the same purpose are not included along with individuals. It is, in fact, they which receive bigger amounts. Why this glaring

omission?

A most objectionable part is the special recommendation for reserving one Assembly constituency for the fishermen of Kanyakumari so that "their voice could reach the ears of the Government." As everyone knows, the fishermen of that district are for the most part converted to Christianity. And they are all under the direct control and guidance of the Christian Missionaries. Even the Commission has noted that it is precisely this aspect of the situation that is at the root of the growing violence there. The formation of a separate assembly constituency for them would therefore only further sharpen the political claws of the Missionaries there and defeat the very purpose of some of the other recommendations made by the Commission.

Sometimes the Commission does not seem to be consistent. At one place it says that conversion to Islam or Christianity in a predominantly Hindu country will disturb the local customs and indigenous institutions and thereby rob the local people of their distinct personality. It also generates a rift and disintegration in society. Social structure and traditional moorings are also disturbed leading to clash of cultures. Having said all this in support of its recommendation for banning conversion, the Commission, at another place, showers praise on the Christian Missionaries for "their immense contribution towards the development of modern India." The Commission also noted appreciatingly that the Indian Christian community is slowly becoming Christianized members of Hindu society. A glaring contradiction indeed!

The anti-God, anti-religion streak of D.K. seems to be at play in the sweeping recommendation that "religious processions should be discouraged, if not banned all together. The Commission also says that such processions should invariably be prohibited in sensitive areas prone to communal violence. The total prohibition of religious processions is, of course, out of the question. Fortunately, the framers of the Constitution were not of this D.K. line and have ensured freedom of religious practices. The Commission should also come out with authentic evidence to substantiate its sweeping and wild allegation that the RSS is responsible for the flare ups between the Hindus and Christians in Kanyakumari District by indulging in "pernicious communal propaganda" and having a "militant and aggressive attitude." If there had been even a grain of truth in that statement, how is it that all previous commissions of enquiry into communal flare ups have absolved the RSS of such tendencies? As regards the so-called charges of militancy and aggressiveness, the RSS does expose mercilessly the dangers of conversion and the subversive tactics employed towards that end. However, the RSS is not in the

least sorry on this score. For on this count it is in the august company of such stalwarts as Vivekananda, Gandhiji and now the learned Judge of the Commission himself.

The Judge has recommended imposing of ban on drills, exercises, parades, etc., by the RSS, because he says they create apprehensions, fear and insecurity among the minorities and affect the maintenance of public tranquility. By this, the Commission appears to have bid good bye to the laws of the land ensuring equal freedom and rights of association and expression for one and all. He pitched upon the predilections of the so-called minorities as the sole criteria to decide which kind of activities are to be permitted in our country.

The Judge has commented that Hinduism is in no need of a savior like RSS. He says Hinduism has survived the onslaughts of many religions in the past and that the total Hindu population of the country is so vast that it need not have any feelings of insecurity. But the RSS has never claimed itself to be a savior of Hinduism. It is only awakening and organizing the Hindus to do their duty by their society, their dharma and their nation. So far as the first reasoning of the judge is concerned, what does the fate of Gandhar, N.W.F., Sindh, Baluchistan, West Bengal and Punjab prove? Has Hinduism survived the onslaughts of Islam in those pans? It is no use indulging in shiboleths like "Hinduism is Eternal." After all, religions are not ethereal always floating in the air or treasured in books. They are down to earth living ideas and principles which have to be found in the life and practices of the people. If the people remain careless and disorganized that precious heritage will certainly be lost. As regards the second reasoning, the judge himself, while recommending legislation for banning conversions, has observed that "when conversions are made on a large scale the Hindus feared that the number of Christians were increasing and their own strength dwindling to the detriment of their political importance and power."

In conclusion, it must be reiterated that all the important recommendations of the Venugopal Commission such as enactment of a Uniform Civil Code, ban on religious conversion and on inflow of foreign funds for the purpose and protection to native culture-these are the very demands put forth, time and again, by the leading Hindu organizations like the RSS. It is indeed unusual that the learned Judge should seek to restrain the free, lawful activities of the very supporter of his own recommendations!

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