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Special Report

Nepal Hindu Reaction

Jha, Hari Bansh Never before have the arrests of Christian evangelists in Nepal created so much hue and cry as have the arrests of American David McBride and Canadian Merv Budd on the charge of spreading Christianity unduly among the people of Nepal.

Christian activists had letters sent on a massive scale to the Nepalese authorities protesting the arrests. Tremendous pressure was put on His Majesty's Government (HMG) of Nepal for their release. Christian circles objected to the arrests on the grounds that the right to choose one's own religion and to discuss openly matters of faith with others are fundamental freedoms recognized by international conventions including the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Hindus support the stand of HMG to contain the growing influence of Christianity in Nepal. Mr. Frederick H. Gaige in his book Regionalism and National Unity in Nepal rightly remarks, "The orthodox Hindus in both Nepal and India take satisfaction from the fact that the King of Nepal is a Hindu and stands at the head of the only government in the world in which Hinduism enjoys special status."

Despite the efforts made by HMG to contain the expansion of Christian religion in Nepal, economic and other supports extended by Christian missionaries have helped weak and influential Hindus alike adopt Christianity. While the law punishes the weak converts, it proves helpless in taking actions against the strong ones.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the Christians have been totally

discouraged to give publicity to their religion in Nepal. Had it been so, they would not have been so successful in increasing the Christian population rapidly in the country. Imports of Christian literature including the Bible are banned in Nepal. Yet the market and particularly the Jonathan Book Store in Kathmandu is flooded with all sorts of Christian literature.

The 1961 Nepal census reported hardly any trace of Christians. By 1981, the Christian population was recorded as 3,891. Charles Mendis, a Christian activist in Nepal, believes the real number to be 60,000. He claims that in the Jharland Village Panchayat of Dhaging District alone the Christian population went from one family to five thousand in two years.

In recent months, the district judge of Makwanpur, Mr. Navraj Upadhyay, has sentenced 13 persons to a total of over eight year's imprisonment for embracing Christianity. Nepal Bhoomi, the Nepalese weekly, has confirmed that efforts are being directed on a massive scale to propagate Christianity in the largely tribal Biratnagar area in eastern Nepal. All of the converts have come from the Satar, Tharu and Rajbanshi tribal communities.

The constitution of Nepal guarantees freedom of religion. Yet the Muluki Ain of the country not only bans the conversion of religion but also restricts Christian and Islam religions from spreading their influence at the cost of affecting the traditional Hindu religion of the country.

According to the Nepalese laws, anyone attempting to convert somebody of one religion into another is given a jail sentence of three years. One who succeeds in such conversions is given imprisonment for six years. A Hindu found to have converted from his religion is imprisoned for one year, and after the completion of this punishment he has to return to his original Hindu religion again.

Many evangelists trying to spread Christianity or convert Hindus into Christians have been imprisoned in Nepal. According to Mr. Mendis, as many as 201 such cases have been pending in Nepalese courts-five against foreigners.

Nepal's Hindus are reflecting on the failure of these laws to control Christian expansion. They've seen that state support to Hinduism is has drawbacks. There is practically no influential newspaper to fight for the Hindu cause. There is no effective organization to look after the interests of Hindus. There are no orphan centers to take care of the Hindus. All this has provided good ground to the missionaries to spread their religion on the soil of Nepal.

Heavy dependence of HMG on foreign aid from Christian countries or multilateral institutions dominated by Christians will pose difficulties in containing the influence of Christianity in Nepal in the days to come. Hindus of Nepal can no longer remain complacent that only the State can contain the expansion of other religions. It is high time that Hindu organizations become active enough to defend the interests of the Hindus in Nepal.

Personal Comments From Nepal's Citizens

Dr. Jogendra Jha, Secretary General of the World Hindu Federation, supported the move of HMG of Nepal for arresting the missionaries trying to convert the Hindus into other religions. He, in fact, demanded more strong action from the government to deal with these unlawful people effectively.

Mrs. Usha, a housewife, opined that there should be perfect freedom to the people to choose whatever religion they like. She also said that in the past several women were forced to commit Sati and burn themselves along with their husbands though they did not want to. Religion, in the same way, should not be forced to be imposed on anybody.

Mr. Jagat Bahadur Singh, member of the Raj Sabha (upper house of the Nepalese parliament) and former assistant Home Minister observed that freedom of religion should not be given in a poor Hindu country like Nepal. He was afraid that any such freedom might help the non-Hindu religious missionaries to convert the people with the help of money.

Mr. Bal Krishna, a school boy, was of the view that there should be strong

opposition to any effort to convert the people from Hindu religion to other religions.

Mr. Narendra Prasad Upadhyay, editor of the English paper, The Telegraph Weekly of Nepal, said that any effort on the part of the administration to loosen its grip over the evangelists would have a catastrophic impact on the people of the Hindu country, Nepal.