

The Silence of Our Friends

Communal Violence in India and Pakistan

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There is a general recognition of the growing assault on democratic space across the world, whether through war or fundamentalism, as a central feature of world politics at the present stage in history. Religious fundamentalism is a growing trend, the cases of Orissa, India and Gojra, Pakistan are just two visible parts of the iceberg of what is occurring on a global scale. As cultural boundaries become looser and globalization increases pluralistic societies, in-group identities become sharper and their attempts to preserve mono-cultural societies, more violent.

Secularism and democracy have always been the founding principles of India. Lately, however, they are threatened by some Hindu fundamentalists. Their intent is to create a Hindu state; hence they pursue this goal creating explosive hate campaigns exploiting the poorest layers of society: "If you do not protect Hindu religion you are not Hindu".

The attack against the Christian and Muslim Dalits in Orissa and Gujarat can be defined, without fear of being contradicted, as unprecedented: one of the most violent caste and religious persecutions in the post- independent history of India.

Reportedly, more than 100 Christians and more than 2000 Muslims were killed during the attacks, and those who survived, fearful of their lives, were forced to run into the forest to reach a safer place. Today, fear has not vanished from the hearts and minds of the victims who, displaced in camps, are still living a dreadful experience. The conditions for a return to their villages provide no space for negotiation: convert to Hinduism, dress in the traditional Hindu dresses and perform Hindu rituals.

The Dalit persecution is a case of two-fold discrimination: caste and religion. It did not start in 2002: attacks against Dalit communities were filed in 1989, in 1992 and in 1997. Each time, the pre-emptive action of the central government failed, leaving the victims isolated and unaided. But the central government is not the only one responsible for the isolation of the Dalit community. Humanitarian Agencies did little as well.



In neighbouring Pakistan the violence against Christians, Hindus and Ahmadis reached the same level of atrocity. In Gojra, seven Christians, including women and children, were burnt alive, several dozen people were injured and nearly 180 houses were looted and destroyed on 1 August 2009.

The incidents of Gojra are not isolated events. "This is a type of violence we were not used to. After Gojra the situation is dramatically worsening. There are several cases that could explode anytime", stated Mr. Peter Jacob, Executive Secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan.

Blasphemy laws, meant to protect the Prophet Mohammed and the Holy Koran, are the key detonator. The text of the blasphemy laws is religion specific and highly discriminatory. Pakistan is a multiethnic and multi-religious country (4% of their population represents religious minorities and includes Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, Bahá'ís, Ahmadis and Kalash) and if laws that protect only a specific religion are established, the result will most probably be more abuse. In addition, including such provisions in the Penal Code will mostly affect the weakest categories of society (i.e children, the mentally impaired, non believers). These laws leave dangerous room for private justice, as the accusation of blasphemy can be made by anyone without any subsequent investigation, and hold a subversive potential that cannot be ignored.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief observed that the punishments accompanying blasphemy laws are disproportionate to the offence. Some Islamic scholars have also condemned the existence and application of these laws. The problem of religious minorities is wider and more complex than the simple consideration of the blasphemy laws as it is inherent in the system. Without any link to the rule of law, the system guarantees special administrative privileges to a part of the society.

Mixing religion and politics is not a sign of a healthy democracy and the civil society calls for a ban of all extremism and extreme ideologies. Taking a purely administrative approach to religious discrimination does not solve the problem and unquestionably will not stop fundamentalists from pursuing their campaigns of hate.

States should promote a climate of dialogue and integration by ensuring the prosecution of those who pursue these campaigns of hate against minorities. Moreover, a strong and independent judiciary system has to give just recognition to the victims, as peace building starts only where justice prevails.



The international community should urge Pakistan and India to honour their international obligations and human rights commitments, as these violent events are the foremost consequence of a systematic discrimination.

On 16 September 2009, on the occasion of the 12th session of the Human Rights Council, Franciscans International held a side event on "Communal Violence and its effects on Religious Minorities". The event provoked an interesting debate on the growing and worrisome trend of religious fundamentalism, and confirmed the reluctance of the international community to link religion to human rights.

Fundamentalism is growing, shrinking democracy all over the world due to the clash between static and monolithic identities and a multipolar and dynamic culture. Our role as civil society is that of promoting dialogue and integration, as well as calling for the end of impunity, since peace cannot be achieved without justice. To paraphrase the words of Martin Luther King Jr., the danger lies "not (in) the words of our enemies but (in) the silence of our friends". *F*

**Communal violence
(or inter-communal violence)**

refers to instances where one religious or ethnic community attacks another one. Often, minority communities are victims of violence perpetrated by extremists from the majority group.

The Human Rights Council should pay more attention to instances of communal violence, wherever they occur, and regardless of which community is targeted.

FI urges States to:

- Repeal the laws that discriminate against religious minorities or that contribute to create a climate of suspicion and hatred.
- Investigate cases of communal violence and ensure that persons involved in the planning and the carrying out of violence are brought to justice.
- This includes implementing adequate witness protection programmes and giving adequate compensation to victims.