

**THE DEBATE ON CONVERSION INITIATED BY  
THE SANGH PARIVAR, 1998-1999**

**BY DR SEBASTIAN KIM**

When the one who is in an advantageous position seeks to force his conception of God and the Universe on the other who is in a vulnerable position, when the one strikes at that which is deepest and most precious in the heart of the other, he invites resistance. *Shripaty Sastry*<sup>1</sup>

Despite their dismissive attitude, what the Hindus certainly cannot ignore any more is the fact that the two communities [Hindu and Christian] are heading for a showdown. And given the volatility of the situation, the clash is likely to come sooner rather than later.

*N.K. Singh*<sup>2</sup>

In the first half of the 1990s, India witnessed the rise to political power both in local and central government of the RSS “family” of organisations, collectively referred to as the Sangh Parivar, often abbreviated to “the Parivar” or “the Sangh”.<sup>3</sup> As a result of the election in March 1998, for the first time a BJP-led government held power in central government, though as part of a coalition it had to some extent to accept the logic of consensus politics. This tension was particularly acute in tribal areas as Christian missionaries and Parivar activists often confronted each other over the issue of conversion.<sup>4</sup> During the second half of the decade the situation noticeably worsened as the Parivar activists started to instigate violence against Christian communities, culminating in 1998-99 in a series of attacks.<sup>5</sup> The tension continued as a result of the Prime Minister’s call for a “national debate on conversion” in January 1999 and the visit of the Pope John Paul II to Delhi, 5-8 November 1999. Indeed in this period conversion became a major socio-religious and political issue and was

---

<sup>1</sup> *A Retrospect: Christianity in India* (Pune: Bharatiya Vichar Sadhana, 1983), 6. Sastry, a prominent RSS leader, made this speech to a Christian audience at De Nobili College, Pune on 8 July 1983.

<sup>2</sup> “A Crisis of Faith”, *India Today*, 15 May 1992, 97. The article deals with the conflict between Christian and non-Christian tribals in Madhya Pradesh.

<sup>3</sup> See Ashis Nandy, *et al.*, *Creating a Nationality* (Delhi: OUP, 1995), 69-99; Tapan Basu, *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> See Ghanshyam Shah, “Conversion, Reconversion and the State”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 Feb 1999, 312-8; *India Today*, 25 Jan 1999 & 30 Mar 1999.

<sup>5</sup> See *Communalism Combat*, Apr 1998, 16-18, and Oct 1998, 10 and Jan 1999, 12; Chandran Paul Martin (ed.), *Religious Liberty in Peril – The Indian Churches’ Experience* (Nagpur: NCCI, 1999), 13-20; *Then They Came for the Christians – A Report to the Nation* (Mumbai: All India Federation of Organisations for Democratic Rights, 1999), 95-8.

openly debated in the national press. In this paper, we shall consider the historical setting of the unprecedented debate on conversion to discover why and how the issue of conversion became so controversial in India at the close of the twentieth century, and then we shall analyse the debate itself.

### **8.1 Hindu-Christian tensions and the call for a national debate on conversion**

The 1998-99 debate on conversion was sparked by the controversy surrounding conversions of tribal communities. During the 1990s, the Parivar focused their attention on tribal areas where Christian missionaries had already established educational institutions and medical facilities and conversions were taking place. In the case of the Dangs district of Gujarat, Ghanshyam Shah points out that, despite census statistics showing that overall the population of Christians in India was actually falling, the Christian growth rate in the area was remarkably high and, particularly in the last few decades of the twentieth century, there was increasing competition between Christian organisations and Hindu societies for conversion or reconversion respectively. This resulted in various clashes over tribal customs, which the converts to Christianity had ceased to observe.<sup>6</sup> While Christians argued that tribals were not Hindus, the Parivar, who renamed the tribals *vanvasi* (or *vanavasi*, forest dwellers) rather than *adivasi* (original inhabitants), argued that they were part of the Hindu family as they shared many of the cultural and religious aspects of Hindu religion. The Parivar adopted a programme of *ghar vapsi* (*ghar vapasi*) or “home-coming” to counteract Christian missionary activities and they also started schools and other social activities in the tribal areas.<sup>7</sup> Occasional conflicts between Hindu activists and missionaries and between tribal converts and non-converts escalated and, by the close of the decade, some tribal areas were being described as a “battle ground” for conversion.<sup>8</sup>

The rise of BJP political power at both local state and central government levels inevitably brought about a strong suspicion among religious minorities that the Sangh

---

<sup>6</sup> Shah, “Conversion”, 312-5.

<sup>7</sup> *Indian Express*, 13 Feb 1999. In this period “home-coming” became preferred over the term *shuddhi* in response to Christian criticism that the latter implied a form of conversion.

<sup>8</sup> Ruben Banerjee, “Desperate Acts of Faith”, *India Today*, 30 Mar 1998. The article reported that no less than 30 clashes had occurred in Orissa in the preceding year. See also *Express Magazine*, 11 Oct 1998.

Parivar would use their political power to achieve their religious purposes of *Hindutva* at the expense of minority rights. The removal of the exemption from income tax of educational and medical institutions by the Finance Act 1998 and suggestions that churches be disqualified as places of worship because wine is “served” on the premises were regarded by Christians as a misuse of political power.<sup>9</sup> During the 1998 election campaign, some Hindu activists in tribal areas allegedly threatened that, if they won the election, they would withdraw Scheduled Tribe concessions for Christian tribals in an effort to persuade them to reconvert.<sup>10</sup> While strongly denying the alleged inducements to conversion in the tribal areas, Christians protested that the intimidation by Hindu activists was a clear breach of the secular nature of the constitution. However, the threats increased and Hindu activists, particularly in the state of Gujarat, started to attack Christian communities in what appeared to be a pre-planned and deliberate action on behalf of their organisations. Christians responded with a large-scale demonstration and by issuing statements to raise awareness and support among the general public.<sup>11</sup> A statement by both the Catholic church and Protestant churches on 12 July 1998 condemned the actions of the Parivar as “systematic attacks” not only on the minorities but also on the fundamental rights of the citizens of India, which were creating “an atmosphere of fear”.<sup>12</sup> But attacks on Christian communities further intensified during Christmas 1998.

On 10 January 1999, after visiting the Dangs district, the Prime Minister and leader of the BJP, Atal Behari Vajpayee called for a “national debate on conversion” on the grounds that it is “in everybody’s interest that a general consensus be formed on the issue”.<sup>13</sup> The Sangh Parivar leadership, insisting that the violence was caused by the Christian campaign of conversion in the tribal areas, declared their intention to “combat conversions”.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, they asked the government to take a number of measures including: issuing a “total ban on conversion”, ensuring that converts were returned to the Hindu fold, withdrawing Scheduled Tribe concessions given to the

---

<sup>9</sup> See Martin (ed.), *Religious Liberty*, 21-9, for Christian objections to the issues.

<sup>10</sup> Shah, “Conversion”, 316.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, “The National Agenda of the Church” (press release: 21 Aug 1998) in Martin (ed.), *Religious Liberty*, 27-9.

<sup>12</sup> “Freedom of Religion Suppressed” (press release: 13 Jul 1998) in Martin (ed.), *Religious Liberty*, 25-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Indian Express*, 11 Jan 1999.

<sup>14</sup> *New Indian Express*, 9 Jan 1999. See also *Times of India*, 2 Jan 1999.

tribal converts, banning the foreign funding of Christian missionaries, and tabling a constitutional amendment to prevent conversions.<sup>15</sup> They accused the Christian campaign of conversion of being “deliberately provocative” because it involved “attacking and abusing” Hindu deities, and described it as the “politics of minoritism”.<sup>16</sup> In the arguments forcefully presented by some Hindu writers during the debate, there was a gradual but sure shift in the position of the Parivar from objection only to conversion by force or inducement to objection to conversion *per se*.

The call for a national debate was met by generally negative responses from the Christian communities. It was seen as “adroitly hinting that Christians are ultimately responsible for their own woes” and as a “well-thought-out Sangh Parivar strategy” to alter the fundamental right of freedom of religion in the constitution.<sup>17</sup> Christians maintained that the problem was not conversion, since there was no evidence of the alleged “forced conversion” taking place in tribal areas, but that the cause of the trouble was the Parivar’s aggressive approach to minorities.

In the midst of this debate, the killing of Graham Staines, an Australian missionary who had been in charge of a leprosy home in Orissa, and his two sons on the night of 22 January 1999 not only shocked the people of India but was also much publicised world-wide and raised deep concern for the deteriorating situation. It also seemed to support the Christian insistence that the Hindu argument on conversion was faulty because the missionary concerned appeared not to have been involved in converting tribals. The statement of the joint meeting of the CBCI, NCCI and other Protestant churches on 2 February 1999 condemned the violence toward the Christian minority, which it saw as perpetrated by “fundamentalists” with an ideology of “intolerance, cultural exclusivism and dominion”, who deny “the pluralistic cultural heritage and the right of the poor”. They denied allegations of false conversions and saw the Christian community as targeted because of their work to help the underprivileged.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> *Indian Express*, 6 Jan 1999; *Times of India*, 6 Jan 1999; *Maharashtra Herald*, 12 & 13 Jan 1999; *New Indian Express*, 20 Jan 1999.

<sup>16</sup> T.V.R. Shenoy, “Orissa’s Outrage and After”, *New Indian Express*, 27 Jan 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Sumit Sarkar, “Hindutva and the Question of Conversions” in K.N. Panikkar (ed.), *The Concerned Indian’s Guide to Communalism* (New Delhi: Viking, 1999), 77 & 96; “Prime Minister Vajpayee Calls for National Debate on Conversion” (press release: 11 Jan 1999) in Martin (ed.), *Religious Liberty*, 42-3 & 69.

<sup>18</sup> Martin (ed.), *Religious Liberty*, 53.

Christians, together with the English language media blamed the start of the violence on Parivar attempts to “forcefully” reconvert Christians in tribal areas and saw the issue of conversion as a “constructed” justification for the recent violence, which was an attempt by high caste Hindus to retain their hegemony and dominate Indian society.<sup>19</sup> At the National Consultation on Religious Liberty and Human Rights held in August, Christians emphasised the constitutional right of religious freedom and even suggested a political coalition with other minority religious communities to protect their rights.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, the VHP, the Parivar organisation most vehemently against conversion, placed a commitment to “curbing conversions” at the top of their agenda in their large meeting held in Ahmedabad in February 1999. They also claimed that the total number of Christian missionaries in post-independence India had drastically increased, a claim largely substantiated by Christian figures.<sup>21</sup> They argued that Hindu religion and culture were “facing a grave threat” as missionaries were “exploiting the social inequalities in the Hindu society”, and urged Hindus to reconvert those who had left the Hindu fold.<sup>22</sup> This was followed by a much-publicised home-coming ceremony of tribals in a village in Madhya Pradesh in which Dilip Singh Judeo, a member of the *Rajya Sabha* and the leading protagonist of *ghar vapsi*, washed the feet of some of those who had reconverted.<sup>23</sup> The report of the “Justice D.P. Wadhwa Commission of Inquiry” into the killing of Graham Staines, published on 21 June 1999, seemed to endorse the Parivar’s argument.<sup>24</sup> The report praised the dedication and sacrificial work of Staines and recognised that preaching the gospel is both an integral part of Christian faith and a fundamental right.<sup>25</sup> However, it also found clear evidence that this particular missionary was “involved in active propagation of his

---

<sup>19</sup> *Communalism Combat*, Jan 1999.

<sup>20</sup> *NCCR CXIX/8* (Aug 1999), 607-12.

<sup>21</sup> *Times of India*, 6 Feb 1999; *Indian Express*, 6 Feb 1999. The Parivar claimed that the numbers of missionaries had increased from 1,744 in 1947 to 15,000 in 1999. Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1993), 274-5, gives expatriate missionaries (Protestant and Catholic) as 3,143 and Indian (Protestant) missionaries working in different parts of India as 11,284. For statistics of recent Catholic personnel, see Augustine Kanjamala (ed.), *Integral Mission Dynamics: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Catholic Church in India* (New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1995), 608-10.

<sup>22</sup> *Indian Express*, 6 Feb 1999. See also *Maharashtra Herald*, 6 Feb 1999; *Times of India*, 6 Feb 1999.

<sup>23</sup> *Times of India*, 15 Feb 1999; *Indian Express*, 15 Feb 1999.

<sup>24</sup> *Justice D.P. Wadhwa Commission of Inquiry: Report* (New Delhi: Justice Wadhwa Commission of Inquiry, 1999). The Commission was appointed by the central government on 29 January 1999.

<sup>25</sup> *Justice D.P. Wadhwa*, 90-1.

religion apart from his social work” and concluded that his missionary work “did lead to conversions of tribals to his faith”.<sup>26</sup> It argued that the killing was not an isolated incident but was motivated by the “misplaced fundamentalism” of the individuals who believed that the missionary was “instrumental in converting poor *adivasis* into Christianity”.<sup>27</sup> While Christians and the English language media were sceptical of the findings of the report,<sup>28</sup> the Parivar saw it as vindicating their view that Christian conversion was the key factor in provoking Hindu-Christian communal tension.<sup>29</sup> The friction continued during the elections in September, when Christian leaders openly campaigned against the BJP.<sup>30</sup> The election resulted in October in a BJP coalition in the central government.

## **8.2 The controversy surrounding the visit of Pope John Paul II to India, November 1999**

As the fever of the election began to fade, the VHP launched a campaign against the visit of Pope John Paul II to India due that November and focused on the issue of conversion as the most controversial aspect of it. The VHP and the RSS demanded that the Pope apologise for the Goa Inquisition and “forced conversions” in Goa during the Portuguese period and that he should withdraw the claim of salvation only through Christianity.<sup>31</sup> In response to this the Archbishop of Delhi insisted that the Pope has “full freedom to assert his belief in saying that Jesus is the saviour of mankind and it is up to the people to accept it or reject it”.<sup>32</sup> The Pope’s visit excited such vigorous debate that for a few weeks articles appeared in the press daily, either critical of the Pope and Christianity on the one side or defending the Catholic church’s position on the other.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Justice D.P. Wadhwa, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Justice D.P. Wadhwa, 55, 90.

<sup>28</sup> *Indian Express*, 7 Aug 1999; *Times of India*, 13 Aug 1999; *Asian Age*, 27 Aug 1999.

<sup>29</sup> See Arun Shourie, “Refusing to Learn from the Wadhwa Report”, *Asian Age*, 20 Aug 1999; “Consequences of Ignoring the Law”, *Asian Age*, 27 Aug 1999.

<sup>30</sup> For example, “XIII General Elections: Vote Consciously” in Martin (ed.), *Religious Liberty in Peril*, 69-72.

<sup>31</sup> *Asian Age*, 10, 12 & 17 Oct 1999; *Outlook*, 25 Oct 1999, 18-9. It was also reported that a Freedom of Religion Bill had been submitted to the Gujarat government for discussion: *Asian Age*, 16 Oct 1999.

<sup>32</sup> *Asian Age*, 15 Oct 1999.

<sup>33</sup> For a highly critical view of the Pope, see S. Prasannarajan, “The Millennial Missionary”, *Indian Express*, 24 Oct 1999.

Although John Paul II's previous visit to India in 1985 had also met with Hindu opposition,<sup>34</sup> on this occasion the VHP campaign for an apology received much heavier media coverage and triggered a wider public debate on conversion. By drawing attention to atrocities by the Catholic church under Portuguese rule, the VHP both embarrassed Christians about their past and also succeeded in awakening the religious sentiments of Hindus. The Goa Inquisition (1560-1812) was carried on not only against Christian heretics but also against Hindus and other non-Christians, who were accused of obstructing conversion or infringing some of the laws directed against their religions.<sup>35</sup> The Parivar were able to persuade the public that the past attitude of the church, portrayed in the terror of Inquisition, still persisted in the Roman Catholic approach to Hindus, despite the claim by some Catholics of a decisive shift after Vatican II. Hindus drew a parallel between contemporary missionaries and those of the time of the Inquisition, arguing that they had the same agenda and the same motive to convert Hindus and keep them from lapsing in doctrine, the only difference was that the current methods did not use physical force.<sup>36</sup> Contemporary Christian missionary portrayals of Hinduism as evil and darkness were brought to the notice of Hindu leaders during the same period and gave them ample evidence that Christians still held the same attitudes toward Hindus and Hinduism as in the past.<sup>37</sup> For the Parivar, the important link between the Inquisition and the late twentieth century was the church's insistence on conversion, and they argued that as long as Christians held the view that only Christianity provides salvation, their "aggressive" campaign of converting Hindus would continue. As they made clear, a mere apology would not be enough, conversion activities must be stopped and the church must denounce conversion.<sup>38</sup>

At his meeting with religious leaders on arrival in India, Pope John Paul II emphasised the need for a deeper understanding and dialogue among the people of

---

<sup>34</sup> See for example, H.V. Seshadri, *Christian Missions in Bharat: Some Questions to Pope* (Bangalore: Jagarana Prakashana, 1985).

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Thekkedath, *From the Middle of the Sixteenth Century to the End of the Seventeenth Century* (History of Christianity in India II; Bangalore: CHAI, 1988), 406-8. A.K. Priolkar, *The Goa Inquisition* (Bombay: Bombay University Press, 1961), 50, 159, 189.

<sup>36</sup> For example, M.V. Kamath, "Mission Impossible", *Times of India*, 13 Oct 1999.

<sup>37</sup> See Saira Menezes & Venu Menon, "The Zealots Who Would Inherit", *Outlook*, 22 Feb 1999 and the response from Ashok Chowgule in "The Zealots Who Would Inherit (and a Response)", <http://www.hvk.org/articles/articles/0299/0056.html> (date accessed: 26 Sep 2000). See also *Times of India*, 11 Nov 1999; Suman Guha Mozumder, "A Dark White Zeal", *Outlook*, 6 Dec 1999.

<sup>38</sup> *Indian Express*, 3 Nov 1999.

different religions but at the same time he stressed the importance of religious freedom:

No state, no group has the right to control either directly or indirectly a person's religious convictions, nor can it justifiably claim the right to impose or impede the public profession and practice of religion, or the respectful appeal of a particular religion to people's free conscience.<sup>39</sup>

During his visit, the Pope offered no apology for the excesses of the Goa Inquisition; instead in the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* released during this visit, he re-asserted the traditional view of the relationship of Christianity toward other religions of his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). *Ecclesia in Asia* had been produced as the outcome of the All Asia Bishops' Synod; therefore it was not addressing the theological quests of India alone. Nevertheless, it is significant that it was delivered in India in the midst of the conversion debate so it is necessary to look at it more closely.

John Paul II began *Ecclesia in Asia* with the following exhortation: "just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent".<sup>40</sup> He further reminded the bishops of Asia that evangelism was their "absolute priority" because "Christ is the one Mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of the world".<sup>41</sup> He insisted that although the church respected other religious traditions and their "soteriological character", and sought to dialogue with them, their religious values "await their fulfilment in Jesus Christ".<sup>42</sup> Particularly in the chapter on "Jesus the Saviour: A Gift to Asia", he stressed that the unique contribution of the church to the people of Asia is "the proclamation of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, the one and only Saviour for all peoples".<sup>43</sup> In the chapter on "Jesus the Saviour: Proclaiming the Gift", it was made clear that there is "no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord", and furthermore that the "primacy of the proclamation" should be maintained "in all evangelizing work".<sup>44</sup> Although he

---

<sup>39</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edn), 10 Nov 1999, 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA) (1).

<sup>41</sup> EA (2).

<sup>42</sup> EA (6).

<sup>43</sup> EA (10), (13), (14).

<sup>44</sup> EA (19).

acknowledged the importance of inculturation in evangelisation, John Paul II nevertheless insisted on the unchangeable and universal nature of Christian doctrine and he affirmed that the Catholic church is “the *ordinary means* of salvation”.<sup>45</sup>

*Ecclesia in Asia* was very much criticised by the secular media, who “expected [John Paul II] to unfold a new doctrine that takes into account the religious and cultural diversities that the Asian continent represents”, because they perceived “no further progress” since Vatican II. They complained that, according to the document, conversion remains the “cardinal objective of the church” and that the inter-religious dialogue promoted by Indian theologians was discarded in favour of “motivated dialogue”.<sup>46</sup> There was furious criticism from the Parivar, who vowed to “finish” conversion.<sup>47</sup> Shourie declared that the Pope had “silenced secularists, as well as missionary-apologists” since he himself explicitly declared the church’s intention towards other religions and their plans to evangelise not only India but the whole of Asia.<sup>48</sup> The only reference to conversion in the document was the phrase “a call to conversion”, which was much quoted by Hindus but was in fact a call to Christians to become worthy of God.<sup>49</sup> However, the content of the document made it more than clear that there was a continuing call by the church hierarchy to commitment to the explicit preaching of the Christian gospel in the Asian continent with a view to the conversion of non-Christians. Therefore Hindus were correct in interpreting it as a call for the conversion of Hindus.

### **8.3 Conversion from the perspective of Hindus**

Throughout the debate on conversion during 1998-99, the Parivar consistently asserted that the root cause of Hindu-Christian tension was the Christian campaign of conversion. It is therefore necessary to examine the truth of this claim. The prominent historian, Sumit Sarkar located the root of the violence generally in the Parivar’s

---

<sup>45</sup> EA (23), (2), (31).

<sup>46</sup> “Christ in Asia”, *Indian Express*, 9 Nov 1999.

<sup>47</sup> Acharya Giriraj Kishore, the VHP Vice-President reported in *Outlook*, 22 Nov 1999, 14-6.

<sup>48</sup> Arun Shourie, “The Pope Dispels All Doubts!”, *Asian Age*, 19 Nov 1999.

<sup>49</sup> EA (4).

aggressive campaign of *Hindutva*, which needed “enemy Others” for their reaction to the threat of globalisation and to the spread of liberation theologies, which sought to empower the downtrodden in Hindu society against the interests of a dominant minority of high caste Hindus.<sup>50</sup> Supporting Sarkar, K.N. Panikkar insisted that blaming Christian conversion was an “afterthought, a convenient pretext”. He added that the cause of the violence was due first to the Parivar’s search for political support from tribal areas and the necessity of displacing the considerable Christian influence on tribals, and secondly to retaliation against the secular position taken by several Christian organisations in the face of Parivar politics.<sup>51</sup> This view was also shared by the report of the All India Federation of Organisations for Democratic Rights, first published in April 1999, which saw conversion as “a *manufactured* issue, a deliberate diversion and a trap” and a “justification for its sudden decision to attack Christians” in order to “sway the *majority* of people with a hate campaign against a minority”.<sup>52</sup> The implication was that Hindu politicisation of religions must be checked and that religion and politics should be kept within the framework of secular ideology.

However, though the above arguments may have explained the socio-political dimensions of the situation, they neglected to examine the religious dynamics of the context in which the Parivar operated and failed to hear what Peter van der Veer calls the “narration by the aggressor”.<sup>53</sup> In this case the aggressors constantly expressed resentment toward the Christian campaign of conversion, particularly in the tribal areas. Indeed, as we have seen, conversions to Christianity were taking place, tensions were being created by Christian conversions in tribal areas, and the leaders of the Parivar did have evidence of Christian campaigns for the evangelisation of India which actually “targeted” the tribals with what seemed to be careful planning to achieve their goals of converting them. Moreover, there were many examples of Hindu objections to Christian conversions both in their writings and in their campaign of *shuddhi* or *ghar vapsi*.

---

<sup>50</sup> Sarkar, “Hindutva and the Question of Conversions”, 98-101.

<sup>51</sup> K.N. Panikkar, “Introduction: Defining the Nation as Hindu” in K.N. Panikkar (ed.), *The Concerned Indian’s Guide to Communalism* (New Delhi: Viking, 1999), xv-xix.

<sup>52</sup> *Then They Came for the Christians*, 6-9 & 90-1.

<sup>53</sup> Peter van der Veer, “Writing Violence” in David Ludden (ed.), *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (New Delhi: OUP, 1996), 263-8.

The Parivar's resentment of conversion was due to their nationalist stance, from which perspective Christian (and Muslim) converts appeared to betray their nation and secede to the side of the conqueror.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, in their examination of the situation, Christians failed to grasp that the nationalism that the Parivar advocated was deeply *religious*. In his study of the events at Ayodhya, van der Veer has convincingly argued that the Hindu violence was due not to the problem of the rise of politically motivated fundamentalists but rather to the shift of power to "religious nationalism". Unlike Ashis Nandy,<sup>55</sup> who argued that the recent violence was due to the failure of the ideology of the secular state and that a return to the traditions of Hinduism was the way forward in the context of communal violence, van der Veer insisted that what was taking place was a shift from the "religious notion of sacred space" to "nationalist notions of territory".<sup>56</sup> In other words it was not that religion was used by politically motivated Hindus but rather that the religious pursuit of "sacred space" was expressed in a claim on the territory of the sacred place. Hindu leaders regarded tribals as at the boundary of the Hindu fold, and it was interference with this space that provoked them to react.

It is apparent from the above that the issue of conversion was not just "manufactured" by the Parivar to justify their actions toward the Christian community, but was a key issue for them to deal with in the course of their campaign of *Hindutva*. In 1998-99 the Parivar used the national media to argue for the illegitimacy of conversion in a pluralistic society like India. They produced an unprecedented number of articles and books during the period, but some of their most forceful arguments are found in the writings of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Ashok Chowgule, David Frawley, and Arun Shourie. These characterise conversion as violence against humanity, an attack on Hindu nationhood, and an inherent problem of Christianity.

### 8.3.1 Conversion as violence against humanity

The most important development in the Parivar's argument against conversion in the 1998-99 debate was the identification of conversion as violence against humanity and

---

<sup>54</sup> Pran Chopra, "Conversions and 'Conspiracies'", *The Hindu*, 5 Feb 1999.

<sup>55</sup> Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance", *Alternatives* XIII/2 (Apr 1988), 177-94.

<sup>56</sup> Van der Veer, "Writing Violence", 253-60.

therefore evil and unacceptable. In the Parivar's view, as "social and religious violence" "all conversions are wrong" and "there is no justification for conversion in this age".<sup>57</sup> The most vigorous argument was presented by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the head of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, who wrote an "open letter" to the Pope presenting Hindu views on conversion. He contended that all should have "the freedom to pursue" their own religion, each of which has some beauty and something to contribute to the enrichment of humanity. But he claimed that "converting religions" are "necessarily aggressive", because conversion implies a "conscious intrusion into the religious life of a person" and is "violence against people who are committed to non-violence".<sup>58</sup>

David Frawley (or Vamadeva Shastri), who is a Hindu convert from the Catholic faith, offered a vigorous critique of "organised conversion" by Christian missionaries as perpetuating "psychological violence" toward people of other faiths, and insisted that conversion is an "ideological assault", a form of "religious violence and intolerance", and an "attempt of one religion to exterminate all others".<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Ashok Chowgule presented conversion as part of the "destructive" effect of missionary activities on the local people, exploiting and undermining the local culture and religion, as illustrated in the case of the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of the Americas. He also argued, using V.S. Naipaul's analysis,<sup>60</sup> that conversion is used as an effective tool to destroy a people's history, as it serves to prevent converts from returning to the past.<sup>61</sup> This identification of conversion with violence was echoed in a memorandum submitted by a group of Hindus to the Prime Minister, which condemned conversion as "an explosive socio-religious activity capable of igniting centrifugal forces".<sup>62</sup> This was not entirely new since many Hindus already connected conversion with perversion and colonial aggression, but what was new in the context of the late 1990s were Hindu attempts to dub the past history of the Inquisition and "forced conversions" by Christian and Muslim rulers in the context of colonial

---

<sup>57</sup> *Maharashtra Herald*, 13 Jan 1999; *Times of India*, 16 Jan 1999.

<sup>58</sup> Swami Dayananda Saraswati, "Conversion is Violence", *Indian Express*, 29 Oct 1999.

<sup>59</sup> David Frawley, "The Missionary Position", <http://www.bjp.org/news/feb1799.html> (date accessed: 24 Feb 2000).

<sup>60</sup> See V.S. Naipaul, *Beyond Beliefs: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 1-3.

<sup>61</sup> Ashok Chowgule, *Christianity in India: The Hindutva Perspective* (Mumbai: HVK, 1999), 17-25.

<sup>62</sup> "An Open Letter to Pope John Paul II", *New Indian Express*, 6 Nov 99.

aggression onto the present campaign for the conversion of Hindus in the context of the global expansion and economic supremacy of the wealthy nations. As Frawley put it, it then becomes not a question of whether conversions are carried out by ethical means or not, since conversion itself is “inherently an unethical practice”, which “inevitably breeds unethical results”.<sup>63</sup>

### 8.3.2 Conversion as an attack on Hindu nationhood

The ideology of *Hindutva* strongly asserted that the rights of the majority Hindus must be respected as opposed to the Christian and moderate Hindu argument of the freedom of choice of individuals. From this perspective, Christian conversion was regarded as “fundamental contempt for Hinduism” and a force to “semitise Hindus”. “Tolerance”, Shenoy argued, “is being preached to one section when other religions are teaching intolerance”.<sup>64</sup> A.N. Dar pointed out that, despite the difficulties, especially the birth of Pakistan, Hindus had kept India as a secular, not a Hindu, state. For him, conversion was an attack on majority Hindu generosity, which had been able to uphold the rights of other minority religious communities and that, though the rights of minorities in India should be respected, there were clear limits on this.<sup>65</sup>

Presenting this problem of conversion over against “Hindu rights”, Ashok Chowgule, the President of VHP Maharashtra, challenged Christians not only to accept the notion that “the Hindu’s way of salvation is as valid as the way through Christ, and that salvation is possible in other faiths as well”, but also to accept their position as a minority group and be conformed to the framework set by the Parivar:

The Christians in India have to learn to accommodate their philosophy within the Hindu paradigm, which is also the paradigm of their biological ancestors. This accommodation has been made by others who have come from outside, and not only have they survived, but have also prospered. It is not only what the Hindutvavadis expect of Christians that is important. Indian Christians have to determine their own place in the society in India.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Frawley, “The Missionary Position”.

<sup>64</sup> T.V.R. Shenoy, “Orissa’s Outrage and After”, *New Indian Express*, 27 Jan 1999.

<sup>65</sup> A.N. Dar, “The Hindu is Hurt”, *Indian Express*, 1 Mar 1999.

<sup>66</sup> Chowgule, *Christianity in India*, 74-8. *Hindutvavadis* are proponents of *Hindutva*.

Abhas Chatterjee explained the Parivar understanding of the term “minority” in the following terms: “the residents of this land who have alienated themselves from her national attribute – Sanatana Dharma – are no more part of this nation, but minorities” and not “nationals”.<sup>67</sup> According to this way of thinking, people are defined not in terms of numbers but by their attitude toward Hinduism. And this is based on the notion that in India, Hindu ways should prevail and, just as within the territory of a secular state, one has to abide by its law. Therefore, in the Parivar’s understanding, conversion lay “beyond being a communal issue” and was considered an attack on the Hindu nation “as it exists”.<sup>68</sup>

### 8.3.3 Conversion as an inherent problem of Christianity

During the 1998-99 debate, the Parivar’s objections were not just limited to Christian conversion, but extended to attacks on Christianity and its theology. Hinduism is generally regarded as a non-proselytising religion, a view based on the philosophy of equal respect for all faiths. In presenting “pluralistic Hinduism”, Hindus inevitably compared their theology favourably with “exclusivistic Christianity”, which they clearly regarded as narrowly dogmatic and inferior. For example, Frawley claimed that “Hinduism has a much broader scope of spiritual and yogic practices, philosophies and mystical teachings than does Christianity”.<sup>69</sup> Sita Ram Goel writes more strongly:

Hindus are committing a grave mistake in regarding the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity as a dialogue between two religions. Christianity has never been a religion; its long history tells us that it has always been a predatory imperialism par excellence. The encounter, therefore, should be viewed as a battle between two totally opposed and mutually exclusive ways of thought and behaviour.<sup>70</sup>

Conversion was seen as the symbol of “intolerant” Christianity and of “lack of respect” toward other religions.<sup>71</sup> In the words of T.V.R. Shenoy, “[C]an you imagine

---

<sup>67</sup> Abhas Chatterjee, *The Concept of Hindu Nation* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1995), 24-30.

<sup>68</sup> Ashok Chowgule, *Hindutva and the Religious Minorities* (Mumbai, HVK, 1997), 7-8.

<sup>69</sup> Frawley, “The Missionary Position”. Cf. Chowgule, *Christianity in India*, 9-12.

<sup>70</sup> Sita Ram Goel, *Pseudo-Secularism, Christian Missions and Hindu Resistance* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1998), 2.

<sup>71</sup> M. Rama Jois, “Conversion, Fruit of Intolerance”, *Indian Express*, 25 Nov 99.

a greater act of disrespect than converting someone? Isn't a missionary effectively saying, "Your faith is flawed, but mine is not"?"<sup>72</sup>

We have seen that, in *Ecclesia in Asia* for example, Christians insisted that their missionary endeavour was rooted in their scriptures and that it is every Christian's duty to share the gospel, as well as the fundamental right of any citizen to convert. But at the same time, they asserted that their attitude toward other religions had changed, in the Catholic case since Vatican II. For Hindus this was a theological paradox. The obvious conclusion Hindus drew was that aggressive forms of conversion were still an integral part of the character of Christianity, though expressed in more subtle ways. In other words, the Parivar saw Christianity, in its historical development and its theology, as incapable of accepting any ideology of tolerance or pluralistic philosophy.

In the late 1990s, in an attempt to prove that conversion was an inherent problem of Christianity, its source documents were examined more closely, particularly in the writings of Arun Shourie, Sita Ram Goel and Ashok Chowgule, who studied the Vatican II documents, to which Catholics kept referring, and the Bible, which Protestants relied on. Shourie claimed that, far from the supposed change of Christian attitude, the exclusive nature of Christian theology and the desire for the conversion of non-Christians is very clear even in Vatican II and post-Vatican II documents. He drew attention to the more conservative statements on salvation within the conciliar documents to the effect that Christ is the only way to salvation and that the Catholic church is the necessary means to achieve it. Quoting the affirmation that "the essential mission of the church is to evangelize all men" from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975),<sup>73</sup> Shourie noted that the encyclical not only asserts the right to convert Hindus but also that it is the duty of Christians to do so. Observing that the new convert has to be engaged in converting others as a mark of his or her genuine conversion, he cynically remarked that Hindus, by not converting, are "preventing Christians from being saved".<sup>74</sup> These arguments were echoed by Chowgule, who also noted the Pope's description of Protestants aiming to convert Catholics in Latin America as "rapacious

---

<sup>72</sup> T.V.R. Shenoy, "Respect Nurtures Respect", *Indian Express*, 4 Nov 1999.

<sup>73</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) (14).

<sup>74</sup> Arun Shourie, *Harvesting Our Souls: Missionaries, their Design, their Claims* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 2000), 34-53. This book first appeared in December 1999.

wolves” and his cautions about adopting certain ideas of other religions. Chowgule regarded these as contradicting the Christian claim that conversion is a matter of individual choice and a fundamental right.<sup>75</sup>

Christian insistence that preaching the gospel is an inherent duty, according to the Christian scriptures, led Sita Ram Goel to examine the biblical text itself and to conclude that Jesus Christ is an “artifice for aggression”, Christianity is a “big lie”, and the papacy is the “vehicle of Western imperialism”.<sup>76</sup> Shourie, in a more sophisticated approach to analysing the Bible, drew attention to the problem of the historicity of Jesus Christ. He saw the gospels not as “objective reports but propaganda” written with “a specific purpose” in mind, which was in fact the conversion of the readers.<sup>77</sup> Shourie argued that the Christian God was “obsessed” with himself and that this self-centredness was passed on to his Son and again to the church. This led him to conclude that the church could not possibly be “broad-minded, ecumenical, tolerant”.<sup>78</sup> On the contrary, in his book pointedly entitled *Harvesting Our Souls*, Shourie urged Hindus:

... we should be alert to the fact that missionaries have but one goal – that of harvesting us for the Church, and they have developed a very well-knit, powerful, extremely well-endowed organizational network for attaining that singular goal. Their “spiritual” quest, their quest for power and control, their commercial interests are all entwined with, they are in fact dependent on that one goal – conversion.<sup>79</sup>

In this way, criticism of conversion resulted not only in assertions of the superiority of “pluralistic Hinduism” over “exclusivistic Christianity” but also in attempts to discredit Christianity.

#### **8.4 Christian re-thinking of conversion in the context of *Hindutva***

---

<sup>75</sup> Chowgule, *Christianity in India*, 29-31. See also John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 89-90.

<sup>76</sup> Sita Ram Goel, *Jesus Christ: An Artifice for Aggression* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1994), 76-9 & 80-5; *Papacy: Its Doctrine and History* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1986), 44-52.

<sup>77</sup> Shourie, *Harvesting Our Souls*, 206-11.

<sup>78</sup> Shourie, *Harvesting Our Souls*, 360-70.

<sup>79</sup> Shourie, *Harvesting Our Souls*, 404.

In the context of what was seen by Christians as a systematic attack on their community, both locally in tribal areas and nationally in the media, Hindu moves to blame Christian conversion for the troubles were bound to be regarded as an attempt to divert attention away from the aggressive attitude of the Sangh Parivar and put the responsibility for communal unrest on the religious minorities. Christians and moderate Hindus thus focused their contribution to the 1998-99 debate on the political development of the Sangh Parivar, relating the current violence to the case of Ayodhya, to argue that Hindu fundamentalists were responsible for the violence and that Christians were only victims of aggressive *Hindutva* ideology. By interpreting the attacks on their community as due not to Christian conversion but to politically motivated and aggressive campaigns by the Parivar, Christians not only tended to portray their communities one-sidedly as innocent victims of persecution but also misread Hindu arguments.

As we have seen, it became clear in the course of the debate that the Parivar's campaign hinged on the problem of conversion, both past and present. Furthermore, Hindus were provoked by Christian calls for conversion *per se* and not only by "forced" or "induced" conversions", a point which Christian protagonists largely failed to recognise when they continued to stress that their intention was only to care for the poor and bring justice to the tribals. While Christians treated the situation as politically motivated and thought that the Parivar were interested in their political numbers, they also largely missed the religious nature of the Parivar's arguments.

Recognising that Hindus were concerned about Christians *converting others*, the response of Christians in the 1998-99 debate was to focus instead on *converting oneself* as a fundamental right of any individual enshrined in the constitution. While Hindus argued that conversion was violence as a result of something imposed upon people from "outside" of their socio-cultural and religious sphere, Christians argued that conversion was the result of a search to satisfy their needs, and that "outsiders" were merely instruments to help people make a personal decision to change. As in the case of *dalits*, Walter Fernandes and others used sociological methods to show that the religious conversion of tribals was an "effort to recover the security and identity lost through colonial and upper caste interventions". Fernandes justified the legitimacy of evangelisation among the tribals as "struggling for the liberation of the

victims of injustice” and blamed the Parivar for attempting to “demonise Christians in the name of conversions”.<sup>80</sup> Others also regarded the conversion of tribals as a “socio-religious movement” against their Hinduisation.<sup>81</sup> This interpretation was shared by many writers, who urged social reform and pointed out the strong desire of tribals to assert their distinct identity apart from Hindus.<sup>82</sup> However, this interpretation of conversion as social protest not only reduced conversion to a socio-political activity, but also provided legitimisation for Hindu campaigns of reconversion as “home-coming” as a mainly socio-political event.

Hindus criticised Christian conversions on the basis that they lacked a “spiritual dimension” but there were also studies that showed that tribal motivation to convert appeared to have more to do with their daily struggle with problems of illness and fear of evil spirits, and with attraction to Christian faith, than with hopes of social liberation.<sup>83</sup> Although there were some examples of tribals seeking social justice en masse, these studies also demonstrated that conversions in tribal areas were taking place on an individual or family basis and that the needs of the individuals concerned were the primary motive for conversion. Taking these findings seriously, there were fresh Christian attempts to uncover the motives of conversion, particularly of tribals. At a consultation on “Re-Reading Mass Movements in India” held in 1997, participants were asked to address the questions of the motives and processes of mass movements in given people groups, mainly tribals.<sup>84</sup> Most of them cast doubt on whether the commonly held sociological interpretations of conversion gave a full explanation, and instead emphasised the “religious (belief) dimensions” in conversion

---

<sup>80</sup> Walter Fernandes, “Debate Poverty, Not Conversion”, *Times of India*, 15 Jan 1999. Cf. S.M. Michael, *Anthropology of Conversion in India* (Mumbai: Institute of Indian Culture, 1998); S.M. Michael, “In the Interests of Freedom”, *The Examiner*, 30 Oct 1999.

<sup>81</sup> M. Abel, “Christianity in India: Contributions and Controversies”, *Bharatiya Pragna* 1/1 (Jul 1999), 29-30; A.J. Philip, “Who’s Afraid of Conversion?”, *Indian Express*, 11 Jan 1999.

<sup>82</sup> Bhavdeep Kang & Neeraj Mishra, “Pilgrim’s Progress Revisited”, *Outlook*, 25 Jan 1999, 22-4; Vasant Sathe, “Reform Hindu Society to Stop Conversion”, *Times of India*, 22 Jan 1999; Ujjwalk Chowdhury, “Real Force Behind Conversions”, *Maharashtra Herald*, 1 Feb 1999; Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar, “Brand Problems of a Religious Multinational”, *Sunday Times of India*, 14 Feb 1999; B.K. Roy Burman, “The Other Side of ‘Conversion’”, *Mainstream* XXXVII/8 (13 Feb 99), 7-11; Muchkund Dubey, “Challenges of Pluralism”, *Times of India*, 25 Feb 1999.

<sup>83</sup> For example, Shah, “Conversion”, 315.

<sup>84</sup> The papers of the Consultation have been published as F. Hrangkhuma (ed.), *Christianity in India: Search for Liberation and Identity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998).

and some re-defined conversion movements as “Spirit movements”.<sup>85</sup> The paper-writers treated the tribals as deeply religious people and took the view that it was the “pre-existing tribal belief system” in contact with the Christian faith, more than any social factors, that triggered the tribal response, and furthermore, they insisted that in most cases conversion was the outcome of a decision based on spiritual or religious considerations.<sup>86</sup> They concluded that it was primarily because faith in Jesus gave the people a sense of freedom and self-confidence that they embraced it, though they did not rule out other factors.<sup>87</sup> On the basis of his study, George Oommen argued that conversion of tribals followed deep consideration of the implications for their pre-existing system of beliefs, which involved questions related to “the land, ancestors, their spirits, [and] new Sanskritic gods”. Moreover, primary place in their consideration was given to “[t]heological issues related to misery, disease and punishment”.<sup>88</sup> Therefore the findings of the consultation, using anthropological methodology, gave Christians grounds to argue that, though conversions of tribals were large in numbers, they were the result of the conscious decisions of individuals and families, and that the conversions were primarily religious and spiritual.

Although treating conversion as the result of a spiritual quest appeared to provide a “spiritual” aspect to the conversion of tribals, the Parivar insisted that Christian missionaries “exploited” the fear and vulnerable situation of the tribals by giving them “false promises” of healing and casting out demons. The emphasis on conversion being initiated by the people themselves, for whatever motive, and not due to outside interference, could not disguise the fact that Christian missions were active in tribal areas, and Hindus insisted that these were instrumental in bringing about conversions. S.K. Chaube’s work shows that, though there had been “tribal solidarity movements” initiated by the tribals themselves since Independence, these owed a great deal to the activities of Christian missions or Hindu activists.<sup>89</sup> And the fact that a considerable

---

<sup>85</sup> See George Oommen, “Christianity Among Malayarians of Kerala” in Hrangkhuma (ed.), *Christianity in India*, 138-54; James Massey, “Christianity Among the Dalits in North India with Special Reference to Punjab” in Hrangkhuma (ed.), *Christianity in India*, 1-13.

<sup>86</sup> Nirmal Minz, “Christianity Among the Mundas, Oraons, and Kharias of Chotanagpur” in Hrangkhuma (ed.), *Christianity in India*, 14-38; Oommen, “Christianity Among Malayarians of Kerala”, 154.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Minz, “Christianity Among the Mundas”, 34.

<sup>88</sup> Oommen, “Christianity Among Malayarians of Kerala”, 150-1.

<sup>89</sup> S.K. Chaube, “The Scheduled Tribes and Christianity in India”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27 Feb 1999, 524-6. Chaube compares Manipur, ruled by the British, with Tripura, a princely state,

number of tribals were reconverting to Hinduism, following Hindu campaigns, reinforced the Hindu claim that conversion was being carried out by outside agencies.

Uneasy feelings were expressed by some within the Christian community toward Christians who were actively engaged in converting tribals and held a hostile attitude toward Hinduism. “Mainline” Christian theologians saw both the Sangh Parivar’s *Hindutva* ideology and Christian campaigns for the evangelisation of India as having a fundamentalistic attitude and an aggressive methodology to achieve their goals.<sup>90</sup> Both Protestants and Catholics were increasingly embarrassed by “fundamentalist” Christians, especially when Hindus described their campaigns as “imperialistic” in their approach and unethical in their portrayal of Hinduism.<sup>91</sup> There was an evident desire in some Christian writings to distinguish “mainline churches” from “fringe group churches” who claim that Jesus is the only saviour and use derogatory language about Hindu deities, and to present the latter as a small portion of Indian Christians.<sup>92</sup> Ishanand Vempeny, a Catholic theologian, argues that the objections toward Christians by the Parivar are not based on a fair picture because the work of the majority of missionaries is based on “compassion and love”. The majority are engaged in “bearing witness” and are not “interested in making people change their religions”; it is only a small portion of missionaries from “fringe group churches” who hold “outdated Christian doctrine” and engage in converting people.<sup>93</sup> Such writers generally avoid the term “conversion” or, if they do use it, they insist on separating it from proselytism.

That conversion should not be understood as involving a change of religious community was the dominant feeling in a meeting held at United Theological College on the theme of “Religious Conversions in the Pluralistic Context of India” in September 1999. S.J. Samartha, in the keynote address, criticised those Christians who make “exclusive claims”. Samartha found the reaction against missions and conversion based on such claims unsurprising because they “lead to theological

---

and points out that the former has a large number of Christians (34.11%) and the latter, where Christian missionary work was severely restricted, very few (1.68%).

<sup>90</sup> See *Times of India*, 15 Jan 1999; *The Asian Age*, 17 Feb 1999.

<sup>91</sup> See Abel, “Christianity in India”, 30.

<sup>92</sup> *Asian Age*, 17 Feb 1999; Janaki B. Kremmer, “Madness of a Few”, *Outlook*, 8 Nov 99, 60.

<sup>93</sup> Ishanand Vempeny, *Conversion: National Debate or Dialogue?* (Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1999), 24-45.

contempt towards people of other faiths”. His solution was that, in the pluralistic context of India, one has to acknowledge a plurality of missions and conversions and that Christians are called to participate in “a ministry of minority”, that is “co-operate with people of other communities of faith for common purposes in society”.<sup>94</sup>

However, mainline Christian attempts to distance themselves from controversy by dissociating themselves from “fringe groups” were resisted internally as these groups in their turn insisted that their faith and practice were in line with biblical teaching and that apparent numerical weakness in India did not mean weakness in influence or theology.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, the assumption that these groups of Christians were backed by outside churches is less than satisfactory nor are the adherents of evangelising groups necessarily small. Lionel Caplan argues that, though the influence of North American Christian fundamentalists is undeniable, the pietism of “fundamentalist” groups in India could be traced back to nineteenth century conservative evangelical missionary attitudes. What is more, in the urban mainline churches he studied, though the middle class leadership espoused a “social gospel”, the majority of Christians, who were poor, held conversion and the work of the Holy Spirit as key features in their faith and practice and were enthusiastic about active evangelism.<sup>96</sup> So though, in terms of their influence on theology and leadership, these Christians could be described as a “fringe group”, in terms of numbers, they represented the Christian majority in the mainline churches. For the Sangh Parivar, unless the mainline churches declared a stop to conversion and dissociated themselves from these “fringe groups”, the latter must be considered part of the Christian community.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, it was clear to them that the traditional Christian doctrine of salvation through Christ by means of conversion, in spite of supposed changes in Christian theology, still remained a vital teaching of some Protestant groups in India. What is more, it was explicitly affirmed in the *Ecclesia in Asia*, a document representing the Catholic church world-wide.

---

<sup>94</sup> S.J. Samartha, “Towards A Ministry of Minority”, 2-4 (unpublished paper presented at the above meeting).

<sup>95</sup> See *Asian Age*, 17 Feb 1999.

<sup>96</sup> Lionel Caplan, *Religion and Power: Essays on the Charian Community in Madras* (Madras: CLS, 1989), 72-93.

<sup>97</sup> Hindu Vivek Kendra, *Religious Conversions: Frequently Asked Questions* (Mumbai: HVK, 1999), 12-3.

## **8.5 The problem of conversion as symptomatic of a clash of religious frameworks**

During the 1998-99 debate, the Parivar were not only trying to convince the public that conversion was the main stumbling block between Hindus and Christians but also insisting that Christian pursuit of conversion of Hindus was still deeply rooted in an exclusive theology in spite of changes in their approach. Indeed, more conservative sections of the Christian community agreed that conversion was part and parcel of their Christian practice. This view was most clearly expressed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*.

Hindus tried to show that Hinduism also provided an answer to the meaning of life and confidently asserted that Hindu religion provided an understanding of salvation differing from the Christian notion. The arguments against conversion put forward by the Parivar, perceived by Christians as socio-political ones, reflected this struggle to provide an answer to the Christian theology of salvation through conversion. In Hindu thought, keeping one's *dharma* is vital. Therefore conversion as change of religion (*dharma*) can only originate from outside one's religious sphere as a form of interference with one's right to pursue the religious quest defined by one's birth. The problem of conversion for Hindus runs deeper than concern about changes of religious affiliation, it is to do with the perceived incompatibility of the Christian call to conversion with the Hindu idea of keeping one's own *dharma*. In the course of the debate, comparison of Hindu and Christian understanding of the ways to achieve salvation was inevitable, and despite their ideology of "equality of religions", Hindus made unfavourable comparisons of Christianity with Hinduism. Paradoxically, while Hindus strongly objected to contemporary Christian attacks on Hinduism on the basis of religious tolerance, they also resorted increasingly to verbal abuse against Christianity. They asserted the superiority of Hindu religious thinking and attempted to discredit the Christian scriptures and the traditions of the church as part of their attempt to win the battle over conversion. From their new yet fragile political strength, the Parivar promoted a Hindu ideology based on the traditional *Vedic* philosophy of tolerance in their encounter with other religions. However this tolerance was not applied within what was perceived to be Hindu territory. In other words, the Parivar defined a Hindu nation within which Indians are protected from what is seen

as outside theological interference by other religions such as Christianity or Islam. In such a Hindu nation other patterns of thought could be tolerated only on the terms set by existing Hindu norms. Religious conversion was a threat to this concept of nationhood and the communities that promoted it were seen as subversive.

The ideology of *Hindutva* has been criticised not only by religious minorities but also by moderate Hindus for several reasons: it is a “majoritarianism” of power-driven “minority” high-caste Hindus over against the other sections of society;<sup>98</sup> it is “untrue both to Hinduism and to Indian nationalism” and, in defining “Indianness” along religious lines, it is fundamentalistic;<sup>99</sup> and whereas to the secularist Indians should be defined on the “basis of common participation in the body politic known as India – regardless of their caste and religion”, *Hindutva* thinking legitimises social hierarchies that guard the privileges of the powerful.<sup>100</sup> The Parivar’s pursuit of *Hindutva*, as David Ludden points out, is a “majoritarian idea that does not espouse communal conflict in principle” but sees communal conflict as a by-product of reactions from minority communities and secular forces in the course of their cultural and ideological search for Hindu national self-identity. And it may be argued that, in many cases of communal conflict in India, the problem did not entirely lie with the majority Hindus.<sup>101</sup> But the combination of this “majoritarian idea” with the politics of numbers in a modern democratic electoral system became so dominant that the religious minorities had limited space to locate their own self-identity, let alone to uphold any conflicting ideology against the dominant Hindu groups. Indeed, Robert E. Frykenberg questions whether India has ever had “a single, self-conscious, unified *majority* community” and regards the concept of “majority” as misused by some Hindu leaders for their political gain at the expense of minorities.<sup>102</sup>

It is not surprising then that conversion in this context was understood as a way for *dalits* and *adivasis* to “protest” against what was perceived to be overwhelming

---

<sup>98</sup> Sarkar, “Hindutva and the Question of Conversions”, 101; A.J. Philip, “Hindutva, the Lexical Way”, *Indian Express*, 8 Mar 1999.

<sup>99</sup> Shashi Tharoor, “Hindutva Assault on Hinduism”, *Indian Express*, 14 Mar 1999.

<sup>100</sup> Teesta Setalvad, “A Warped Debate”, *Communalism Combat*, Jan 1999, 8-10; Praful Bidwai, “The Congress’s Dangerous Temptation”, *Times of India*, 6 Feb 99.

<sup>101</sup> David Ludden, “Introduction – Ayodhya: A Window on the World ” in Ludden (ed.), *Making India Hindu*, 15-6.

<sup>102</sup> Robert E. Frykenberg, “The Concept of ‘Majority’ as a Devilish Force in the Politics of Modern India”, *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* XXV/3 (Nov 1987), 267-74.

ideological aggression. But for the Parivar, it was a stand against the affirmation of Hindu nationhood and struck at the very root of their vision of Hindu India. It is ironic that the Parivar, in their assertion that the self-identity of Indians must be founded on *Hindutva* over against any other ideology, not only failed to appreciate the struggle of other religious groups to define their own identities, but imposed their ideology on them as the only means of being part of the “Hindu nation”. As they reject the universality of the Christian theology of salvation through Christ, the Parivar need to consider whether their ideology of *Hindutva* is necessarily applicable to all in India regardless of their socio-religious understanding of Indianness.

In the context of systematic attacks on Christian communities during 1998-99, Christians were bound to be suspicious of any Hindu argument and regard it as part of an aggressive Hindu “majoritarianism” that Christians could not yield to. The conversion issue then, for Christians, was not just a matter of the freedom to change religious affiliation but it was to do with whether to conform to a Hindu system of thought. The theological struggle for Christians was whether Christian faith provides “salvation” *outside* Hinduism so that one has to reject it, or *within* its boundaries so that one remains inside it. And Hinduism in this case signifies not so much the cultural boundaries of India as the ideological boundaries of Hindu identity. What Christians resented most was the pressure from dominant Hindu groups that sought to impose the rights of Hinduism over both the territorial and the sacred space of Christians. Conformity to the former involved the adoption of the Indian socio-cultural heritage, in which Christians had made significant progress over the years, but conformity to the latter meant giving up Christian distinctiveness altogether. It was not only a question of whether salvation is in Hindu or in Christian faith; it was to do with preserving Christian religious and communal identity. Christians asked Hindus to respect this in the same way as Hindus expected Christians to respect Hindu religion.

The Hindu-Christian debate of 1998-99 helps us to see that interpreting religious conversion requires more than an examination of personal changes of religious commitment or the socio-political changes taking place in a community. Study of the debate exposes the religious complexity of the problem of conversion in India and suggests that it is also due to a clash of two radically different religious frameworks in

Christianity and Hinduism. As we have discussed, the religious dimension is of vital importance in Parivar pursuit of *Hindutva* ideology, which is described as a “desire to restore the centre of faith of the Hindus”.<sup>103</sup> It is ironic that both the Parivar and Christians accuse each other’s practice of conversion of being politically motivated and lacking in spiritual dimensions, while both are clearly religious movements and their arguments are based on their own understanding of religious conversion.

---

<sup>103</sup> Rakesh Sinha, “Nationalism Redefined”, *Indian Express*, 30 Dec 1998.