



By DALE LUIS MENEZES

Deliver us from Nationalism?

There is, I think, a delicious irony in the pastoral letter written by Thomas Macwan, Archbishop of Gandhinagar. Writing at the time when the Gujarat legislative assembly elections are around the corner, Archbishop Macwan in his pastoral letter of 21 November 2017 said, “Nationalist forces are on the verge of taking over the country”. Unmindful of the spirit in which the letter was written or the realities that affect the various communities in India due to violent politics, one witnessed the usual hue and cry in the media. Many commentators even questioned the right of the Archbishop to express his views.

At this point, one might ask who these ‘nationalist forces’ are. Aren’t those who consider themselves Indians ‘nationalists’, one way or the other? Are we to conclude, then, that India needs to be saved from its own people? Especially when a distinction is often made between right-wing and secular nationalists, what could the rather ironic remark by Archbishop Macwan indicate? The statement was made in the context of political power and the way it influences the people in contemporary times. Particularly, the statement hints at the use of nationalism to spread hate and trample upon the rights of people. In this sense one can argue that Archbishop Macwan was referring to those forces that use nationalism to create disorder in society.

Speaking of the increasing attacks on minoritized religious groups as well as the human rights violations against other marginalized groups, Archbishop Macwan’s statement reveals that all is not well within the nation. He observes, “We are aware that the secular fabric of our country is at stake. Human rights are being violated. The constitutional rights are being trampled. Not a single day goes without an attack on our churches, church personnel, faithful or institutions. There is a growing sense of insecurity among the minorities, OBCs, BCs, poor etc”.

Archbishop Macwan’s reference to ‘nationalist forces’ sans distinction perhaps hints at some fundamental aspects of Indian nationalism and the manner in which the Indian identity was crafted, chiefly through the freedom struggle. As I have written in the past in this very column, Indian nationalism and identity is based on Hindu majoritarian ideals and works

towards maintaining the power and privileges of savarna castes, mostly across religions. By not making a distinction between the secular and right-wing nationalists, or remaining non-committal on that distinction, Archbishop Macwan cut through the politicking hullabaloo and simply pointed out that violence and marginalization is routine for many in India.

But one can also think of the Archbishop's caution against excessive nationalism as emerging from a nationalist understanding of India's past and culture. In other words, reproducing the very problems that the letter tries to tackle. The idea that India was a well knit secular society is an old Nehruvian one. What this idea does not take into consideration is the presence of the caste structure in Indian society and the manner in which it obstructs the formation of an egalitarian, let alone secular, society.

The banal violence and marginalization stands starkly against the supposed ideological lines drawn between secular and right-wing nationalisms in India. The recognition of the banality of violence and marginalization in present times should also make us realize that there is a long history to marginalization, including the time when secular, liberal nationalism held sway in India. There cannot be a secular society if millions within that society are subjected to discrimination and violence. As such, Archbishop Macwan's plea to safeguard the "secular fabric" of the country need to be understood as requiring the creation of a secular society in the first place.

The letter also confronts all those who consider themselves as proud nationalists. Rather than play the usual blame game where one type of nationalists (such as the secular liberal ones) blame the other (right-wing) for all the ills in present times, Archbishop Macwan's letter demands introspection from all those who claim themselves to be nationalists. It demands that they scrutinize the source of their nationalism, identity, and pride.

The ironic remark in the Archbishop Macwan's letter should also be an occasion for us to realize that if there is a growing insecurity amongst the 'minority' communities that prompts such statements, it is not necessarily because such minority communities are inward-looking and that they cannot look beyond their own selfish gains. It is rather prompted by a very real experience of facing daily marginalization or minoritization and observing how other

communities too are subjected to similar discrimination. We in Goa have observed how legitimate issues raised in a church-run magazine were brushed aside by the whole political establishment. The discussion of the Archbishop's pastoral letters seems to follow a similar script; the storm that is whipped up about the letter diverts us from the pressing problems.

At the end of the day, the issue is not whether nationalism works or not; it is rather the gap between the ideals of nationalism (no matter what shade) and the reality that it ends up hiding. The real challenge that confronts us is to bring the discussion back to the problems faced by the multitude of minoritized and poor communities in India. In this task one might profit much in heeding to the call for safeguarding the constitutional values.

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