By DALE LUIS MENEZES

# Pastoral Letters and Indianness

Over the last couple of years, pastoral letters written by various bishops in India have led to national furore over their contents. While the writing of pastoral letters is routine, these letters found themselves in the eye of the storm largely because they were written around the time of elections and referenced the problematic political conditions affecting minoritized caste and religious groups. The most recent of such pastoral letters to have received the attention and ire of Indian media is written by Anil Couto, the Archbishop of Delhi. But if one considers all the recent statements together, a particular pattern emerges – one that concerns the health of the Indian polity. Let us proceed chronologically.

In 2015, the Bharatiya Bhasha Suraksha Manch (BBSM) led a campaign that demanded that English as a medium of instruction (MoI) in primary schools to be not funded by the Goa government. Despite a widespread demand from *all* sections of Goan society for English, the BBSM and other such right-wing organizations blamed Catholics and the Church for going against the interest of Indian culture. As is usual, these organizations attempted to pit 'Hindu sentiment' against the Christian communities in Goa. In response to the false accusations, the Archbishop of Goa and Daman, Felipe Neri Ferrao at the annual Christmas civic reception pointed out that in terms of education, and in other matters like religious tolerance and Goa's environmental destruction the role of the Church was viewed with suspicion.

What followed the speech at the civic reception were wild accusations about the Church not being Indian enough – or being directly responsible for Goan Christians being disloyal to Goan ethos and Indian culture. An editor of a prominent Marathi daily – who recently coined the bizarre and Islamophobic term "Kristi Jihad" – even went to the extent of finding proof of the Archbishop's/Church's un-Indianness in the fact that the gathering was addressed in English!

Towards the end of 2017 and with the Gujarat State legislative assembly elections round the corner, Thomas Macwan, the Archbishop of Gandhinagar found his pastoral latter being splashed across TV news channels, and loud, uncouth debates conducted over its contents. The letter cautioned that the growing influence of nationalism was threatening the core constitutional values of India. The relevant portion of the letter needs to be quoted for a

better understanding of what Archbishop Macwan was concerned about: “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 letter was directed to re-claim what he understood to be an Indianness – secular in character – that is disintegrating due to ugly power struggles. Even if India may not have a great track record of upholding secularism and protecting marginalized groups in the past, letters such as those of Archbishop Macwan repose faith in the founding principles of the Indian constitution. The manner in which this is done is by swearing allegiance to a certain idea of nationhood – or Indianness – for securing rights and citizenship. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is a gap, an ever widening gap, between the noble principles enshrined in the Indian constitution and contemporary Indian nationalism (irrespective of political leanings); there is no equality as such and there are no equal partners in this nationhood.

Which is why we are in a situation wherein only few groups can legitimately speak for the ‘nation’ – and ‘minorities’, or the minoritized are not a part of this group. This was very clear through the furore that followed Archbishop Couto’s letter; most had no idea what was so objectionable in the letter. In many ways, one could consider Archbishop Couto’s letter (along with Archbishop Ferrao’s recent letter) as similarly directing our attention to hold fast onto the founding constitutional principles. While we welcome the calls for following the constitutional principles, one has to be careful while understanding the repeated references to the “secular fabric” of India. One cannot assume that there *was* secularism which is *now* under threat; the numerous instances of planned sectarian violence over the course of the last half century against marginalized groups are a case in point. Secularism, if one goes by its fraught history in India, is not something that seamlessly exists with the current idea of Indian nationhood, but a promise that needs to be realized.

And it is precisely in times of elections – or impending elections – that one feels the threat to the constitutional principles. In this sense, many of the bishops in India who have expressed concerns about the political future of the people owing to an election cannot be faulted. However, if one thinks that it is *only* in times of elections that one can stop the rapid rot of

the Indian political system then one is sadly mistaken. Elections come and go and short-term politicking does little to improve the lot of the poor and marginalized.

In times of deep political crisis, one feels the need for moral leadership. In this sense, the Church in India is quite suited considering its systematic and long-term charity work and the ideas of compassion it brings to public life. Therefore, it is legitimate for the Church to be concerned and act in the here and now, without compromising its core values. But it has to recognize that marginalization of various groups is a deeper problem, beyond the scope of nationalism and elections.

(First published in *O Heraldo*, dt: 6 June, 2018)

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