

**Indian Theological Association (ITA)
Statement 2016
TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN
MINORITY IN INDIAN SCENARIO TODAY**

1. We, the members of the Indian Theological Association (ITA), gathered at Montfort Spirituality Centre, Bengaluru for the 39th Annual Meeting cum Seminar during 27-30 April 2016, reflected on the theme, "Toward a Theology of Christian Minority in the Indian Scenario Today" and articulated our theological response to the precarious situation of the religious minorities in general and the Christian minority in particular. It is a fact that minorities in any situation can feel threatened and insecure because they feel powerless before the might of the majority. But in the present Indian situation the vulnerability of the religious minorities has worsened because of the policies and programmes as well as the covert and overt actions of the present BJP government which is guided by the Hindutva ideology of the RSS and its affiliates for whom Muslims and Christians are a threat to their establishment of the Hindu cultural nationalism.

2. According to the Constitution of India the minorities are categorized in terms of language, religion and culture. In a wider perspective minorities may include various groupings: religiously, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists; sociologically, oppressed groups and influential groups within the minorities and economically, the poor and deprived sections of society. Literally speaking the term minorities refers to all those people in society who have been marginalized because of their ethnic, religious, social or economic situations. Minorities can also be understood as victims and also the few who are the subjects of transformation and community builders.

3. When the Christians had voluntarily given up an offer to have separate political constituencies in the Constituent Assembly of India,

the framers of the Indian Constitution in their wisdom recognized the vulnerability of the minority religious groups in the midst of a large majority of the Hindus. So they are guaranteed by the Constitution the right to preserve and promote their cultural and religious identity (Articles 29 and 30). It was not a privilege given to them but a right and a duty to promote the cultural and religious diversity that make India a great nation.

The Context of Our Theological Reflection

4. Over the years there have been attempts to destroy the communal harmony and religious tolerance in India by religious fundamentalist groups. In the pre-Independence era there had been many communal clashes in India. The partition of India itself was based on the fear of the security and possibility of prosperity of the Muslim minority in the midst of a large majority of the Hindus. The communal violence that followed the partition of India sacrificed thousands of people belonging to Muslim and Hindu religious communities. In the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, 2800 members of the Sikh religious community were murdered. In the present Indian scenario the two religious minority groups that have become the target of Hindu right-wing groups are Muslims and Christians. There has been a series of atrocities against them, especially in the last twenty years. The Godhra communal violence of 2002 in Gujarat took the lives of 790 Muslims according to official report while other sources estimate it to be about 2500. The toll of Hindus in the violence was 254. The Godhra massacre of a large number of Muslims was the beginning of a new wave of communal clashes and polarisation of the citizens of the country in terms of their religious affiliation.

5. According to the report of the Human Rights Watch, incidents of anti-Christian violence rose in India following the victory of the Hindu Nationalist Party BJP in March 1998. The acts of violence include arson of churches, re-conversion of Christians to Hinduism by force and threats of physical violence, distribution of threatening literature, burning of Bibles, rape of women including religious sisters, murder of Christian pastors, vandalising Christian educational institutions and desecration of cemeteries. From 1964 to 1996 at least 38 incidents of violence against Christians were reported whereas in 1998 alone, 90 incidents of violence were reported. Graham Staines and his two sons were burnt alive by Hindu fundamentalists in 1999, while they were sleeping in a wagon in Odisha. In June 2000 four churches were bombed; in September 2008

about 20 churches were vandalised in Karnataka. In August 2008 anti-Christian violence that erupted in Kandhamal following the murder of Swami Lakshmanananda, leader of the anti-conversion movement by the Maoists. About 100 people lost their lives, thousands injured, 300 churches and 6,000 homes destroyed, and 50000 people displaced. While the government machinery failed to protect the lives of the citizens, the Sangh affiliates went on a rampage, chanting praises to the Hindu gods! A nation that prided in religious harmony and peace showed its ugly face of bigotry, religious fanaticism and intolerance to the entire world. Since Kandhamal, sporadic incidents of violence against Christians have continued as they are seen as a soft target.

6. An analysis of the situation of anti-Christian violence would show that those using the slogans branding Christians as "agents of conversion," "agents of foreign powers," "outsiders," "members of a foreign religion," "beef-eaters," etc. are not real votaries of genuine *Sanatana Dharma* but tools in the hands of those who manipulate Hindu religious sentiments in order to achieve political and economic power and to enslave the poor and marginalized as well as to discriminate the minorities and dehumanize the Dalits. .

7. The pattern of violence against the minorities by the Sangh brigades and their affiliates shows that they unleash violence to consolidate their power and expand their base. They use two techniques to establish themselves. Before the election they instigate violence either in the name of conversion or in the name of cultural/moral policing and terrorize the secular and minority groups and galvanize the "Hindu" votes. Once their party is in power the Sangh brigades take law into their hands and let loose violence against secular groups and minority communities to send the message that the latter have to comply with whatever the former dictate.

8. Those who unleash violence against Christians and Muslims are interested in establishing a cultural nationalism which would reinforce caste-system of institutionalized inequality. The Christian commitment to the education and conscientization of the Dalits, tribals and other marginalized in the Indian society is a constant threat to the nefarious plans of the champions of Hindu cultural nationalism. Some of those who are discriminated and treated as untouchables in the Hindu society in spite of laws against such discrimination and dehumanization seek to free themselves from the shackles of oppression through conversion to minority religions.

Unleashing violence against the minorities on the one hand and *ghar wapsi* (return home or re-conversion) project of the Hindu fundamentalist groups on the other are intended to stop the marginalized groups from asserting their inalienable right to live as dignified humans guaranteed by the Constitution.

9. The main challenges the secular groups, Christians, and other minorities – in fact, the Nation itself – face from the Hindu nationalists are the following: hate campaign against the minorities, efforts at creating enmity between majority and minority groups in view of vote banks, falsification of the history of India, saffronization of education, judiciary and politics, labelling the minorities as anti national, attempts to tamper with the secular character of the Constitution, co-opting of tribals and Dalits into the Hindutva stream, and projecting the idea of the Hindu Rashtra.

10. One of the factors that disturb the Hindutva organizations is that though Christians form only 2.3 per cent of the population according to the 2011 census, their institutions occupy the public space quite disproportionate to their number and so exert an uneven influence on society. The Sangh and its allies identify the institutions of minority religions as symbols of their power. Another factor that upsets them is the commitment of the Christians to the cause of Dalits and the marginalized. The educational services of Christians empower Dalits and tribals who in turn resist their subjugation by the so called high castes of Hindu society. The Sangh is afraid that they might lose the vote bank of Dalits, if they convert to minority religions. Christians are also blamed for the influx of Western culture – language, dress code, food-habits, etc. – into the country. Many do not see that several policies and practices of the nationalist BJP government are actually promoting western culture. In reality, the inflow of the MNCs has brought in more of western consumer values than Christianity might have done. While the Hindutva outfits condemn, on religious grounds, the poor for eating beef, the Indian state is the third largest exporter of beef in the world. This is a blatant contradiction.

11. The Hindutva organizations are, from a psychological analysis, reactionary movements. Their psyche seems to have been hurt by the indiscriminate condemnation of doctrines and practices of Hinduism by Christian missionaries and organisations in the past, which continues today in the practice of some Christian sects. Even though the missionaries had gone overboard in blaming some Hindu tenets

and practices, it has to be admitted that many such practices had been dehumanizing and life-negating, particularly for women and Dalits.

12. In the present multicultural and multi-religious scenario, we need to uphold the minority rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India in order to safeguard our religious identity. The minority rights are needed in order to ensure peace, freedom, equality and justice in a pluralistic society. If the founding fathers and mothers of the Indian Constitution had not thought of minority rights, our schools and institutions, which have served the community and the country at large, would have been seen as an unnecessary tumour to be cut off. These rights are to be sought not merely in the religious sphere but also in the cultural and social spheres. Having said this, we need also to fight for the right to reservation for Christians and Muslims of scheduled caste origin. We need also to retrospectively examine whether we have misused the minority rights in not promoting effectively the marginalized Christians in our institutions.

13. However we should not look at the minority rights as an excuse to live with a ghetto mentality. The minority rights are envisaged by the Constitution so that the richness of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social groups is maintained for the wellbeing of the whole nation. Hence in the exercise of their rights the minorities must take care to reach out to the other communities as well. Christians need also to join with other minority communities in their fight for economic and social justice. It is good to remember that our identity and existence are inseparably linked to the reality of the majority community. Hence our exercise of minority rights should not be detrimental to the interest of the nation but must be in line with the common good.

14. The present Church response towards the Hindutva forces can be described as mixed. Some Christians and Christian communities live with a feeling of fear, helplessness and anxiety about the future. It prevents them to be pro-active and get involved in common social and political issues. Since Christians in general lack in social analysis, they are not aware of the hidden political agenda of the Sangh affiliates. Some because they are too naive or for ulterior motives show a readiness to be a part of the Sangh agenda. For instance, in Goa and Kerala, where Christians form a sizable section of the population, some Christians have allied with the BJP in the name of maintaining peace and political stability.

15. The positive side of the story is that, in spite of opposition and persecution from some quarters, the Church has continued with her

mission of service to the nation in various fields such as education, health care, socio-economic development and also empowerment of weaker sections. In addition, the Church agencies have been prompt in extending immediate relief and providing long-term rehabilitation to the affected during natural calamities like floods, droughts and earthquakes. In its humanitarian services, the church does not discriminate on the basis of caste, creed or race.

16. We have to assert our identity as Indian Christians but always in dialogue with other religions. The present challenges may also be seen as an invitation for introspection. Our lifestyle, theologies and worship may be brought closer to our Indian culture and ethos.

Biblical and Theological Reflections

17. From the beginning of its history, Israel understood itself as a minority. Abraham called himself 'a stranger and a sojourner' (Gen 23:4). The people of Israel were sojourners in Egypt. The word 'Hebrews' in fact meant that (Ex 21:2; Gen 39:14-17). God chose them as his own not because they were 'more in number than any other people.' In fact they were 'the fewest of all the people' (Deut 7:6-8). In relation to the nations of that time (cf. Deut 7:1), they were a tiny minority, struggling for its existence. Hearing their cry God made an option in their favour and liberated them. Thus God showed himself as a compassionate, loving and liberating God.

18. From the status of a tiny minority, they grew up into a triumphant and powerful minority, large in number (from 70 to 600,000 cf. Ex 12:37), so that Pharaoh and Egypt were afraid of them (cf. Ex 1:7, 9-10). Later, after the exodus, Moab was in great dread of them (cf. Num 22:3) and nations melt before them (cf. Josh 2:9-11). The identity of Israel as a minority is seen in its relation to God who empowered it and to other nations. God they had to obey and his covenant they must keep (cf. Ex 19:5-6). Their living as a holy People of God gave them a special status. So they had to be contrast community, having nothing to do with the nations among whom they lived (cf. Deut 7:5; Is 56:3; Ezra 9:1; Neh 9:2; 13:3). Israel as a minority most often had a hostile relationship with other nations.

19. As the children of Israel were sojourners in Egypt and Lord their God liberated them, they were to do justice to the triadic group of minorities, the fatherless, the widow and the sojourners (cf. Deut 10:18; 24:17; 27:19; Ex 22:21-24; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5). Of these three groups, the sojourners were singled out and they could even take part in the Passover (cf. Ex 12:48). God wanted Israel to be a

qualitatively different but vibrant minority. When the triumphant minority failed from this duty, they were reduced to be slaves in exile (cf. Jer 7:5-6; 22:3; 21:12; Amos 5:7; Is 1: 17, 21). Thus God proved himself to be a just and righteous God.

20. During and after the exile, when the hope of fulfilment of God's promises seemed lost, the prophets gave them the message of hope that God would do it through the remnant, those leading a righteous life in the eyes of God. This paved the way for the concept of the 'poor of Yahweh' (Is 49:13; Ps 18:27; 149:4; 1Mac 1:52f). They kept alive the messianic hope (cf. Ezek 34: 11-20).

21. Jesus the 'marginal Jew' gathered around himself, the Remnant, God's people, and preached God's reign, which is insignificant in the beginning but will grow and expand so as to embrace all the people (mustard seed, yeast – cf. Mt 13:33; Lk 13:21). So Jesus rightly called his disciples the 'little flock' (Lk 12:32). Among them, there was a small group of women, a minority within the minority, who challenged their culturally sanctioned traditional roles and travelled from Galilee supporting the mission of Jesus (cf. Lk 8:1-3). They stood firm, witnessing to the crucifixion (cf. Mt 27: 55-56; Mk 15:40-41; Lk 23:49; Jn 18:15-18, 25-27; 19:25-27). They were the first witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. Among them, Mary of Magdala is called 'the apostle to the apostles' (Hugh of Cluny, Abelard, Bernard of Clairvaux). Later, in the early church, it was women who opened their houses for the gathering of the believers (house churches) and played leading roles in the budding churches (cf. Acts 12:12, 16:15; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15).

22. Jesus' way of ministry was different, preferential, radical and shocking, as is evident from the Nazareth manifesto (cf. Lk 4:16-19) and further expressed in many parables (e.g., lost coin, lost son and lost sheep of Lk 15, the Good Samaritan of Lk 10). He challenged the oppressive minority and its structures such as hierarchy and patriarchy and held a different view of equality, justice, peace and harmony of the reign of God. Jesus never failed to celebrate life. He included the outcast, tax collectors and sinners, in the table fellowship. He is the giver of life, life in all its fullness: physical, psychological, moral and spiritual (Jn 4: 8).

23. Jesus' incarnational attitude is made manifest in his relationship with the minority of his time. It is marked with compassion and empathy that lead to actions: multiplication of bread (cf. Mk 6:30-44, Mk 8:1-10), raising of the dead young man at Nain (cf. Lk 7:11-17).

His option leads him to the point of being killed. His resurrection from the dead is the Father's affirmation of his option and mission.

24. The minority group of the early believers took up the mission of Jesus and bore witness to him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8). They grew geographically (cf. Acts 1:8) and numerically (cf. Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7). Like Jesus, they too faced threats and persecutions from the Jewish authorities (cf. Acts 4:1-7, 17-18; 5:17-40; 7:54-8:1, 14). The Acts and Pauline letters point to many crises the early church faced from within such as circumcision of gentile Christians, table fellowship with the gentiles, economic divide, and role of women in the worshiping community. The leadership of the early church handled them skilfully with the help of the Spirit, according priority to the mission.

25. Later with Paul, Christianity expanded itself to the world of Hellenistic Gentiles and reached 'all the nations' (cf. Acts 28:30-31), thus accomplishing the mission mandate of Jesus (cf. Mk 16:15; Mt 28:19; Lk 24:47). However, the church still remains 'a faithful remnant' (cf. Rom 11:5; also Is 6: 10-13; 4:3; 6:3; Mic 4:7). Even while going through persecution and suffering, it has continued to proclaim the values of justice, love, equality and communion.

26. Suffering is an integral aspect of Christian identity. Proclaiming prophetically the good news of Christ and bringing mercy to the marginalized inevitably bring opposition. The Church experienced persecution whenever she stood for the cause of justice in the world. The Church cannot withdraw herself from announcing the gospel because the creation of a new society that assures justice to all is a priority of the mission. She cannot but be the voice of the voiceless. The minority status can never be a stumbling block to the Church on the path of mission with and for the marginalized.

27. Jesus said: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Lk 12, 32). Again the Lord says, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt 5, 11). To speak against unjust structures and be ready for a share in the paschal death of Christ with the hope of sharing in his resurrection is a part of discipleship. The Church trusts in the guidance of the Spirit, for ultimately the Spirit is the primary agent of evangelisation. The minority status of the Christian community is to be recognized as a

powerful sign of being a little flock, a lamp kept on a lampstand and a leaven. The Church's self-identity is in her being-for-others, including the forces that oppose her and attempt to destroy her.

A Christian Response to Hindutva

28. As Christians, we may not respond to the challenges posed by the Hindu fanatics in a communalistic manner. We need to be apostles of peace and reconciliation who, in this way, contribute to the healing of society and building up of a healthier nation. The gospel abolishes distinctions (Mk 2, 15-17), social and communal barriers (Mt 15, 21-28), reconciles conflicting groups, commits people to the poor and to their needs (Lk 7, 18-23).

29. The Sangh Parivar forces threaten the very foundation of our nation, dismantling the values of democracy, secularism and individual freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. We need to network with secular and other like-minded groups to defeat the agents of Hindutva who aggressively try to impose cultural nationalism and fascism on our nation. An inter-textual reading of the sacred scriptures of the different religions in India along with the Indian Constitution is an urgent need today in order to galvanize their secular potentials to fight against the growing fundamentalism and to strengthen the democratic fabric of the nation.

30. We need to increasingly use the mass media to expose the anti-minority activities of the Hindutva brigade before the international community and enlist the support of international leadership, human rights organisations, etc.

31. We need to critically look at the triumphalistic attitude that often influences decisions in our institutions, parishes and dioceses. We have no hesitation to spend crores of rupees for constructing huge churches, when millions of people remain poor in our country. But we are very slow when it comes to spending money for the empowerment of the downtrodden. As followers of Jesus, who had no place to lay his head, we need to promote a spirituality of simplicity. It is not the edifice that makes the Church but the community of believers which, at its beginning, held everything in common and was one in mind and heart, sharing meals together with joy and simplicity of heart (Acts. 2, 44-46).

32. We also have to address fundamentalist tendencies within our own communities. We need to educate our people to respect other faiths and faith communities. Preachers in the charismatic movements must refrain from belittling other religions. Parish feasts

and other Christian celebrations must also become occasions for public affirmation of friendship with members of other faith communities. Instead of remaining a peripheral activity, interreligious meetings must become a flowering of the dialogue of daily life in a particular locality. The good practice of sharing meals with members of other communities during festivals may be promoted further. Our educational institutions need to form interreligious and intercultural cells and train students to live with and appreciate the differences. These cells may organize activities which remove prejudices and promote better understanding and appreciation of different faiths and cultures. Christian theologians have a responsibility to promote interreligious and intercultural living through their writings in journals, news papers and social media.

33. Though the Church is a minority in India, she has a universal mission of serving and proclaiming the saving plan of God for humanity. She has to be part and parcel of the larger community in which she is planted. She must consider the local customs and practices, if not inherently sinful, as common patrimony in which she shares. There is a need to incorporate the history, culture, and architecture of each place in the way we express our Christian faith. The Church needs to die to its colonial vestiges so that the authentic Christian faith may rise again from the Indian cultural soil, while remembering that the gospel cannot compromise with what is incompatible with it in the given culture. We need to be more Indian in worship, liturgical vestments, religious habits, architecture, etc. When she confronts value-systems that contradict Jesus' vision, the Church has to heal and perfect them for the good of the nation.

34. The parish has to be a source of life not only for the baptized but also for all who live in its territory. As Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the parish has to be a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their pilgrimage toward God. The parishioners are to be made aware that it is the task of every member of the community to communicate God's love to all who live in the neighbourhood. At least a few of the activities of the parish must be open to people of other faiths also, thus expanding the scope of the parish as a communion of communities.

35. Interreligious dialogue has an important role in freeing the believers from the clutches of extremist standpoints and enabling them to build bridges between diverse religious communities. Every

religious community must come out of its exclusivist mindset and welcome others with greater openness. Faith convictions should be distinguished from moral values, even though they are interrelated. It is, therefore, possible for people of different faith traditions to arrive at a consensus with regard to moral imperatives for personal and social conduct. Dialogue of life and dialogue of liberative praxis can bring people together to stand in solidarity with the oppressed in their struggles and jointly contribute to making of a more equitable nation.

Conclusion

36. The Spirit of God calls the Church to conversion from a self-righteous and self-sufficient attitude to seeing herself as a little flock and a leaven in society. As such the Church can easily be at home with Indic culture of harmony of religions, cultures and ideologies. Pope Francis reminds us that the great religious traditions of the world “play a fruitful role as a leaven of society and a life-giving force for democracy” (Rio de Janeiro, 27 July 2013). The Church needs to challenge prophetically all forms discrimination and exclusion of minorities, Dalits and all other disadvantaged sections of society and stand with those who struggle for their legitimate right to live with dignity. In the context of attacks on minorities and false propaganda against them by the Hindutva forces, it is not enough that the Church reacts to the situation. She must also be pro-active in preserving her religious identity in relation to the Indian culture and ethos.

37. In light of the Christian-experience of God as an all-embracing Father who cares even for the birds of the air and lilies of the field (cf. Mt 6:26, 28) revealed through his Son Jesus Christ and his Spirit, any form of division, discrimination or marginalization in social order goes against God’s design of communion among humans and with God. The God who sides with the victims of exclusion and discrimination reveals that all humans are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Therefore, even the appellation *minority* needs to be understood only as a reminder that everyone must be treated with dignity and everyone’s inalienable rights must be recognized and protected. It is a Christian faith conviction that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ” (Gal 3:28). Therefore, it is an imperative for Christians to work tirelessly for “*sarvodya*”, the welfare of all.