

People's Voices

THE ATTACKS AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Etienne Rassendren

In the last few weeks, we have witnessed in sheer anguish and astonishment some of the worst attacks on what we have usually considered “a given” in our contemporary Indian society, namely our plural democratic culture. *We have also heard with utter shock the unthinking or malicious justification of the violence.* The spectator and sometimes colluding state has raised the bogey of forced or induced conversion, as if Christian evangelisation simply means beefing up the community's numbers. The statistics however show that there is actually an overall drop in the number of Christians in recent times. Besides, all the humanitarian services and the economic growth facilitated by the community have been rejected as insidious inducements. The civil society endeavours that have provided some much needed social justice to the marginalised and the disempowered have been discredited as anti-national. *What is most disheartening is the grave sense of alienation that is growing among minority communities, particularly Christians who see no credible reason for the attacks they have endured.*

How then do we respond to these disturbing attacks on our secular polity? How do others and specially the members of the majority community understand this sheer travesty of democracy? Instead of using a professional language, this article expresses people's voices against these grievous attacks on their everyday cultural, religious and above all, human interactions and friendships in times of both celebrations and sufferings. It speaks of the quiet, easy-going, ordinary and continuous cross-over between communities. This piece therefore presents some general ideas drawn from various conversations and two more detailed and specific responses.

Etienne Rassendren teaches English at St Joseph's College, Bangalore. He has a Ph.D. in *South African Poetry* and his interests include *Culture Studies*, *Race Relations* and *Nationalism Issues*.

Conversing about the Multi-Cultural Everyday

I recently spoke of the attacks with a wide variety of people, from intellectuals and middle-class professionals to housemaids and rickshaw drivers. While there is widespread condemnation, people are mainly filled with fear, disappointment and even anger. *They mourn the loss of harmony and the development of distrust between people and communities.*

Most people believe that there has been no provocation for the attacks. They feel the conversion issue is merely a bogey. There are no deep prejudices and contentions that give fundamentalists and right-wing forces the ‘fodder’ for the creation of reprisals. Even the death of the Swamiji in Kandhamal had other claimants than Christians. A housewife said: “Why are Christians ‘being targeted’? They have not done anything wrong! How long should we tolerate this injustice on minorities?” Some now fear to visit their friends who belong to different religions. *Their normal relationships have been unduly threatened.* Ordinary people do not buy the arguments of fundamentalists. They condemn them for causing hatred. They see their actions as an injustice contradicting democratic freedom and good faith and harming cross-cultural mobility. *They consider them an attack on the social fabric.* People guess that the attacks have other goals and motives than what is claimed. They are aimed at communalisation for certain specific gains.

From such responses, it is clear that **people perceive the violence as planned and promoted by a small but powerful agency** that seeks to divide for their political, economic and cultural advantages. They use this method to support their constituency by developing suspicion and hate, in much the same way as they did in Godhra in 2002. Theirs is a social experiment to ‘divide and rule’. Our diverse culture is thus hurt, as an intellectual observes, by the regressive use of ‘identity politics’.

Other comments deal with what the Christian community and its institutions stand for. Many people see the Christian community as being involved in the culture of “charity”. Its churches, training centers, social work organisations, hospitals and educational institutions are “rendering service”. One person said that he had himself benefited. A driver remarked that “this violence was a direct de-recognition of

the history of Christian service". He deplored that "even little children" were not spared, obviously referring to an incident in which a child was hurt in an attack on a wedding party in Mangalore. From the above, it is obvious that **the Christian community is generally recognised for its compassion and goodwill, its attitude of service to all, especially the needy, and its peace-loving nature.** This image is very different from the accusations made by its violent adversaries!

Some other reflections concern the celebration of ordinariness. For most people, it seems absurd to claim that the Christian community ridicules other religiosities. Many people who have studied in Christian institutions remember the values these stand for. *The institutions possess a strong multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural orientation.* Some said they had eaten their first Onam meal at a Christian home, thereby suggesting the multi-cultural nature of the Christian community. People seem to wait eagerly for Christian festivals. In their own neighbourhoods, Christians also go to Muslim and Hindu homes to share in their festivals, marriages and childbirths. They live peacefully and in harmony with others. Women in particular explained how often they help one another, and share sufferings and joys with their neighbours.

It is therefore evident that **the everyday life remains unaffected by the ideological underpinnings of identity politics.** *There is no barrier to communication in the ordinariness of common life.* Hence, the recent attacks and their attendant discourses appear planned to promote social divisiveness by creating a psychological insecurity. They try to make foreigners out of Christians in spite of the deep communitarian spirit of the everyday.

Breaking the Everyday Traditions

Let me now share the detailed responses to violence of Padma Baliga and Chethan Kumar. I will present them here in full and comment on them by way of conclusion. Padma Baliga has resided in Mangalore for many years. She is a Hindu, committed to her faith and associated since long with Christian institutions and a multi-cultural neighbourhood. She has been a school teacher, a corporate trainer and is now professor at St. Joseph's College, Bangalore. Chethan Kumar has recently completed his BA and works as a journalist in

one of the local newspapers. Though brought up as a Hindu, he is agnostic.

"I have felt the shadow", writes Padma Baliga.

"I have felt the shadow, have felt it everyday. Some days, it was a fleeting presence, a smudge on the horizon, the merest suggestion of something sinister which disappeared before one even realised that the day's brightness had been marred. Some days, it was dark and foreboding, enveloping one from all sides; but it went away pretty soon and the brightness always came back. **Until September 14th.** *I knew that the shadow of the beast was upon us, maybe even gaining on us, when I heard about the attacks on prayer halls.* This was happening in Mangalore, not Kandhamal, Ranchi or Indonesia. To a busy urbanite juggling career and family, most places on the map are just that – a dot or a name, almost falling off the map as it were. But this was happening in Mangalore, I told myself again.

Mangalore was just about the most secular place I knew. I studied there in a convent school and wasn't really aware to what caste group I belonged, till I was in my teens. Mangalore was where I went to the temple every Saturday with my family, and to the chapel every other day with my school friends. Not because the school authorities insisted on it, for they didn't, but because the calm, stillness and sanctity appealed to me. Although it is home to a large part of the Konkani Brahmin community to which I belong, Mangalore is also the place where I grew up with friends who were Catholic and Muslim rather than Brahmin and Konkani. It is where we visited Catholic friends for Christmas and the Nativity of Mary for a celebratory meal, and they came home for Ganesh Pooja and Diwali and ate the *prasad* with relish. *It was unthinkable to me that a quiet sane town was being torn apart by sectarian strife. I felt like taking a flight to Mangalore and joining the protesters there.*

I didn't. Nor did I join the protests here. That is because it is my sincere belief that **these attacks have nothing to do with religion but are the product of a devious mind** that does not hesitate to create discord and friction in its attempt to grasp power and pelf. I believe that *left to ourselves, we are perfectly content to live as good neighbours*, but are unfortunately being persuaded into seeing each other not as human beings but as members of a caste, group or

social hierarchy. I believe we need to use a language that is inclusive rather than exclusive. *I believe in Gandhi who believed in Jesus Christ who exhorted his followers to turn the other cheek.*"

"Unconstitutional and unethical", says Chethan Kumar.

"The Constitution of India guarantees every citizen the *liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship* as well as equality and justice.' Therefore, I strongly believe that **the attack on the Christian community is unconstitutional and unethical.**

I believe that, as a responsible citizen, *it is my duty to voice my opinion against such acts that violate the democracy of India.* Though the Hindu Jagarana Vedike, Shiv Sena and others have the basic right to function, their goals and objectives have to comply with the Constitution. Association with a particular religion does not automatically provide one with the license to take up arms against another religion; in fact, this is an insult to the culture and the law of the land.

I am not a religious person and I am a Hindu by birth, I have no leaning whatsoever towards Christianity or Islam. I am thus unbiased. If conversions do take place, it has to be proved whether they are forced. But having said that, *I still condemn the way some organisations reacted. It is not fair to hold an entire community responsible for the actions of an overzealous individual. Whatever has happened is a reaction based on unhealthy emotional prejudices.* I therefore call upon people not to react baselessly."

Restoring the Everyday

By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect on the plural nature of our democratic culture and draw some implications.

First, the recent attacks have their origins in a violent ideology of social domination. They negate the fundamental rights of people and, through divisive politics, violate the central principle of democracy. *The self-given "license to take up arms" against a community subjugates the plurality of the everyday.* It is an act of injustice that denies the rule of law in democracy.

Second, divisive cultural politics breeds fear and imposes the idea of a mono-cultural India. The shadow of sectarianism has

certainly been in the making for long. It has made the "quiet" multi-cultural town of Mangalore lose its humanism. Alienation seems to prevail, even in the hesitation to join a protest. *To be truly religious is to be inter-religious and secular. To have a truly Indian selfhood means to have more than one cultural identity.*

More than anything else however, what has been lost is the celebratory nature of Indian pluralism – the philosophy of the everyday that includes sharing celebratory events between different communities. It is this syncreticism (which transcends the binaries and is capable of occupying a secular space, beyond caste and creed, class and 'nationality') that has been broken and destroyed. Through cultural nationalism, a new hegemony is emerging that imposes consent through direct domination, violence, hate and fear, so that the benefits of power may accrue to the ruling Hindutva elite.

While we analyse the powerful ideological force of cultural nationalism, we must also count the human costs that the victims endure. *What needs then to be restored is the grave loss of faith in the state, country and its people. This demands building confidence among people and restoring in every possible way the philosophy of the everyday.*