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## TOGETHER FOR OUR PLANET



# CLIMATE CRISIS

The COP26 (Conference of Parties), the UN Climate Conference, is a worldwide wake up call to save the earth from the pile of filth. Pope Francis has urged global leaders to take radical decisions that would provide effective responses to the current ecological crisis

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## HUG THE NATURE



Frightening reports are coming out on the possible catastrophe caused by the rising sea level. One of the recent studies by a global non-profit research group says that as many as 50 coastal cities across the world are facing the danger of being swallowed by sea in the next few decades. Among the Indian cities that could go below the tidal level are eight places -- including Mumbai in the West and Kolkata in the East. In the background of such alarming reports, COP26 (Conference of Parties), the biggest global meeting on climate change, is a platform that could retrieve the world from the impending danger.

The recent COP held in Glasgow in the United Kingdom was one such occasion when countries could arrive at some consensus on meeting the threat staring at the world. However, it could not happen because of the wide gap between the views of the developed and developing countries. It is an undisputable fact that the present climate crisis is largely due to the West because of large-scale emission of carbon dioxide in those countries as they fast-tracked development. The developing countries are right in demanding that the West should bear a major share of finance to make clean technologies accessible to the former, but the latter are not willing to heed to the demand.

There is also a big disparity in the deadline, suggested by various countries, to meet the target of zero emission of carbon dioxide. This target means that no more carbon dioxide will be added to the atmosphere than what has been removed by way of increasing the use of clean energy. This zero-level emission is vital for reducing the danger from rising sea level and cyclones. Many developed countries say that this target should be achieved by 2050, indeed a distant deadline; but some major developing countries want this should be stretched by two or three decades. Thus, China, the largest emitter of carbon dioxide, wants a 2060 net zero year while India, the third largest emitter, wants it to be 2070. However, there is a consensus that by 2030 some progress should be made in this direction to save the world from an imminent catastrophe.

In the midst of such divergent views, it is important to look at Pope Francis's vision to save the world from an ecological crisis. Stating that the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like a pile of filth, he said never have we so hurt and mistreated our home as we have in the last two hundred years. In the encyclical *Laudato Si* (Praise be to you) the Pope said humanity has to change its lifestyle, production and consumption to combat the increasing atmospheric warming. Caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries, warming has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world where rise in temperature together with drought has proved devastating. Every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. The world should listen to these cold truths spelt out by the Pope about global warming. It is time to stop hurting the nature; instead start hugging it. That is the only way to save it from the disaster looming large over it.

As always, we would be happy to hear your reviews, comments, and suggestions.

Happy Reading!

**Dr. Suresh Mathew**  
Editor

✉ → [frsureshmathew@gmail.com](mailto:frsureshmathew@gmail.com)

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Mayur Vihar Phase - I  
New Delhi - 110091  
Tel: 011-45873264, Mob: 7042562963  
Email: icdelhi@gmail.com  
frsureshmathew@gmail.com  
indiancurrentsweekly@gmail.com  
Website: www.indiancurrents.org

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## POWER QUOTES



Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up

**Thomas A. Edison**

• • •



If you want to live a happy life, tie it to a goal, not to people or things

**Albert Einstein**

• • •



Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking

**Steve Jobs**

• • •



Money and success don't change people; they merely amplify what is already there

**Will Smith**

• • •



Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced

**Soren Kierkegaard**

• • •



Life is never easy. There is work to be done and obligations to be met - obligations to truth, to justice, and to liberty

**John F. Kennedy**

• • •



When we do the best we can, we never know what miracle is wrought in our life or the life of another

**Helen Keller**

• • •



If you live long enough, you'll make mistakes. But if you learn from them, you'll be a better person

**Bill Clinton**

• • •



The Future Belongs To The Competent. Get Good, Get Better, Be The Best!

**Brian Tracy**

# TOGETHER FOR OUR PLANET



# CLIMATE CRISIS

The COP26 (Conference of Parties), the UN Climate Conference, is a worldwide wake up call to save the earth from the pile of filth. Pope Francis has urged global leaders to take radical decisions that would provide effective responses to the current ecological crisis

# CLIMATE MEET

## BIG TALK, SMALL COMMITMENTS

The 26th Session of the Conference of Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Glasgow from October 31 to November 12, was high on rhetoric and low on commitments

BY **CEDRIC PRAKASH**

The day COP26 concluded, the world's best known environmental activist Greta Thunberg tweeted, "*The #COP26 is over; here's a brief summary: Blah, blah, blah. But the real work continues outside these halls. And we will never give up, ever!*"

A few days earlier, addressing a massive protest on the streets of Glasgow, Thunberg said "It is not a secret that COP26 is a failure. It should be obvious that we cannot solve the crisis with the same methods that got us into it in the first place. The COP has turned into a PR event, where leaders are giving beautiful speeches and announcing fancy commitments and targets, while behind the curtains governments of the Global North countries are still refusing to take any drastic climate action."

Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, warned of an impending 'climate catastrophe'; most of those who welcomed the deal in Glasgow said a huge amount of work remained to be done. Guterres acknowledged the shortcomings of the agreement. In a statement, following the deal, he tweeted: "The #COP26 outcome is a compromise, reflecting the interests, contradictions and



state of political will in the world today, It's an important step, but it's not enough. Our fragile planet is hanging by a thread we are still knocking on the door of climate catastrophe" In a follow-up tweet, the UN chief sent a message to 'young people, indigenous communities, women leaders, all those leading on #ClimateAction': "I know you might be disappointed. But we're in the fight of our lives & this fight must be won."

The 26th Session of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26) which was held in Glasgow from 31 October to 12 November 2021 was high on expectations. The world was hoping that finally the global leaders would demonstrate the much-needed statesmanship, sagacity, sincerity and synergy to address the catastrophe of climate change before the whole planet is destroyed. But that was not to be. Though high on rhetoric, the final deal was woefully short of non-negotiable commitments



Antonio Guterres

"The #COP26 outcome is a compromise, reflecting the interests, contradictions and state of political will in the world today, It's an important step, but it's not enough. Our fragile planet is hanging by a thread we are still knocking on the door of climate catastrophe"

- Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations

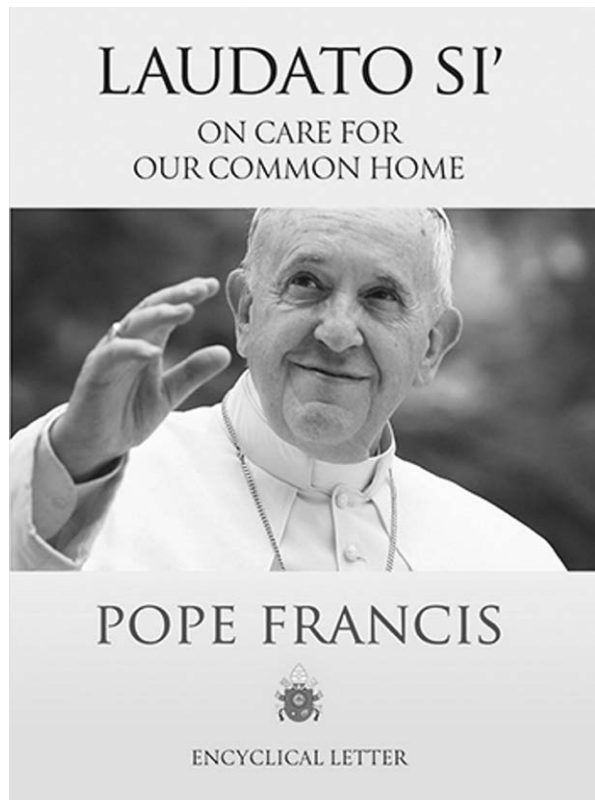
which should have come spontaneously and with that much needed urgency. Thunberg bluntly refers to the outcome as 'blah, blah, blah'; Guterres is more cautious and refers to the 'state of political will' prevalent in the world today!

Whilst most countries (particularly those of the Global North) are in the dock for not committing and ensuring implementation to much more, the two countries of COP26 that did not agree to have a greater global concern are India and China. Normally rivals, both India and China clubbed together to ensure that the final agreement had the words "phase down coal" instead of the "phase out coal" which was there in the earlier versions. The change in a decisive step caused great disappointment and concern over whether the world can limit the average global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees C. This prompted the President of COP26 Mr. Alok Sharma to quip, "China and India will have to explain themselves and what they did to the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world."

In the early days of the summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made several promises on the global platform. These included cutting emissions to net zero by 2070, reduce carbon emissions by one billion tonnes by 2030, and raise the share of renewables in the energy mix to 50%, among others. Given the power of the mining mafia, particularly those in the colliery sector, these 'tall promises' for whatever their worth, were naturally welcomed. So, the last-minute intervention by India to water down the wording of the final agreement were treated with disdain.

The earlier versions of the agreement contained a commitment to phase out unabated coal (unabated

**Pope Francis has been one world leader who has shown unflinching commitment to the care of our common home and of his concern on the havoc wrought by climatic changes. He insists that we have been called to be stewards of the creation which God has entrusted to us**



refers to coal that is burned without carbon capture and storage technology, which advocates say significantly decreases emissions). The argument given by India was "How can anyone expect that developing countries make promises about phasing out coal and fossil fuel subsidies? Developing countries still have to do deal with their poverty reduction agenda." Though there is certainly a point by some who insist that all fossil fuels need to be phased out (including oil and gas) and not only coal. All, however, were not buying those arguments with one diplomat saying, "The longer you take to phase out coal, the more burden you put on natural environment and your economy."

Pope Francis has been one world leader who has shown unflinching commitment to the care of our common home and of his concern on the havoc wrought by climatic changes. In a very incisive message to the President of COP26 at the start of the summit, Pope Francis said, "As the Glasgow Conference begins, all of us are aware that it has the vital task of demonstrating to the entire international community whether there really exists a political will to devote – with honesty, responsibility and courage – greater human, financial and technolog-



ical resources to mitigating the negative effects of climate change and assisting the poorer and more vulnerable nations most affected by it. At the same time, we realize that this task has to be undertaken in the midst of a pandemic that for almost two years has devastated our human family. Covid-19 has brought immense tragedies in its wake, but it has also taught us that, if we are to succeed in overcoming the pandemic, there is no alternative: all of us must play a part in responding to this challenge. And that, as we know, calls for profound solidarity and fraternal cooperation between the world's peoples."

He went on to add, "COP26 can and must offer an effective contribution to the conscientious construction of a future in which daily actions and economic and financial investments can genuinely protect the conditions that ensure a dignified and humane life for the men and women of today and tomorrow, on a "healthy" planet."

On May 24, 2015, Pope Francis gave to the world his path-breaking Encyclical Letter 'Laudato Si' 'On Care for Our Common Home'. It was the first major Papal teaching on a subject of critical importance namely 'the environment'. 'Laudato Si' meaning "Praise be to you" are the first words of the celebrated 'Canticle of the Creatures' of St Francis of Assisi. The Encyclical which came months before the landmark 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, (COP 21) which was held in Paris, in fact set the tone for world leaders to come to grips with real causes which were responsible for environmental degradation and which ultimately caused climatic changes with disastrous results everywhere.

In the opening statements of the Encyclical, Pope Francis makes his intention clear "to address every person living on this planet" saying, "this sister (mother earth) now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life."

In the first Chapter, he states that "we cannot adequately combat environmen-

tal degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation"; he deals here with several 'aspects of the present ecological crisis': pollution, waste and the throw-away culture; climate as a common good; displacement and migration caused by environmental degradation; access to safe drinking water as a basic and universal human right; loss of bio-diversity; decline in the quality of human life and break down of society; global inequality. He also denounces unequivocally the use of pesticides and the production of genetically engineered (GE) crops.

Pope Francis strongly notes that "the earth's resources are also being plundered because of short-sighted approaches to the economy, commerce and production." In making such statements, in taking a stand for the 'care of our common home', Pope Francis made several enemies among the rich and powerful who are bent on profiteering; those engaged in the extractive industry by plundering very precious and scarce natural resources. This was indicative from the fact that Gallup Poll conducted in the United States a little after the Encyclical was released, showed that his ratings had plummeted by more than 18% points among fairly large sections of Americans and particularly the wealthy and other vested interests.

Pope Francis insists that we have been called to be stewards of the creation which God has entrusted to us. He ensures that 'Laudato Si' focuses on human



rights violations and injustices. He does not mince words when he says “in the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, committing oneself to the common good means to make choices in solidarity based on a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.”

What is paramount in the final analysis, says Pope Francis, is a radical commitment to ensure posi-

**The world was hoping that finally the global leaders would demonstrate the much-needed statesmanship, sagacity, sincerity and synergy to address the catastrophe of climate change before the whole planet is destroyed. But that was not to be**

tive change, which is the need of the hour. For this, he says, every section of society must play a definite role in a collaborative and concerted manner. The Pope does not spare the priests of the Catholic Church and he calls upon them to engage with the faithful on environmental issues. Further, he challenges international and national Governments and mechanisms saying, “the same mindset which stands in the way of making radical decisions to reverse the trend of global warming also stands in the way of achieving the goal of eliminating poverty. A more responsible overall approach is needed to deal with both problems: the reduction of pollution and the development of poorer countries and regions.”

‘Laudato Si’ makes one uncomfortable! Therefore, there is always the danger that many would like to cosmeticize this powerful document: to tinker with bits and parts, to be selective and comfortable in its reading; to do non-threatening acts like growing trees, propagating alternative technologies, not using plastics, to indulge in acts of tokenism like environmental ‘education’, or project work. Whilst all these acts are surely good and would hopefully lead to something more sustainable, no Pope would waste





# GLASGOW AND BEYOND

The commitments made at the conference on climate crisis are praiseworthy. Now it should be ensured that they do not remain at the level of rhetoric

BY **DR. SIJI CHACKO**

**C**limate Summit at Glasgow was a unique and rich experience with the representation and participation of 120 country leaders and people from over 200 countries. The enthusiasm and vibrant participation of the youth and indigenous people have been encouraging adding to its uniqueness. In the entire city of Glasgow, one could see hoardings depicting various images of climatic impacts with captions such as “The World is Counting on You.”

The Summit has undeniably brought the climatic crisis to the central stage of discussion. Recalling commitments made at Paris and the importance of reducing emissions got highlighted beyond doubt. It also witnessed a lot of focused conversations around possible collaboration and actions among parties towards accelerated and sustained climatic action. Phrases like climate adaptation and resilience were often doing rounds at discussion tables. A lot has been shared on green technology and promoting clean energy infrastructure. The context of loss and damage and the critical issue of climate finance, especially for developing countries, remained a huge priority. COP26 was a good reminder for developed countries to re-commit to the Paris Agreement pledge of USD100 billion annually as climate finance.

The indigenous peoples who live an eco-friendly and climate-friendly life steward over 80 per cent of

the planet’s remaining biodiversity. It is for the first time in the history of COP that 28 indigenous people were nominated to share their knowledge and experiences with the world. By and large, there has been a greater acceptance of the role of indigenous people, especially youth, to inspire climate action. Their voices and inspiration could play a major role in mitigating the climate crisis. Yet it was realised that their voices were not yet heard sufficiently. Many indigenous people outside COP26 venue too voiced about a neo-colonisation that commodifies the nature and its resources.

A brief stocktaking of the key achievements:

- Leaders from over 120 countries pledged to halt and reverse deforestation by 2030.
- A methane pledge, led by the US and the European Union, wherein more than 100 countries agreed to cut methane emissions by 2030.
- More than 40 countries – including major coal-users such as Poland, Vietnam and Chile – agreed to shift away from coal, one of the biggest generators of CO2 emissions.
- Nearly 500 global financial services firms agreed to align USD130 trillion – some 40 per cent of the world’s financial assets – with goals set out in the Paris Agreement, including limiting global warming to 1.5 degree Celsius.
- In a joint declaration, the US and China pledged to boost climate cooperation over the next decade. Reiterating their commitment to keep the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal alive, they agreed to collaborate on issues such as methane emissions, transition to clean energy and decarbonisation.
- At least 13 nations committed to end the sale of fossil fuel powered heavy duty vehicles by 2040.

However, in their final statements, Parties softening their stand from a complete “coal phase-out” to “coal phase-down” was rather disheartening and disappointing. One begins to wonder whether there would be any substantial change in the coming 20 years, except a possible increase in a new way of colonisation.



**According to the UN, “Madagascar is likely to go down in history as the first brought on by extreme and unusual weather patterns”. This is not the case of a country which is at war or in conflict, but in peace and with virtually zero carbon emissions!**

After COP26 concluded, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres shared that “the COP26 outcome is a compromise, reflecting the interests, contradictions and state of political will in the world today. It’s an important step, but it’s not enough. It’s time to go into emergency mode.”

Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg in her address mentioned, “over 60% of the CO2 emissions have occurred since 1990 and a third since 2005. If this is considered to be climatic action, then we don’t want it”, indirectly hinting at less of ‘Blah, Blah, Blah and more of action.’ Yet there is hope and that hope is in individual actions, synergy and collective consciousness.

### **Climate Change is Real**

The world has witnessed wildfires in North America, extreme rainfall in Asia, Africa, the US, Europe, and others. For the beautiful Indian Ocean Island, Madagascar, environmental challenges are enormous and mounting. With an extended dry period due to the worst drought in 40 years, the island is subjected to several yearly cyclones, vicious winds and dust storms, burying villages and forcing people to flee. According to the UN, “Madagascar is likely to go down in history as the first brought on by extreme and unusual weather patterns”. This is not the case of a country which is at war or in conflict, but in peace and with virtually zero carbon emissions!

Tigris and Euphrates rivers are drying up. While in Syria, this year’s drought has been the worst in last 70 years, in Iraq, this year’s summer was the second-driest in 40 years. Drought in Iraq and Syria could totally collapse the food system for millions of people. The warmest daily maximum temperature is projected

to increase by 4-7°C, with the highest temperature changes in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, northern India, Pakistan, China, Nepal and Bhutan.

In Bangladesh, 28 per cent of its population lives in coastal areas. Tidal flooding caused by sea-level rise accelerates displacement. As per estimates, with a projected 50 cm rise in sea level, Bangladesh may lose approximately 11 per cent of its land by 2050, affecting an estimated 15 million people living in its coastal areas. Thus by 2050, one in every seven people in the country will be displaced by climate change, and up to 18 million people may have to move because of sea level rise alone. Sri Lanka is also facing threats of sea level rise, as about 25 per cent of its population lives in low-lying areas. Extreme weather events are severely impacting the country’s ecosystem, life and livelihood of people at large. Pakistan too experiences recurring heatwaves and droughts, riverine and flash floods, landslides and cyclones affecting lakhs of its people.

In the context of India, a recent study by the Council for Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), a premier New Delhi-based think tank, estimated that 25 of 35 States and Union Territories are highly vulnerable to climate-induced floods and drought, with Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Bihar being most at risk. While 75 per cent of the districts, including 95 per cent of coastal ones, are extreme event hotspots, around 45 per cent of these districts have undergone unsustainable landscape and infrastructure changes increasing their climate vulnerability. Flash floods are increasing at an alarming rate and intensity.

In Maharashtra alone, floods between June and





October this year destroyed over 13.59 million acres of crops. Recent disasters in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, cyclones in Odisha and West Bengal and droughts in different parts of the country are major concerns. 226 people reportedly died and several went missing due to extreme rainfall in this year alone in Maharashtra, Uttarakhand and Kerala. Cyclone Fani killed at least 89 people in eastern India and Bangladesh and caused damages worth nearly USD8.1 billion. Severe rains, flash floods and landslides are proof of the reality of climate crisis we are in. Northern Bihar areas continue to face riverbank erosion due to extreme floods, subsequently forcing people to relocate.

### Commitments and Contradictions

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced five major commitments or "Panchamrit" at the COP26, which stated that India will:

- Achieve net-zero emissions by 2070
- Bring its non-fossil energy capacity to 500 GW by 2030
- Bring its economy's carbon intensity down to 45 per cent by 2030
- Fulfil 50 per cent of its energy requirement through renewable energy by 2030
- Reduce 1 billion tonnes of carbon emissions from the total projected emissions by 2030.

While there have been many efforts towards green recovery, energy and technology, especially about 3 bn USD to be invested in battery development and photovoltaics (PV), the country continues to engage

in the use of coal with several loans sanctioned for many thermal power projects.

According to Climate Action Tracker (CAT), an independent scientific agency tracking climate actions since 2009, India's climate targets and policies are 'Highly insufficient' and inconsistent with the target of keeping the temperature to 1.5°C temperature limit. According to them "Under India's current targets and policies, emissions will continue to rise and are consistent with 4°C or more of warming when compared to a modelled domestic emissions pathway."

India has to phase out coal use from its power sector by 2040 to be aligned with the Paris Agreement 1.5°C limit. In order to achieve significant progress, it has to shift its dependence on fossil fuels, which unfortunately is not the case. India's coal capacity is to increase from current levels of over 200 GW to almost 266 GW by 2029-30 with 35 GW expected to be in place in the coming five years which is an increase of 17.5 per cent increase in coal capacity. It is also worth noting that its coal-run power plant pipeline is the second largest in the world and the country is one of the few countries that has increased this since 2015.

A lot more coal mining has been opened up to more private investors of late, which raises a lot of questions on the commitment to carbon reduction. While COP 26 reached a deadlock when it came to 'phasing out of coal', perhaps no country including India can reach its target without stopping any new coal capacity additions. It is also important to note that India gives out approximately 35 per cent higher subsidies for fossil fuel-related sector than for renewables.

**India has to phase out coal use from its power sector by 2040 to be aligned with the Paris Agreement 1.5°C limit. In order to achieve significant progress, it has to shift its dependence on fossil fuels, which unfortunately is not the case**

## The Road to be Taken

World looked at COP 26 negotiations as the “last, best hope” to keep the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C. Although more than 140 governments have announced net zero goals, covering 90 per cent of global emissions, according to CAT, with all target pledges, including those made in Glasgow, global greenhouse gas emissions in 2030 will still be around twice as high as necessary for the 1.5°C limit.

Bill Hare, CEO of Climate Analytics, a CAT partner organisation said, “The vast majority of 2030 actions and targets are inconsistent with net zero goals: there’s a nearly one degree gap between governments’ current policies and their net zero goals.” He also said that “if the world leaders have no plans as to how to get there, and their 2030 targets are as low as so many of them are, then frankly, these net zero targets are just lip service to real climate action. Glasgow has a serious credibility gap.”

“Glasgow has a massive credibility, action and commitment gap as the world is heading to at least 2.4°C of warming, if not more”, the CAT warned. Reducing the credibility gaps before we come to emission reductions is critical.

In the coming days we need to focus more on:

- Prioritising policies that respect human rights and support a just and equitable transition to a clean energy economy.
- Principles of equity and common, but differentiated responsibilities should be made central to any discussion on deep cuts in emissions critical to address catastrophic impact of climate change.
- Integrating adaptation goals with sustainable development so that development actions to address poverty are not put at peril.
- Ensuring fair and adequate people’s participation, especially of women and vulnerable and marginalised communities, in all decision-making and implementation of climate-related targets and actions.
- Classifying critical green technologies being developed as public goods and their access made affordable for all to care for the common home.

We need to realise that placing people, their lives and livelihood before profits has to end, and we need to radically and immediately transform our relationship at all levels, taking awareness and responsibility for the current situation of climate crisis. Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si* shows us a way for a



conversion at various levels, individual, institutional and collective.

We should not limit to rhetoric, wanton debates and false promises on ‘net zero’. And the much-stated and quoted commitments towards achieving those deliverables should not put undue pressures on the poor, marginalised, and local indigenous communities. The narrative should be robust, consistent and devoid of any ambiguities for commitments made to be realised.

There is no doubt that Prime Minister Modi’s speech at Glasgow was historic and the commitment of the country expressed by him was much appreciated globally and locally stating it as ‘ambitious’ and ‘pathbreaking’. While the announcement of the ‘Panchamrit’ is perhaps the most desired and wanted set of ideas and actions for reform, it is hoped that much of them may not remain like yet another rhetoric, which is quite usual for most world leaders when it comes to climatic action. ©

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**DR. SIJI CHACKO** is the coordinator of Ecojesuit Network of India and South Asia

# HOPES AND FEARS AT CLIMATE MEETING

Climate change affects everyone. It leads to unprecedented devastation. It is time for the world to take note of it

BY ANN MARIE BRENNAN

The occasion of the Conference of Parties (COP26) on Climate control in Glasgow, Scotland, in November 2021, was an amazing opportunity as people from almost 200 countries gathered to discuss the urgent climate crisis and to negotiate solutions. I was able to attend this conference as part of a delegation representing the Society of Jesus and Ignatian collaborators. I am a member of Christian Life Community, a lay Ignatian association in over 70 countries, which has a commitment to work for the integrity of all creation. As I reflected on my experience of COP26, I realized that there was a common word for both my desolation and my consolation. That word was Fragility.

Here are some of my desolations:

## Fragile

At multiple events, both at the COP26 venue as well as at side events outside in the city of Glasgow, it was heartbreaking to hear the stories and see the images of so many fragile situations due to climate

The poorer and more vulnerable countries do not have the resources to be as influential and to negotiate just compensation for damages and loss experienced due to climate change not even of their own making. Marginalized groups such as indigenous voices face similar inequality



change and injustice: desertification of land, decreasing number of wetlands, dying coral reefs, deforestation in impoverished areas, damaged coastal areas, ruined farms and harvests, and much more.

## Rising

In presentations and discussions everywhere, rising temperatures are causing unprecedented devastation. There's drought, famine, increased incidence of wildfires, rising sea levels, hurricanes, flooding and tornadoes. The scale of resulting poverty, hunger, fear, violence, death, and more is enormous. Demonstrators held posters and chanted, "Keep 1.5°C Alive!" It was meant for global leaders, businesses, and citizens to prevent the average global temperature from rising more than 1.5°C by the year 2100.

## Anger

Anger at the leaders who persist in denial or outright lies about climate change; they implement destructive policies; there is a lack of care for the common good, and a lack of integrity and will to do the right thing.



Climate activists carry placards during the Fridays For Future rally in Glasgow, Scotland. Credit - AFP Photo



## Greed

Greed for money and power is a fundamental root cause of the climate crisis. The taking, using, and polluting of natural resources disproportionately for personal gain and not considering the negative impacts on others – this is such a source of sorrow. I wondered about the basis of this greed. Is it based on fear? Fear of not having enough? Lack of trust in the dynamic that in giving of ourselves, we reap even more fullness of life. One of the Gospel readings that week was about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. God's creation is wonderfully abundant, nourishing, and life-giving for all, if we take care of it and share goods fairly.

## Inequality

The theme of Inequality came up often in many presentations. The poorer and more vulnerable countries do not have the resources to be as influential and to negotiate just compensation for damages and loss experienced due to climate change not even of their own making. Marginalized groups such as indigenous voices face similar inequality. Many were not even able to attend the COP26 because of Covid restrictions. But for those that were there, the structure of the negotiations did not give them an equal voice at the negotiating table even for decisions directly impacting them.

## Loss

With climate change causing extreme weather conditions, millions of people face loss of their homes and even cultures as they are forced to relocate. Additionally, there is loss of habitat for many creatures and loss of biodiversity with the extinction of so many more animals, insects, and plants.

## Inadequate

The final pledges do not address the needed change. Multiple analysts predict that the current national pledges place the temperature rise between 2<sup>o</sup> and 3<sup>o</sup>C, and that's only if pledge agreements are enacted.

## Yackety Yak!

Similar to “Blah, Blah, Blah” expressed by Greta Thunberg, the Yackety Yak were the empty statements and greenwashing of national and corporate leaders expressing how wonderful their efforts are knowing full well that they fall far short of the global goals.

As dismal as the above desolations are, there were points of hope and consolation.



Well-organized and creative, youth demonstrators expressed that the status quo is NOT OK. When many of us older folk were tired, or became complacent, the youth continued to organize and persist with much energy

## Fragility is a gift

Each of us alone may be a fragile voice, overwhelmed, but joining with others, our voices are strengthened. We experienced this at the Climate March! I joined a pilgrimage with the Jesuit Missions of about twenty people from Edinburgh to Glasgow. We arrived at St. Aloysius parish, and with about 100 parishioners, we walked to Kelvingrove Park where we joined thousands of people with the faith bloc. Then this block joined the March with many more blocs so that we were 100,000 marching with a clear, singular message to COP26 negotiators to do the right thing and to do what is needed to protect our planet and one another! It was an amazing witness! For Christians, this is the time of year when we reflect on the birth of Jesus Christ who was born as a fragile baby to poor parents in a very fragile situation without a place for Mary to give birth. In this story, we see how God is present and works joy and wonder into the fragility of life.

## Rejoice

On the pilgrimage from Edinburgh to Glasgow, we had the opportunity to walk along the canal and the



Scottish countryside. Immersed in this beautiful place, all the pilgrims had a sense of the wonder of God's creation. With the psalmist, we could appreciate the phrase: Let ALL the Earth Rejoice. In our evening reflections, I as well as the others felt the growing desire that ALL should experience such wonder in creation, so that ALL the Earth could Rejoice.

### **Acknowledging our shame**

At the COP26 Delegates Mass in Glasgow, the bishop stunned the congregation with the statement, "We should hang our heads in shame. Caring for our common home is a commission given to us by God." As shocking as this was, I felt consolation! For me, it was refreshing to hear the bishop openly acknowledge our negligence and complicity in destructive practices. While not commonly done, acknowledging shame, our sins, is a necessary step for conversion toward caring, responsible, sustainable action.

### **God walks with us step by step**

This became a mantra for me on the pilgrimage, especially as my feet became blistered and sore, and again during the conference itself in trying to figure out venues and presentations. But it also applies for us as communities figuring out next steps in this climate crisis. God is near and walks with us in our uncertainty and loss.

### **Indigenous voices**

Good to hear the indigenous voices from five continents speaking up in various presentation and sharing their wisdom and concerns.

### **Loving and caring friendships**

There was a strong feeling of love among people united in the desire to give witness to the need for humanity to come together and advocate for climate justice. People who were complete strangers. When facing trials, injustices, sorrow, fear – love overcomes.

### **Innovation**

On displays throughout the venue were lots of creative ideas to help prevent, adapt, and mitigate impacts of climate change

### **Youth**

Youth were a strong presence at COP26 with many speaking out strongly and articulately. Well-organized and creative, youth demonstrators expressed that the status quo is NOT OK. When many of us older folk were tired, or became complacent, the youth continued to organize and persist with much energy. And even as they understood the depth of the climate change problems, they continued to laugh and sing. Among my group of pilgrims at the March, they sang, "Walk in the Light!" This was a profound sense of Hope. May we all walk in the Light so that ALL the Earth can rejoice! ☺

# OPEN LETTER TO CHIEF JUSTICE OF INDIA REST IN PEACE, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM!

BY A.J. PHILIP

Dear Justice N.V. Ramana Ji,

It is from a widely-publicised open letter that Shri P. Sainath wrote to you that I learnt that you began your career as a journalist with Ramoji Rao's Eenadu group of newspapers. I remember how the newspaper with several editions revolutionized, if not transformed, Telugu journalism. Many years later, I had the luck to visit ETV's office at the Film City in Hyderabad where I was stunned by the range and size of its operations.

You have lamented the death of investigative journalism in the country. You have cherished memories of the days when the Press in India showed the mirror to those in power and exposed them for what they were, corrupt, morally and ethically degenerate and, therefore, worthy of being shown the door.



That was the time when every journalist worth his salt aspired to be an investigative journalist, whom Joseph Pulitzer described as a muckraker.

Yes, they were indeed muckrakers because they sought to expose what is hidden under the muck. You have done a great service to society by reminding the people of the death of investigative journalism. At least there is a semblance of debate on the subject, sparked by your reference to it.

There are many reasons for the investigative journalist disappearing from the public space. I would like to concentrate just on the role the judiciary played in placing one more log on its funeral pyre or the last shovel of soil on its grave.

I do not claim to be a brave or investigative journalist, out to expose those in power. Every time I write a piece, be it in this magazine or on Facebook, whether it is an open letter to the Prime Minister or the Home Minister or the UP Chief Minister, my friends send me a message, "Be safe", in various forms depending on the sender's religious belief.

The greatest strength of a journalist or a citizen is that he can approach the court and get redressal of his grievance. Once this right is gone, he will be at the mercy of the police or the investigating agency which is, often, at the beck and call of those in power





This is a new phenomenon. I have been writing this column for at least a quarter century but it is only now that I receive such kind advice, “stay safe, may God protect you” etc. Why is this so? They know that those in power are capable of finding something wrong in what I write and sending me to jail where in the absence of medical care, I may become a Stan Swamy.

Recently, I watched Karan Thapar’s interview with Aakar Patel, whose book ‘The Price of Modi Years’ came out recently. His previous book was titled ‘Our Hindu Rashtra: What It Is. How We Got Here’. Let me confess, I am yet to read either of his books, though I would like to.

Aakar Patel came across as a soft-spoken person, who has been critically examining the Modi years with some sort of detachment, the hallmark of a scholar.

In the long interview, he never lost his cool, unlike Modi who asked for a glass of water before walking out of Thapar’s live interview. He answered all his questions and his articulation was sometimes much better than that of the famous interviewer. What surprised me is that Thapar concluded his interview

by wishing Aakar Patel, “Stay Safe”! That has never been Karan Thapar’s style of concluding his interview.

That forces me to ask the question, why do people find it necessary to remind their friends or relatives who question the government in the public fora to remain “safe”? I do not have to tell your honour that in India the journalist, budding or investigative, does not enjoy any special privilege.

Whatever privileges the journalist enjoys are the privileges that a citizen of the country enjoys, unlike in the US where journalists have a limited First Amendment right not to be forced to reveal information or confidential news sources in court. My argument is not that we should give special privileges to journalists.

The greatest strength of a journalist or a citizen is that he can approach the court and get redressal of his grievance. Once this right is gone, he will be at the mercy of the police or the investigating agency which is, often, at the beck and call of those in power. When the Jesuit priest, Stan Swamy, died in police custody, the Bombay High Court hearing his bail application stood up and paid respect to the departed soul.

The next day when the police, which did not interrogate him even for a second after he was arrested, objected to the court paying last respect to him, the learned judges rescinded their action. Why could they not ask the prosecution to get lost. That needed guts which was, alas, found lacking in them. They behaved like Pilate who allowed the mob to have the blood of Jesus, though he knew in his heart of hearts that he was innocent.

Every time a judge gives a verdict, it sends out a signal that either emboldens or discourages a journalist. Take the case of a recent verdict given by a single-member Bench of the Kerala High Court. A petitioner, Shri Peter Myaliparambil, approached the court against the practice of printing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's picture on the Covid vaccination certificates. He had a point that the practice was unacceptable.

I have taken the two doses of Covishield vaccine for which I paid from my own pocket. What role did Modi play in the vaccines I had? Nothing at all. Yet, I am forced to look at his face every time I have to take it out for travel or for other purposes. Justice PV Kunhikrishnan found the case "frivolous". He had the power to dismiss the petition and hold his own views.

What I found unacceptable is the long lecture the judge gave on democracy. He said Modi had not come by removing the roof of a building. He was the elected leader etc. Tomorrow the same judge may say the same thing if Modi in his abundant wisdom decides to have his picture printed on the cover of the passports issued in the country? After all, it was this government which proposed to have multi-

**No one values the role of an independent journalist who, like the Prophets in the Old Testament, had the courage to tell the rulers that they were naked if they are indeed naked. Is it any wonder that investigative journalism is becoming a concept of the past with no future at all?**



ple coloured passports, for various sections of the people like blue collar and white collar workers, bureaucrats, aristocrats, diplomats etc.

What's worse, the petitioner was fined Rs 1 lakh. If I were the judge I might also have dismissed the case because the courts could not be expected to review all the government decisions. I might have added that the PM had the power to have his photograph printed on the Covid death certificates as well!

Rs 1 lakh is a big amount for an individual petitioner. When advocate Prashant Bhushan was accused of a far more serious crime of causing contempt of the court, the Supreme Court imposed a fine of only Re 1.

The verdict is a reminder to anyone who challenges a government decision in a court of law. Siddique Kappan is a freelance journalist from Kerala. I know how poorly paid freelance journalists are. He wanted to go to Hathras in UP to report a macabre incident. He got a free lift and he went there. On the way, the police arrested him and he has been in jail for the last one year. What crime has he committed? I am sure he will have to be released if he survives the ordeal of the jail. Will the government compensate him?

In Kappan's own state Kerala, a working journalist was hit by a speeding car and he died instantly. The driver of the car was a senior IAS officer who was in a state of inebriation. He did not spend a single day in jail. Today he is back in service, enjoying all the creature comforts that come with the three letters, IAS, while the journalist's family has been going from pillar to post. This is how journalists are now treated in the country.

The Prime Minister had the practice of letting journalists accompany him on a rotational basis whenever he traveled abroad. As a routine, the PM used to address the Press on board the aircraft

twice during the journey, once while going and once while returning. The journalists were free to ask him any questions, not necessarily related to the trip concerned. Modi stopped this practice. Now he does not want the journalists to sit in the Press gallery in Parliament or meet MPs and ministers in the Central Hall of Parliament.

It is a blatant attempt to muzzle the Press and stop the free flow of information. The government feels that it has various other fora like the PM's Mann Ki Baath, tweets on Twitter and non-stop coverage of PM's visit to Kashi using as many as 55 cameras of Doordarshan to reach the people. They do not want journalists who question him. They want journalists who are his loudspeakers.

**When the fundamentals of the Constitution are trampled upon day and night in the eagerness to make India a theocratic state where one man's word is the law, why blame poor journalists alone if they do not find the situation conducive to investigate, report and survive too?**

One of the first things Modi did after he returned to power in 2019 was to reduce the status of Jammu and Kashmir to Union Territories. You are welcome to check the BJP's poll promises as contained in its election manifestos. At no time did it make such a promise though abrogation of Article 370 was one of its key agendas.

How did the court deal with the issue? Or, when the citizenship laws were amended and millions of people came out on the streets protesting against the new laws. The court did precious little. It was more concerned about a group of women blocking a small stretch of road in Delhi.

One of your predecessors has in his autobiography described how he and his fellow judges celebrated the Ayodhya Verdict in which they upheld the Muslim case to a T and, yet, allowed a temple to come up at the same spot where a mosque stood for

hundreds of years. They went to a five-star hotel in Delhi and drank the choicest wine available there. Worse, the judges did not have the courage to identify the person who wrote the verdict.

For the whole one year, the farm sector in the country was upset over the three controversial laws Parliament enacted hastily. True, the court stayed the operation of the laws. It also appointed a committee to study the situation. Alas, the court did not have the courage to publish the report of the committee which is still under wraps.

Why should the court be afraid of releasing the report? I do not want to speculate on its contents. However, the decision to junk the report did not show the court in a good light. Finally, it was the determination of the farmers to fight to the finish, rather than the court's intervention, that resulted in the rescinding of the three controversial laws.

In my younger days, journalists aspired to join a media organisation from where they aspired to retire as assistant editors or editors. Today, a graduate who did his journalism course is given a contract for two or three years. As he or she grows old, the chances of getting a job are almost nil. Contract labourer cannot be expected to take on the mighty government, particularly when the media organisations they work for are hand in glove with those in power as during the Third Reich.

Today a successful journalist is one who becomes an MLA or MP or minister. No one values the role of an independent journalist who, like the Prophets in the Old Testament, had the courage to tell the rulers that they were naked if they are indeed naked. Is it any wonder that investigative journalism is becoming a concept of the past with no future at all?

When the fundamentals of the Constitution are trampled upon day and night in the eagerness to make India a theocratic state where one man's word is the law, why blame poor journalists alone if they do not find the situation conducive to investigate, report and survive too?

Before I conclude, I must thank you once again for generating a debate on the subject and wish you, your brother and sister judges of the Supreme Court a very happy Christmas and a prosperous and joyful New Year.

Yours etc ©

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**AJ PHILIP** is a citizen journalist and social worker. He can be reached at: [ajphilip@gmail.com](mailto:ajphilip@gmail.com)

# TARGETING MISSIONARIES OF CHARITY

The Kolkata police chief once received a complaint against Mother Teresa. He told the complainant: “Come and replace the Mother and her Sisters and I shall see they are out”. None came forward!

BY **LANCY LOBO**

**A**n institute run by the Missionaries of Charity in Makarpura was booked for allegedly attempting to forcibly convert the young girls staying there. The police filed a case against the Children’s Home for Girls under amended Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act 2003 section 295 (A) pertaining to deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class.

The move came after the chairman of National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) visited the children’s home in August this year. “He found some anomalies at the institute and wrote a letter to the District Collector asking to file a complaint against the institute. So, a committee was formed to investigate the case and it gave a report to the Collector. “I have filed a complaint with the police,” said Mayank Trivedi, social security officer. Trivedi, however, said that he is not authorized to

divulge any more details as the case is about minors. The police said that the institute is accused of trying to convert some young girls and they were asked to wear the cross.

Sister Rose Terrassa, working at the institute, rejected all the allegations of religious conversions at the children’s home and said that they only educate the kids. The children’s home looks after orphan kids and those who were rescued from child labour. When asked what led the complainant to believe that the institute was indulging in religious conversion, Makarpura police inspector J I Patel said, “According to the complaint, 13 copies of the Bible were found in the library of the institute. The NCPCR chairman said that his investigations led him to believe that the institute was resorting to conversion of young girls.”

The police added that there were allegations that the girls were asked to read the Bible and marriages of girls from other religions were done as per Christian rituals.

City Police Commissioner Shamsheer Singh said, “There are prima facie three things in the social

It is said that Hindus are a dying race on account of conversions even though the official census show that Christian population has been decreasing over the years. Hindutvavadis do not believe in the Census as it does not suit their twisted arguments



security officer's complaint. A girl was converted to Christian religion without the permission of the District Collector which is mandatory and some of the girls in the institute were given Bible and crosses to wear. We will now investigate the complaint."

The secular Hindus, Muslims and Christians are considered to be the 'Other' for the Hindutvavadis in India. A book, "Hindus under Siege" by the maverick BJP leader Subramanian Swamy extolls the grandeur of Hindu civilisation and highlights the violence it suffered hundreds of years ago under the Muslim and British rule and calls for revenge on the Muslim and Christian descendants. This is manifested by calling the state to protect Hinduism through laws such as against cow slaughter (for Muslims) and anti-conversion (against Christians).

Religious demography is used by Hindutvavadis twistedly to say that given the fertility rate of Muslims they will soon outnumber Hindus who are today 80% of the total population. It is said that Hindus are a dying race on account of conversions even though the official census show that Christian population has been decreasing over the years. Hindutvavadis do not believe in the Census as it does not suit their twisted arguments.

In 2015, Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS chief gave further impetus to anti-Christian sentiments when he stated, "Mother Teresa's service would have been good. But it is used to have one objective, to convert the person, who was being served, into a Christian." "Mother Teresa was a part of a conspiracy for Christianisation of India," said another RSS leader, Indresh Kumar.



In some measure, Mahatma Gandhi too showed the way to present day Hindutvadis. He was against conversions by Christian missionaries. He said that missionaries may serve the poor Hindu dalits and tribals, but not convert them.

Today the State has been defending Hinduism under Congress as well as BJP parties, though more virulently under the BJP by passing anti-conversion laws. The latest State to process such a law is Karnataka.

In order to fight Christian proselytization, Churches have been vandalised, priests and nuns verbally and physically abused. During 2014-16, around 250 Christian places of worship suffered attacks each year. Physical abuse ranged from the arrest of members of a Christmas choir in Madhya Pradesh to the murder of Pastor Sultan Masih in front of his church in Ludhiana in July 2017. All India Christian Council enumerated incidents of this nature counting 147 of in 2014, 177 in 2015, 441 in 2016 and 410 in the first six months of 2017.

Julio Rebeiro (IPS), a widely respected person for his integrity, wrote in 2015, "As a Christian, suddenly I am a stranger in my own country". He further stated that the fact that Hindu extremists were never called to account for their misdeeds by those who are supposed to safeguard the rule of law.

As Christmas draws near each year and as elections draw near, the harassments and atrocities against Christians geometrically rise. That Covid has made life miserable for all citizens in this country is no concern of this majoritarian regime. There are more vital issues that should concern the regime such as poverty, unemployment, human rights etc.,





Gandhi was a Hindu but his Hinduism had civilizational Hindu values of love, compassion, rule of law, and equality. But today's regime treats minorities as second class citizens, promotes lynching and vandalism, and abuses the law to harass those against it

but unfortunately attention from these issues has been diverted to flippant, imagined, non-issues like conversions. The Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion to each citizen: however, the constitution is not valued by this majoritarian and autocratic rule. Continuance in power appears to be the priority, sacrificing the minorities and their rights.

The Sisters of Missionaries of Charity bathe, feed, house, and clothe the discards of society, belonging to all religions. One wishes that those who spread hate against Christians spend a day doing just what these Sisters are doing. There is a great likelihood that a society that does not look after its aged, disabled, poor and the hungry will undergo a conversion of the heart if they spend a day there.

One of the criticisms of the Church in India is that it has become merely a service provider in the domains of education, health and social service. Church's work is actually covering up the failures



of the State. Instead of appreciating it, the State attempts to harass the Church.

One is reminded of the Police head of Calcutta who received a complaint that Mother Teresa was converting people at Kali temple. He went personally and saw the work of Mother and responded to those who complained in the following manner. "Come and replace the Mother and her Sisters and I shall see they are out". None came forward!

A State that pretends to protect majoritarian religion itself is missionary. Apart from anti-conversion laws against Christians, the State has also brought in laws to deprive reservation benefits to dalit Christians either to revert them to Hinduism or discourage conversion. So, during the decennial Census the State makes the tribals to sign in as Hindus. Gandhi was a Hindu but his Hinduism had civilizational Hindu values of love, compassion, rule of law, and equality. But today's regime treats minorities as second class citizens, promotes lynching and vandalism, and abuses the law to harass those against it.

Mother Teresa is an icon not only to India's Christians but to the whole world. Very many secular Hindus and other religionists have been motivated to undertake works of charity by her example which promotes civilizational values of India.

In a faith-based organisation one cannot but expect artefacts and literature on one's faith. To accuse the organisation of converting others on the basis of such presence is very unconvincing. ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LANCY LOBO is a research scholar, Indian Social Institute, Delhi



# THE COP WILL DECIDE YOUR FAITH AND FATE IN INDIA

Anti-conversion laws, including the latest one in Karnataka, presume no person has the intellect to profess a faith other than Hinduism

BY JOHN DAYAL

In Karnataka, it is the neighborhood policeman who will decide if the faith of a new Christian is genuine or if there is something fishy about his conversion.

It is for him to report to the district magistrate if the person has been paid money, lured by a marriage trap or threatened with divine fury to agree to be baptized a Christian. The pastor could spend up to 10 years in jail, even more, if he has been indicted in several such cases.

In real life, local police often accompany hate mobs, look on as churches are attacked and, more often than not, take the pastor into custody.

As in other Indian states, conversion to Hinduism does not attract any penalties whatsoever as it is deemed to be the “original religion” of the land.

The Freedom of Religion Bill, accepted by the Karnataka cabinet, is the harshest among similar laws prevalent in nine other states in India – Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

Rajasthan has a similar law but it has not yet been signed by the governor. In Tamil Nadu, then chief minister J. Jayalalitha passed such a law but faced public outrage and an electoral defeat before she withdrew the law.

In an arrogant snub to society and the Indian constitution, all these laws – inspired by the Hindu right wing cutting across political parties – style themselves as “freedom of religion acts.”

But it is the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh and its daughter groups such as the Bajrang Dal who are most active, and its political face, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in power, that ensure the law gets weaponized.

The BJP rules the federal government in New Delhi and has control of 15 of the country’s 30 states, including Karnataka.



At their core, all such laws are similar. They presume that no person, much less if a woman, an indigenous Adivasi, or one who was once deemed in Hinduism to be an untouchable and now called a scheduled caste, has the intellect to profess a faith other than Hinduism unless someone else has offered an inducement by way of money, education, medicare or social change, or has been coerced by a show of force.

In recent years, with the rise in Islamophobia, and the fear that Muslims are increasing in numbers in the country, states have modified the law to all but outlaw interfaith marriages, also listing change of religion for marriage as a crime.

Scores of Muslim young men are in jail in Uttar Pradesh and other states for marrying Hindu women in what is called in mass media and political slogans as “love jihad.”

Himachal Pradesh, then ruled by the Congress, was the first one to demand that a person and the clergyman give prior notice to the district magistrate before a change in religion. The high court struck down this requirement. The government later modified the wording.



The Supreme Court some decades ago upheld the basic premise of the law. It had also upheld Article 341 (3), which in fact is the most punitive law against conversion from Dalit communities who risk losing all political and economic reservations and affirmative action if they chose to profess Islam or Christianity.

But in recent years the Supreme Court has upheld an individual's right to privacy, an omnibus right that covers the way of life and several other civil issues. The constitution guarantees freedom of faith, including the propagation of one's religion.

The Supreme Court has not yet been asked to take a fresh look at all such anti-conversion laws in light of its ruling on the right to privacy. Senior constitutional and human rights lawyers such as Dr. Colin Gonsalves have said the laws, including that of Karnataka, can be successfully challenged in the Supreme Court, more so because they beget targeted hate and, in turn, violence against Christians and Muslims.

By the time 2021 ends, human rights activists say the number of violent attacks on Christians in the country may cross the 400 mark. It was variously recorded from 340 to 360 by the end of November. Catholic nuns, novices, clergy, itinerant small pastors, home churches and brick and mortar edifices have been attacked, congregations wounded. The police routinely arrest the Christian but ignore the attacker.

A major nationwide campaign against the Karnataka bill has been mounted by civil society activists, including the National Solidarity Forum, the All India Catholic Union, United Christian Forum and United Against Hate with Bangalore Archbishop Peter Machado as its visible leader.

Their major concern is the bill's provisions to jail "those who indulge in mass conversion" for terms from three to 10 years, and a fine of 100,000 rupees. A "mass conversion" could include just a husband and wife becoming Christian or Muslim.

The bill says the "religious converter" shall give one month's prior notice to the district magistrate or an office designated by him. Marriages done for the sole purpose of unlawful conversion or vice versa will be declared void.

The mischief in this is clear as it empowers "any aggrieved person, his parents, brother, sister, or any other person, who is related to him by blood, marriage or adoption" to lodge a complaint with the police. The couple seem not to have any say in the matter. The law also takes away agency from Dalits and Adivasis. "Whoever contravenes the provision of



section 3 in respect of a minor, a woman or a person belonging to the scheduled caste or scheduled tribe shall be punished with imprisonment for a term, which shall not be less than three years, but which may extend to 10 years and shall be liable to fine, which shall be not less than 50,000 rupees," the bill says.

Notice for conversion must be given two months in advance. The district magistrate should conduct an inquiry through police "with regard to real intention, purpose and cause of the proposed religious conversion." Of churches and pastors, the warning is even more clear. Any institution or organization which violates the law will have its registration canceled.

But targeted violence by politically empowered mobs is the immediate fear.

Aakar Patel, former head of Amnesty India, has a graphic description of how the Sangh mobs are formed. "An organized group often numbering in the hundreds intrudes and begins chanting *bhajans* – hymns – and slogans inside the church and prayer hall while the service is on. They shout accusations of 'forcible conversion' without defining what this is or any evidence that it is happening. They are often violent and assault those gathered for prayer. The mob prevents the worshippers from recording the violence, leaving little or no visual record of the offense. Often the result is that worshippers stop coming to the Mass, and perhaps that's what is intended."

Who, and how, will the empowered mob and its paymasters be held to account remains the question before civil society and the Church in India. ©

Courtesy: UCANEWS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JOHN DAYAL** is a veteran journalist and human rights activist.

# ELECTORAL REFORMS BREACH OF PROTOCOL

A wrong precedence has been made by the PMO which invited the Election Commission for a meeting on electoral reforms

BY **MANOJ VARGHESE**

Gone are the days when the Election Commission of India, especially when T N Seshan was its chief, showed its teeth. The District Collectors and the IAS officers took orders from the Commission. But, recently the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) was called by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), vide a communicque from the Law Ministry, to attend a meeting, along with the full bench. The meeting was to be presided over by the principal secretary of PMO. With the elections round the corner in five states, such a meeting is suspicious. As per the protocol, the CEC is listed at number 9, whereas the principal secretary is ranked at number 23.

According to S Y Qureshi, former Chief Election Commissioner, no such informal meeting can take place on a serious topic like electoral reforms. A wrong precedence has been set. It shows the weakness of the CEC. Quoting his own example, he stated that he had relinquished the post of IAS officer, well in advance, before taking up as the Election Commissioner. He had refused the offer of the then Union Law Minister Veerapa Moily to meet over a cup of tea. Free and fair elections is the responsibility of EC. 'Neutrality' needs to be visible.

"Earlier, on the demand of BJP as Opposition, we had shifted officials even upto the level of state secretary. Autonomous status of EC is supreme and it needs to be honoured. The dignity of our Constitution should be maintained. Setting up a wall against the political parties is mandatory for the EC to maintain its credibility. The PM and the CEC have taken an oath to uphold the dignity of the Constitution. Breach of constitutional impropriety cannot be tolerated," he added.

The Rajya Sabha has since passed the Election Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2021, to link electoral roll data with Aadhaar. The Bill was passed in the Lok



Sabha amid protests from the Opposition demanding it to be sent to a Parliamentary Standing Committee. The Rajya Sabha approved the Bill, after members of the BJP, JD(U), YSRCP, AIADMK, BJD and TMC-M supported it, saying it will help in eradicating duplicate and fake voters from the electoral rolls. However, members of the Opposition parties like the Congress, Trinamool Congress, Left parties, the DMK and the Nationalist Congress Party staged a walkout in protest.

According to the Union Law Minister Kiren Rijju, the Bill would allow the electoral roll to be linked with Aadhar cards and it will be optional, not mandatory, but it will help us to sieve out fake voters. "The Bill proposes to replace the word 'wife' with 'spouse' to make the act (Representation of the People Act of 1951) gender-neutral. It will also expand the limits of the election premises acquisition."

"Even after 18 years, the system said that one has to wait a whole year to exercise their voting rights if they could not register on January 1 (of the year of revision of electoral roll). This Bill will allow four qual-



ifying dates a year to register as voters." The Bill also seeks to allow the electoral registration officers to get Aadhaar numbers from "persons already included in the electoral roll for the purposes of authentication of entries in the electoral roll, and to identify registration of the name of the same person in the electoral roll of more than one constituency or more than once in the same constituency," Rijju said.

Congress Lok Sabha MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, however, alleged that the Bill was related to the upcoming Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections. "I don't know why the government was in hurry to pass the Bill. It should have been sent to a standing committee. We still don't have a data protection law. This may impact people's voting rights. The Government couldn't keep the account of the Prime Minister from being hacked, it couldn't be expected to protect the data of all the citizens," Chowdhury said.

Five former CECs have condemned the move. Earlier the Supreme Court had stated that Aadhaar card cannot be the basis for casting votes. Voters right is at stake, bogus votes are likely to rise and biometric cannot be the basis. The privacy under Article 21 is breached. Eyebrows are raised on as to how the data of over 90 crore voters will be managed. Earlier, only the EVM was under the lens of suspicion, now the entire move is raising mistrust, say political experts.

Earlier, over 500 intellectuals had approached the government to reconsider its move of electoral reforms. Passing a Bill in 10-15 minutes, with no discussions, is defamatory for the Parliament. Unfortunately, one of the main pillars of democracy, that is law making body, is losing its credibility. Aadhaar is not a safe means, with its availability in 5 minutes at Rs 250. Are we heading towards "One nation and one election" concept. The way such Bills are brought up in a haste, is dubious. Around 310 out of 349 bills have been passed in this manner. 'There is something suspicious', opine some mediemen.

Senior Journalist N K Singh asserts that the intention is not clear. Inefficiency and distress is the reason for introducing the electoral reforms. Government has admitted in courts several times that our data is not complete. One poor girl died after six months of not getting the ration, as her finger print was not matching with the Aadhaar card. Also, the move could be misused based on the caste and religion, he added.

Over 19 lakh Bangladeshi refugees were reported

in the National Register of Citizens. Where have they gone? Have they infiltrated into various parts of the country or have been sent back or have been included in the aadhaar card.

How will the proposed reforms in the electoral system help in sieving out fake voters? "Aadhaar linking with electoral roll will solve one of the major problems in Electoral database management which is multiple enrolment of the same person at different places," said people aware of the developments.

"This may be due to the frequent shifting of residence by electors and getting enrolled in the new place without deleting the previous enrolment. Thus, the possibility of electors whose names appear in more than one electoral roll or at times more than once in the same electoral roll can be removed," they added.

The government functionaries said that once Aadhaar linkage is achieved, the electoral roll data system will instantly alert the existence of previous registration whenever a person applies for new registration. "This will help in cleaning the electoral roll to a great extent and facilitate elector registration in the location at which they are 'ordinarily resident'."

Mallikarjun Kharge, the Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, hit out at the Centre and said the Bill was passed without any "discussion or debate" and called it "mockery of democracy".

During the debate, Congress leader Shashi Tharoor said that Aadhaar, a 12-digit unique identity number that contains biometric and demographic information of citizens, is "only meant to be proof of residence and not proof of citizenship". "If you are in a position asking for Aadhaar for voters, all you are getting is a document that reflects residence, not citizenship. You're potentially giving the vote to non-citizens," Tharoor added.

Aadhaar card can give us the right to vote, but not the right of citizenship. A major chunk of public feels that there should be a ceiling on the expenses of the political parties, but that aspect has been overlooked in the electoral reforms. In the name of electoral reforms, the stature of Election Commission has been reformed. Are we heading towards "One Nation, One Election and One Government" theory? ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**MANOJ VARGHESE** is a Media and Communication Expert

# FLOOD OF FREEBIES IN THE NAME OF WOMEN

If the government actually believed in the role of women in economic growth, why did it not announce various schemes when the country was reeling under the pandemic?

BY JASWANT KAUR

Another year is about to end. The year 2021 will always be remembered as a year of massive destruction. Lakhs of people lost their lives to the pandemic. The second wave of the disease was way more devastating than anyone could imagine. The threat of a third wave is looming large as more and more people test positive for the new variant of the virus called Omicron.

Countries like South Africa, the UK, Denmark and Norway have seen a sudden jump in the number of people who tested positive for Omicron. It has been spreading very fast. India, too, has around 100 such cases at the time of writing. In view of this, is it sensible to have a gathering of over two lakh people albeit women, simply because elections are round the corner, in a state that decides the fate of political parties for Lok Sabha elections? Did we not commit the same mistake early this year during the West Bengal assembly elections?

Ironically, this gathering was organized for the visit of none other than the Prime Minister. Now many would ask why only women were asked to come? Why not men? Well, if one looks at elections



in other states, it is evident that women have played a major role in helping the BJP to win elections. Assam is a case in point. Despite the fact that out of 946 candidates, who fought elections, only 74 were women, 82.4 per cent women turned up for voting.

In fact, schemes like Vistarita Kanaklata Mahila Sabalakaran Yojana, (promising a capital subsidy and a revolving fund of Rs. 50,000 and Rs. 25,000 each respectively to self-help groups), Aideu Handique Mahila Sanman Achoni, (payment of Rs. 300 per month to unmarried or a divorcee woman between the age of 35-60 years), Jeevika Sakhi Express (provision of a two-wheeler to a Jeevika Sakhi or community resource person) and many more were launched.

The most popular one was Orunodoi, a direct benefit transfer targeting women as "primary care-takers of the household, with annual income of less than Rs. 2 lakh. The scheme benefited more than 1.7

The schemes announced by the Prime Minister would have solved the financial crunch people faced if they were announced earlier. Ironically, they were given a monthly allowance of Rs. 500, which was grossly inadequate to meet their basic needs, forget the costs associated with medication



PM Modi launches women-centric initiatives in Prayagraj



**PM Modi to transfer 1000cr in account of SHGs for women empowerment**

million women in Assam. But for these schemes, the BJP would not have won the assembly elections.

Coming back to the gathering of over two lakh women in Uttar Pradesh, it seems that the BJP is repeating the tactics that helped it in winning Assam elections. During his address to the women, the Prime Minister promised to transfer Rs. 1,000 crore directly into the bank accounts of Self Help Groups (SHGs) impacting the lives of 16 lakh women. The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM) will be used for transferring Rs. 1.10 lakh per SHG as community investment fund and 60,000 SHGs will receive a revolving fund of Rs. 15,000 each.

Not only this, he will also transfer money under a scheme supported by the World Bank for creating business correspondent Sakhis (BC-Sakhis) in villages. Typically, a BC-Sakhi acts like a *chalta-firta* (moving) bank for the people staying in remote villages, where a bank is many miles away. The prime minister promised that he will transfer a monthly stipend of Rs. 4,000 into the bank accounts of 20,000 such Sakhis for a period of six months so that they can have a stable source of income until they start earning commission on the transactions done by them.

He also promised to transfer an amount of over Rs. 20 crore to one lakh beneficiaries, Rs. 15,000 each, under the Mukhya Mantri Sumangala Scheme, which provides for conditional cash transfer to a girl

child at different stages of her life.

He also laid the foundation stone of 202 supplementary nutrition manufacturing units at an outlay of Rs. 1 crore each. These units will receive funds through the SHGs. On a lighter note, one may think, why 202? It could have been 200 or 250?

All this is being done in the name of women empowerment. The question is, if the government actually believed in the role of women in economic growth, why did it not announce this scheme when the country was reeling under the pandemic?

In fact, a report titled “State of working India 2021 – one year of Covid-19,” released in May this year, showed that women lost more employment than men during the first wave of the pandemic. Nearly half of the formal salaried workers switched to the informal sector for their survival. The report revealed that 230 million more people fell below the national minimum wage poverty line. It also showed that the poorest households took the largest loans, as compared to their earnings, ironically from the private lenders at very high interest rates.

Even during the latter half of the year, when the restrictions were lifted, the income levels remained low as compared to the pre-pandemic levels. Only 47.6 per cent people remained in the category of



permanent salaried employees, 34.1 per cent became self-employed, 9.8 percent took up daily-wage work and 8.5 per cent became temporarily salaried.

If one talks of the paraphernalia aimed at promoting financial inclusion, it would not be an understatement to say that the entire machinery failed badly. The relief packages (if at all this is the right term to be used) did not reach more than 50 per cent of the intended population. The SHGs, which could get credit easily during the pre-pandemic period, did not get much out of such packages. In fact, the government promised to double the maximum credit limit for women SHGs from Rs. 10 lakh to Rs. 20 lakh. It was claimed that 63 lakh SHGs and seven crore poor households will benefit from it.

A working committee, more popularly known as the U K Sinha committee, constituted by the Reserve Bank of India proposed this change in 2019 in view of increasing inflation. However, the fact is that most of the SHGs are not eligible for the earlier credit limit of Rs. 10 lakh, forget availing of Rs. 20 lakh! On an average, an SHG took a loan of Rs. 1.3 lakh. Even if the loan value was increased, they would not have become eligible to receive Rs 20 lakh. In other words, this scheme never got implemented in real terms and was just an eye wash.

In fact, many SHGs could not even avail of the normal loans, especially those members who migrated back to their native village. Loan was given taking into account the repaying capacity of the members, rather than the prospective source of income or need of the members.

Simply put, the schemes announced by the Prime Minister would have solved the financial crunch people faced if they were announced earlier. Iron-



ically, they were given a monthly allowance of Rs. 500, which was grossly inadequate to meet their basic needs, forget the costs associated with medication.

Last week's announcement is nothing but a poll gimmick to entice the women voters. Ironically, public money is being used to meet their selfish ends. And nothing is being done to keep a check on such practices.

Now many may ask, is it ethical to announce such schemes just before the elections? What is the role of the election commissioner? This question has been raised many times. In fact, it came up for hearing before the Supreme Court in 2019.

The apex court had directed the election commissioner to prepare guidelines for conducting free and fair elections for stopping use of such freebies but nothing concrete has happened in this direction. Unfortunately, the so-called independent institutions like the election commissioners have been put to use by the powers that be to serve their own ends. Till the time institutions like the election commission are given power in real terms, gatherings such as these will continue to be conducted, irrespective of a global threat or an economic crunch. After all, nothing matters more than the power and clout that political positions bring with them. ©

**Independent institutions like the election commissioners have been put to use by the powers that be to serve their own ends**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JASWANT KAUR** is a company secretary, can be reached at [jassi.raai@gmail.com](mailto:jassi.raai@gmail.com)



# THE GAFFE OF THE YEAR

Former CJI Ranjan Gogoi's disingenuous repetition of his own past in his autobiography has been an unmitigated disaster

BY **MATHEW JOHN**

There is an old Arab proverb that you should write the bad things that happen to you in the sand so that they can be easily erased from your memory. I would add that the bad things that you have done should also be written in sand so that they can hopefully be erased from your and the public memory.

Which brings me to the gaffe of the expiring year, 2021. Indubitably, that dubious honour goes to the controversial retired Chief Justice, Ranjan Gogoi, who did not write the bad things that he did in the sand but in the form of his autobiography titled "Justice for the Judge". It has turned out into a humongous clanger, further compounded by the rash of foot in the mouth interviews that he gave to the electronic media.



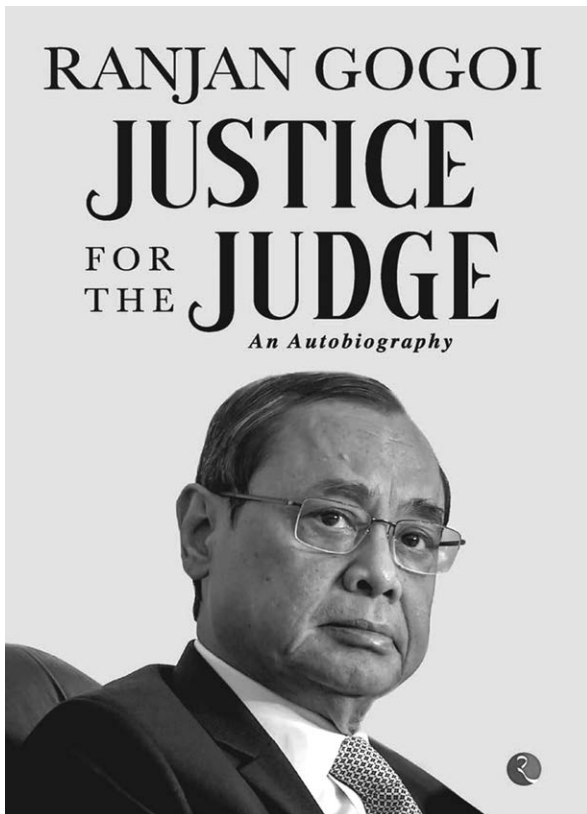
As his version of the controversial verdicts on the sexual harassment charges, Rafale, Ayodhya, the Assam NRC have already been analyzed threadbare and his apologia torn to shreds, I propose to focus, instead, on the overall merits of the book in terms of authenticity and the insights it

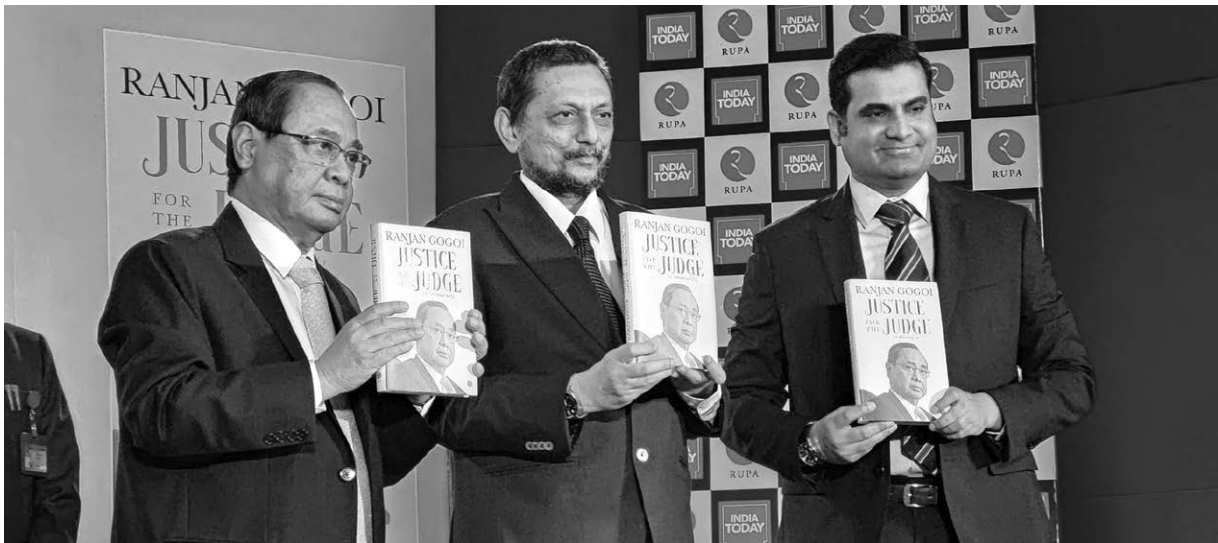
provides into the psyche of the author.

Located where I am, I could not get a hard copy of his book, which is how I like to do my reading, but being of immediate topical interest, I ventured to ask the dear spouse to download the book on her kindle. My request was met with utter disdain. She reminded me of Mark Twain's observation that a man who reads trash has no advantage over the man who cannot read but notwithstanding the insult, I got to read the book on her kindle. In retrospect, her pre-emptive judgement of Ranjan Gogoi's autobiography was spot on!

Two of the greatest writers and humanists have cautioned about the hazards of writing an autobiography. George Orwell had this to say: "Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats." Mark Twain was even more scathing in his diagnosis: "An autobiography is the truest of books, for while it inevitably consists mainly of extinctions of the truth.... the remorseless truth is there between the lines, where the author-cat is raking dust upon it which hides from the disinterested spectator neither it nor its smell.... the results being that the reader knows the author despite his wily diligences." The former Chief Justice has clearly learnt nothing from such cautionary warnings.

His autobiography, written in syntax-challenged, cliché-ridden, desultory prose is a resounding vindication of the two great writers' belief that an autobiography is a cesspool of falsehoods and half-truths, which inevitably exposes the author's many blemishes. To give one example of the twisted verbiage of the conflicted soul: "... why from one perspective





the institution may appear to be shrouded in opacity and why, at the same time, this may be necessary. I also disclose that opacity or lack of transparency is not synonymous with absence of correct and cogent reasons for decisions taken.”

The book kicks off on the wrong foot. The blurb announces the book as “the story of a man of consummate ambition”, at best a left-handed compliment when one considers that overweening ambition has a tendency to dispense with other human values. One is then struck by the author’s use of “Prologue” for the introduction to his book, a term that is normally deployed as a rubric for the introductory section in a fictional or dramatic work, but having diligently ploughed through the contents, I cannot help but conclude that it is a Freudian slip considering the profusion of fiction in the narration.

This autobiography holds interest only because it is arguably about the most infamous period in the history of the Supreme Court when he was the CJI. His prologue immediately puts one on guard. When the author proclaims that he would be giving “an accurate perspective of the working of the judicial system, clearing of the fog of misinformation” and how he showed “the courage to take decisions, true to his conscience, without favour and fear of consequences or brickbats from certain quarters”, the reader knows that he has to watch out.

Gogoi declares that his book is a “frank revelation” of happenings, and that he has been “as forthright as always”. Coming from a man who used the “sealed cover” trickery to conceal critical information from the public in the Rafale case, who resorted to the

secret in-house procedure to shroud the investigation of the sexual assault allegations against him, and who shelved the Kashmir habeas corpus and electoral bond petitions in a sellout to the political executive, that’s a bit rich.

The fictional element in the telling of his life story is straightaway apparent. Can you trust a man who dresses up even his failures so that they are never attributed to his own inadequacy but are due to somebody else or quirky fate? About his performance in the Civil Services examination, he states that he qualified for the interview and then: “All went well until I reached the last person on the interview panel -- Dr Sarup Singh, former VC of DU. I gave a reply that made Dr Singh considerably agitated. I sensed that I had been eliminated. I was proved right when the results were declared.”

Gogoi’s version is a complete misrepresentation of the selection process for IAS recruitment of his time. A candidate’s suitability was adjudged, not on a single answer in the half-hour interview before a full-fledged board but on his overall score in the written exam and interview combined comprising 1750 marks, of which 300 marks were earmarked for the interview. Gogoi insults the reader with such mendacious hogwash!

It is difficult to respect a man who gives inconsistent, even contradictory arguments to justify his actions. About the Ayodhya case reaching fruition in his watch, Gogoi boasts: “While the contribution of my brother judges.... must be acknowledged, what cannot be lost sight of is that without the iron will of the CJI as the leader, the culmination of the

matter would not have been possible.” In effect, he confirmed the status of the CJI as the driving force in the Court hierarchy who has his way when he decides to.

Now for the doublespeak when confronted with his biggest test as CJI -- his alleged sexual assault of a junior court functionary. As the accused in the case, he breached all norms of jurisprudence by presiding over the first committee that issued an “innocent” order (but actually a pre-emptive order) urging the media to show restraint in the coverage of “wild and scandalous allegations which irreparably damage reputation and negate independence of judiciary.”

By his direct involvement in the whole process, including nomination of the investigative head of the in-house committee to decide his own case, he was certainly displaying the “iron will of the CJI as leader” -- his phrase congratulating himself on the Ayodhya verdict. And yet he has the gall to suggest that although in hindsight he should not have been on the committee, he had ensured an impartial probe by appointing his good friend, Justice Bobde, to head the in-house inquiry committee that dismissed the charges.

His point-blank refusal to set up a committee of retired SC judges or outsiders to probe the charges on the grounds that it vitiated the laid-down procedures for such in-house committees contradicts the strong views expressed by him on Rafale: “The highest court in the land cannot be understood to be entrapped by any particular procedure and must always be left with the freedom to develop its own procedures from time to time.” Expediency was what determined his actions as CJI and not principle.

Democracy is best served when there is a putative tension between the judiciary and the political executive, more so at a time when the democratic space is shrinking. But Gogoi sees the relationship in an altogether different light. According to his version of judicial autonomy, “our judges have perfected the means of retaining their independence without getting into any confrontation with the executive”, which is, in truth, an accurate and polite description of a compromised judiciary.

While the world expressed concerns regarding the exercise of arbitrary executive power and diminishing freedoms in India, the Supreme Court, during his tenure as Chief Justice, helped the executive in its dirty work by drawing a veil of secrecy through



the “sealed cover” subterfuge in the Rafale case and by endorsing the lame government trope of “national security”. With the very same intent of helping the regime, he relegated to the back burner the habeas corpus petitions of Kashmir and the foul-smelling electoral bonds issue for the flimsiest of reasons. Although he has not said so in his book, he can rightfully claim credit for doing more than any other public functionary to shore up a corrupt, majoritarian government.

It is no surprise that a recurring theme throughout is his apoplectic rage against a certain section of civil society that he does not name, but we know who they are. Doppelgänger-like, he shares the present regime’s hostility toward dissidents and critics who have relentlessly focused on exposing the transgressions of the governing elite. Sadly for him, his memoirs have provided grist for even more lethal attacks on his legacy.

Given the fierce blowback that has greeted his autobiography, he must surely be rueing the fact that the ink didn’t run dry before he put pen to paper. Anyone who has had the strength of will to be able to go through this book will confirm that Gogoi’s disingenuous repetition of his own past has been an unmitigated disaster. My studied assessment is that by writing his autobiography, the former CJI has authored his own infamy! ©

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**MATHEW JOHN** is a former civil servant

# CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS INSIGHTS FROM NATIVITY NARRATIVES

Restrictions on the festivities and the threat from the right wing groups is an opportunity for the followers of Jesus to focus more on the message of Christmas and equip themselves in order to give powerful witness to Jesus

BY **JACOB PEENIKAPARAMBIL**

The celebration of Christmas in 2021 also comes under the shadow of restrictions due to the increasing number of Omicron variant of coronavirus. Some state governments have already announced limits on the festivities related to Christmas and New Year. Added to the worry regarding the spread of the pandemic, the Christian community in India is constantly under the threat of violence from the right wing hooligans. They may barge into prayer halls and churches and unleash violence on the faithful even on the Christmas day accusing them of conversion, and the police may remain as mere spectators.

Restrictions on the festivities and the threat from the right wing groups may be an opportunity for the followers of Jesus to focus more on the message of Christmas and equip themselves in order to give powerful witness to Jesus. A reflection on the Gospel narratives related to the birth of Jesus can help the



followers of Jesus to draw useful insights for strengthening their faith, and to live their faith against various odds, including persecutions.

## 1) Making Right Choices in Life

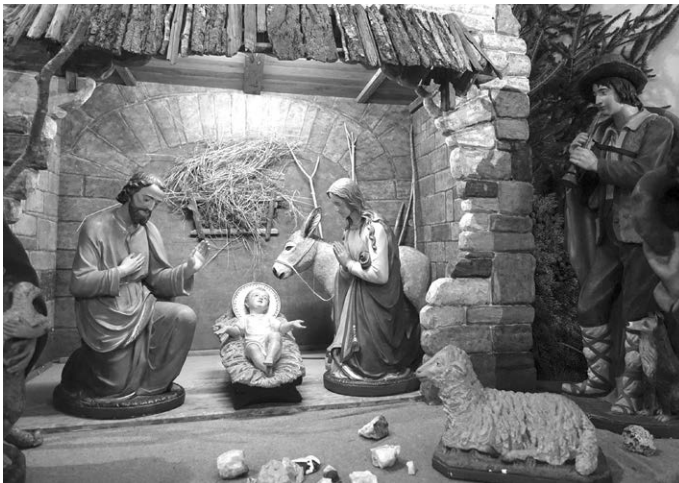
Mary's "yes" to become the mother of Jesus is an invitation to all followers of Jesus to make right choices in life. Every choice has corresponding challenges and Mary too had many challenges. But she had the courage to accept the challenges after weighing the benefits to humanity if she said "Yes" to God.

Everyday life provides the followers of Jesus with challenging situations to make their choices: choice to follow the crowd or to make a difference by setting new trends; a choice to tell lies and escape punishment or tell the truth and suffer the consequences; a choice to be original or to copy others ideas and style; a choice to be indifferent and allow injustice to

flourish or to speak for justice and to pay the price, as many social activists and journalists are doing in India under the BJP regime.

## 2) Life is not about Receiving but Giving

God became a human being in the person of Jesus so that people may have life and have it abundantly. Jesus taught his disciples by his life and discourses that the purpose of life is achieved by giving, giving without expecting anything in return. Mary presented herself as an excellent example of giving by going in haste to serve her cousin Elizabeth who became pregnant in her advanced age. Her





response was immediate and without any request from Elisabeth.

Life provides abundance of opportunities to the followers of Jesus to bring relief, consolation and joy in lives of those who are in need by giving time, talents and financial and material resources. When millions of people are suffering due to the consequences of the pandemic, are the followers of Jesus generous to share their resources with the needy?

### 3) Simplicity and Wisdom Lead to Discernment of the Divine and Manifestation of the Divine

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem People did not recognize the messiah in child Jesus. That is why Mary and Joseph did not get a place and Mary had to give birth to Jesus in a manger. But two groups of people could discern the divine in child Jesus. They are the simple shepherds who were given the news about the birth of Jesus by angels and the three wise men, magi, who came from the east guided by a star. The shepherds were simple people without prejudices and they were open to the message from God. As a result they could perceive the messiah in child Jesus. The magi because of their eagerness to search and learn with openness could discern the messiah in the child Jesus.

In order to see God in human beings and perceive the divine plan in the phenomenal changes taking place in the world and in India, and respond to them creatively the followers of Jesus need a combination of simplicity, openness and intelligence. In practical terms, the Christian faithful are to be empow-

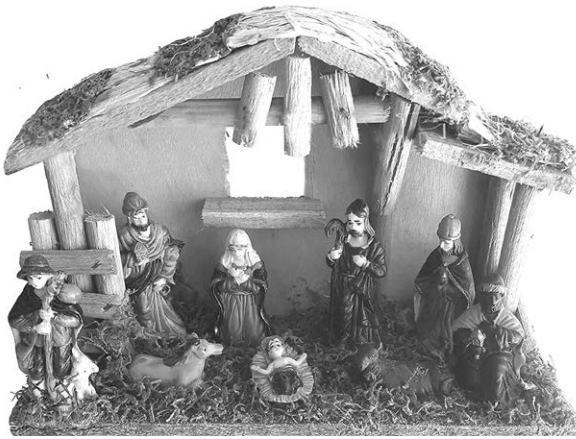
ered through a holistic pastoral approach so that they would be able to take leadership in the society at large and in their respective fields/professions. Instead of investing resources to build grandiose churches and erecting huge statues, resources are to be invested in the human development of the faithful.

Leaders of Christian communities, especially bishops, priests and the Religious, also have to undergo a radical change in their mindset in order to discern the divine and manifest the divine through their interventions in society. They need to concentrate on human resource development of the Church personnel instead of going after aimless institutional expansion so that they become influential leaders who can function as salt and light in contemporary society.

### 4) Leaders Need to Avoid Obsession with Power and Use Power only for Fulfilling Responsibilities

Leaders in any community are entrusted with certain powers and these powers are given to them to fulfill their responsibilities. Sometimes the leaders become obsessed with their powers and forget their responsibilities and even misuse their power. When King Herod heard from the magi about the birth of “a baby born to be the king of Jews”, he was very upset. He felt threatened about his power and it led to the massacre of thousands of boys in Bethlehem and its neighbourhood, who were two years old and younger.

Jesus presented himself as a sublime example of leadership. He told his disciples bluntly that authority is for service and not to lord over others. He also



said that the “Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28). By presenting the parable of the Good Shepherd Jesus explained to his disciples the qualities needed for a leader: deep knowledge about the people, care and concern for the people, leading from the front and readiness to protect people even by laying down one’s life. When the Christian community in India is facing constant attacks from the right wing groups the leaders have to introspect whether they have the expected leadership qualities and commitment to lead their people through crisis management and crisis prevention.

### 5) Be Innocent as Doves and Prudent as Serpents

When Joseph and Mary came to know about the order of King Herod to kill all male children below the age of two, they escaped to Egypt and remained there till the death of Herod. Jesus could foresee the opposition and harassment his followers would have to face in the future. That is why he advised them to be innocent as doves and prudent as serpents.

When the followers of Jesus have to face crises, they should not compromise with their integrity. At the same time they may not go for a direct confrontation with the adversaries. In the context of India today prudence on the part of the followers of Jesus demands building public relations, especially with the members of civil society, local leaders and officials. Prudence also demands cultural adaptation. The majority community has a perception that Muslims and Christians in India follow an alien culture. Failure to adapt to the cultural ethos of people, especially in the mission areas, can lead to alienation from people. The followers of Jesus, especially the priests and reli-

gious, have to introspect whether they are representing an alien culture because of their attire, food habits and lack of proficiency in local language.

### 6) Become Humane - Essence of Spirituality

God became human in the person of Jesus in order to teach men and women how to live as human beings. The Gospels depict a Jesus who is endowed with all noble human qualities like selfless love, forgiveness, compassion, courage, respect for individuals etc. Only when the followers of Jesus are able to reflect these qualities in their lives, will they be able to witness Jesus. As Jesus was a man for others, the followers of Jesus also have to become altruistic.

Rituals, prayers and preaching about Jesus cannot replace following the way of Jesus. Mahatma Gandhi often challenged the foreign missionaries of his time to live the values of Jesus instead of proving the superiority of Christian religion by presenting theological arguments. Gandhiji told them, “You Christians, especially missionaries, should begin to live more like Christ. You should spread more of the Gospel of love and you should study non-Christian faiths to have a more sympathetic understanding of them.”

To be humane, the followers of Jesus also have to undergo a paradigm shift from religiosity of rituals to spirituality of practicing the core values of Jesus. That is why Jesus gave a new commandment to his disciples on the eve of his death. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). The three main characteristics of love, as reflected in the teachings of Jesus, are forgiveness, compassion and non-discrimination or respecting the dignity of every individual.

Let the celebration of Christmas 2021 be an occasion for the followers of Jesus, especially those who are in India, to introspect whether they have been sincere in following the way of Jesus and effective in witnessing Jesus, the “Son of Man”. The most effective means to resolve as well as to prevent crises faced by Christians in India today is to follow THE WAY OF JESUS as depicted in the Gospels. ©

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JACOB PEENIKAPARAMBIL** is a trainer and consultant to Non-Profit Organizations and presently a team member of Universal Solidarity Movement (USM) Indore. He can be reached at: [jacobpt48@gmail.com](mailto:jacobpt48@gmail.com)

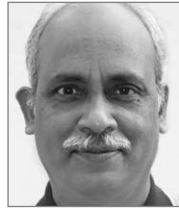
# BEYOND CRIBS AND CAKES

The Modi Govt. had made Christmas as Good Governance Day, to honour former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, making it a working day for govt. staff. But the governance in the last few years is far from being good

BY **JULIAN S DAS**

**T**he birth of Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem may not mean much to the majority of this nation, but surely it means a lot to those who are convinced that peace and joy are gifts lavished on us who did not merit this magnanimous act of God. It is one thing to refuse to accept grace, freely given to us, but it is a different matter when such grace is abused and tarnished, and that is exactly what is making the year-end festive mood gloomy and melancholic.

But it matters if a cross-section of the society is forced to forego the festive mood, because those who have power over them might have thought it is better that they grope in darkness and do not see the light of day. There is immense sadistic joy to witness those on the other side of the fence starve



and die, feel the pain in their bones and are subjected to slow death.

## Cosmopolitan Christmas

We come across missionary school children of all religions preparing the adorable crib in their houses. Most of them might

not believe in what Christians profess, practice and promote; but they know that the crib is one little way how they join the universal community in celebrating the unique event in human history, where God entered the human world to change things which were considered 'unchangeable'.

How we wish the adults not only allow their little ones to do what pleases them or permit them grudgingly, but join their little fancies and enjoy what the air around is full of. If that would happen, then there



would be too little violence and persecution against Christians in the country, and there would be greater regard for what the Christian missionaries have contributed to nation-building (perhaps much more than all the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or the Bajrang Dal, or their parental organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, all put together). If only these fanatics leave behind the religious part aside for a while and look at issues from a different vantage point, then they would have too little to hate the Christians for.

### **Good Governance or Good Riddance?**

It might sound crazy, but there have been people around in our country, who thought one of the best ways to smother the spirit of Christmas was to create an alibi, which will throw mud on those who have lined up a series of celebrations and merry-making with their family and friends. Thank God, there is a good enough reason, if we go by those who govern us, to dump the Christmas and raise the flags of 'Good Governance Day' on the very day.

The former Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, whose birth day coincides with the babe in the manger, would have never allowed his name dragged in to shroud Christmas joy; the co-founder of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) surely was not such a hard-hearted man, as his successors turned out to be. The 'Susashan Divas', as it is dubbed in Hindi, is a tribute to the man, who had contributed to the building of the name through his good governance. The idea behind instituting an annual day was to "honour Prime Minister Vajpayee by fostering awareness among the Indian people of accountability in government".

Though Christmas has been a gazetted holiday, after the institution of the Good Governance Day, it is made a working day for the government, which implies that Christian government employees would be duty-bound to attend office



This is a tribute made by the incumbent PM Narendra Modi on December 23, 2014, while honouring the then 90-year-old Vajpayee and Madan Mohan Malaviya posthumously with the highest Indian civilian award, Bharat Ratna, bestowed on them by the then President Pranab Mukherjee.

What is ironical about the institution of the Good Governance Day by Modi is that he is the one who indulged in anything other than being accountable, with his historic move with "PM Cares" fund which is not audited, which is not accountable to those who doled out their mite, hoping it would reach the most deserving of the nation.

If Modi meant to follow his mentor in being accountable, then he would not have thought of a shadow account, or at least would have brought it under the government exchequer or private Registered Society or Trust, whose accounts should be audited and made public.

### **Sabotaging Serenity**

At the first sight, the great work of instituting a day to honour a former Prime Minister may be praise worthy, and making his birth day as a model day of good governance may be seen as noble. But behind the façade of these noble ideologies is the hidden face of the Hindutvawadis who are ready to sabotage the peace and joy of Christmas.

Though Christmas has been a gazetted holiday, after the institution of the Good Governance Day, it is made a working day for the government, which implies that Christian government employees would be duty-bound to attend office, on the second biggest feast of their religion.



## What is ironical about the institution of the Good Governance Day by Modi is that he is the one who indulged in anything other than being accountable, with his historic move with “PM Cares” fund which is not audited

We had seen such things happening when the Election Commission of India deliberately held Panchayat or Municipality or Assembly or Lok Sabha elections on Good Friday, and compelling Christian teachers and poll officers to be on duty, even on one of the most important days of their religiosity. Obviously, the right-wing leaders cannot accept Christians being joyful. One simple question that we can pose to them is this: Would the leaders do the same on a significant Hindu festival?

### Governance at its worst

Those who claim that the present government at the Centre is an exemplary one, then we may have to take a good look at what governance is. Governance, if it were to be a model, has to be one where all the decisions are not only benefiting those at the lowest rungs of the societal structure, but also those where such people are part of the decision-making process.

We may take a close look at some of the most debated, discussed and hugely opposed Bills passed by the Parliament and have become law like the Citizenship Amendment Act and the three ominous Farm laws (which have since been repealed). The same is the case with demonetization and the Goods and Services Tax. Some of the most sensitive laws of far-reaching consequences have been made at the eleventh hour, giving no adequate time to debate.

If we have to summarise the nature of governance at the Centre, it is far from being 'good', and celebrating once a year 'Day of Good Governance' is not going to change the scenario even the least. For if the Prime Minister and his ministers think that good governance is the need of the hour, then they need to take concrete steps to show the citizens that they are at least moving towards it.

### Saviour Shows the Way

It may be too hard for the hardliners to imagine that a child born in a manger in Bethlehem a little over two thousand years ago could still inspire billions of people across the globe to know what good governance is all about. Let us look at just four characteristics of good governance that the top Indian leaders can learn from the divine child of Bethlehem (if only they have the humility to learn).

First, the Saviour comes down from heaven to the earth, leaving behind the heavenly bliss and thus taking human form; if our leaders can come down from their ivory towers and reach out to those living in ignorance, poverty, hunger, unemployment, lack of habitation, then there would be rays of good governance emerging in our land.

Second, God chose the less known town of Bethlehem to let his Son pitch his tent among humanity; he did not choose the well-fortified city of Jerusalem, but the almost unknown town, and he would live a “hidden” life for the major part of his life. It is time that our leaders leave the comforts of the city and urban living and go to the lesser-known villages and towns to see reality. For this, our leaders will have to take dusty roads.

Third, the new-born child had as his first acquaintances the simple village people and shepherds of the neighbourhood. These are the people who have been on the margins of the society, who have been shunned by the “genteel” society. Good governance can only begin when those on the periphery are first approached and any development is seen from their perspective.

Fourth, the child in the manger also reminds the floating population; we may call them refugees, or migrants or casual labourers. If the leaders care for the people, then they need to take into consideration who are always on the move, either because of survival or because of job opportunities, and provide support systems which would assure that they are well-protected and their basic needs taken care of. That is where good governance can flourish.

Ultimately, it may be impossible to smother the Christmas fire because it is no more in the custody of the Christians but has become the universal symbol of a new beginning where people become first. ©

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JULIAN S DAS** is a freelance video program producer, specialized in production of massive open online courses

# Bob's Banter » BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

bobsbanter@gmail.com



## Political Leaders and Spicy Food..!

Ever so often, a common picture opportunity is when a political leader drops into the house of some poor person and has a meal with him or her. As the Prime Minister launched the Kashi Vishvanath Corridor Project, he supped with construction workers and I wonder whether he asked the same question I asked when I used to sup with my workers, "How do they manage to eat such spicy food!" Or, "my God the food is hot, my tongue is on fire!"

Many years ago while in business, I started a new branch in another city, and while visiting my new sites would sit with my men and have a meal with them. The food was delicious but what was left in my mouth was a burnt tongue! It was around that time that I read Dominique Lapierre's book, 'City of Joy', where the author while talking about the poor in Calcutta and their eating habits was of the view that the spice in food helps abate hunger. 'If you eat very spicy food (he was specifically talking about chilly) food, you tend to feel your stomach is full even though you haven't eaten a nutritious meal.

He brought in a relationship between poverty and spicy food.

Now I am sure the construction workers around the Prime Minister were served the kind of food the PM could eat, but next time political leaders do this photo-opp with the poor, and only if they suddenly drop into some hut, it would be good to see if their taste buds cry out, "Fire! Fire!"

"Who is on fire?"

"Rahul Gandhi eating with that poor lady in her hut!"

"Let's call the fire brigade!"

"Nah!"

"But he's on fire!"

"Yeah and there's a lesson he'll learn after he douses the fire out!"

"What's the lesson?"

"That the poor are hungry! That millions and



millions of people in our country exist on small spicy meals to keep hunger pangs away, and their stomachs need food. That it's not caste or creed that is important in election speeches but food to see people's bellies are full!"

I know I was a chastened businessman after I learnt why my men ate food so hot, so spicy, felt ashamed they had to resort to such gimmicks to fool their stomachs and made efforts to see my men got a better deal. I hope our politicians realize this. And that we encourage them to drop in more often in the homes of the poor, and break bread with them, so they will realize their task is not to bring religious unity in this country but economic upliftment with filled stomachs! Not to stop conversion of people from one faith to another, but simply to convert empty stomachs to full ones!

Then and only then with tongues and mouths on fire will they whisper, "Our job is to nourish the citizen's body, and leave him to nourish his soul himself..! ©

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

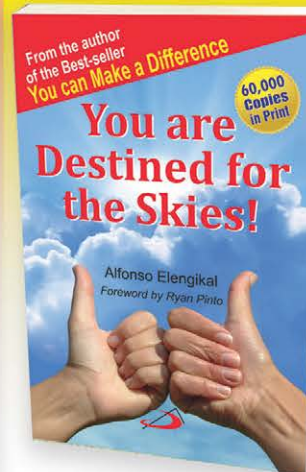
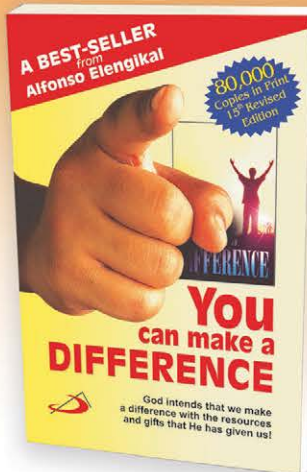
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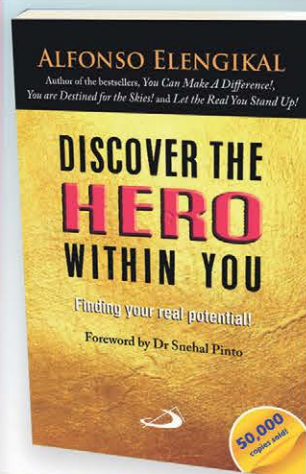
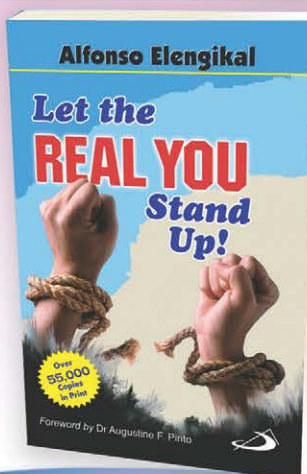
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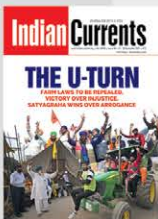


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