

## A Moratorium on Conversions: Who Decides?

Contributed by Joseph D'souza, aicc President  
 Tuesday, 14 October 2008  
 Last Updated Wednesday, 22 October 2008

In the first wave of attacks on Christians in modern India during the late 1990s, a Christian leader flinched under the pressure of Hindu extremists and called for a five year moratorium on conversions. Extremist Hindu forces have repeatedly said Christians are engaged in forced and fraudulent conversions and this is the chief reason for 'spontaneous' violence against Christians. The Christian leader apparently succumbed to the incessant propaganda campaign.

During the rule of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government, the emboldened RSS maneuvered to bring various Christian denominations and associations into a dialogue that would result in a public agreement to end conversions among the downtrodden castes of India. Major Christian organisations were forced to come to the table due to political pressure and veiled threats. After every meeting with the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the spokesperson of the RSS informed the media that the Christians had agreed to their agenda of stopping conversions in modern India.

In the midst of this theatre of the absurd, the All India Christian Council (AICC) was one of the main groups that refused to dialogue with the RSS. This aligned with the position of major civil society leaders and human rights movements in India. This decision was also taken in conjunction with Dalit-Bahujan leaders. The AICC differentiated between a genuine dialogue with non-Christian religious leaders and the sham of 'discussions' with Sangh Parivar outfits who have already decided, before the meeting begins, what they want the outcome to be. The AICC supports a genuine dialogue with other faiths out of our respect for our neighbours — Jesus said we must love our neighbour as ourselves — and in order to maintain civil law, decency, and peace.

Currently, the issue of a moratorium on conversions has emerged in the media in fulfillment of the propaganda of the Sangh Parivar. If the Hindu nationalist parties come to power in New Delhi, I suspect Christian organisations will be forced to come to the table again. Once again the AICC will refuse any dialogue on the issue.

Why? The answer is found in a deeper question.

Who ultimately decides the issue of conversion?

According to the India's Constitution the freedom of religion is given to every individual Indian citizen. He or she has the freedom to believe and practice the faith he or she chooses. The freedom of speech enshrined in the Constitution gives every Indian citizen the right to propagate his faith as long as civil norms and decency are maintained.

In the context of the caste revolt in modern India, a revolution which began with Mahatma Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar, there is another logical reason. If our country does not give the Dalits, tribals and the OBCs (Other Backward Castes) the right to choose their faith, we have effectively imposed permanent slavery of the caste system on them. It was Ambedkar who said that 'I was born a Hindu but I will not die a Hindu'. In 1956 he fulfilled that promise with hundreds of thousands of followers. Since then, rightly or wrongly, the liberation of the oppressed castes is fatefully tied with the choice to convert out of the religion that imposes the caste system on them.

The Indian State tried to deal with caste discrimination by banning the practice of 'untouchability' in the Constitution. With affirmative action provisions through reservation programs, the State tried to lift up the low castes of our society.

In contrast, the Hindu fundamentalist groups led by the RSS only revived and enforced casteist religious practices that demean both the Dalits and also women. These extreme groups have done nothing to enforce the banning of the caste system within their religious systems. It was the Vice-President of the VHP who said the life of a cow is more valuable than the life of a Dalit. This was immediately after five Dalit young men were lynched to death in Jhajjar, Haryana, for skinning a dead cow.

Hindutva groups tried to revive the practice of Sati and have distributed books which contain the Law of Manu which codified the caste system in ancient India.

So who decides on a moratorium on conversions? The RSS? The media? Those who come to the table and dialogue on this issue? Or the oppressed Dalit and low caste person in India? Dare we take away this final and most basic of human rights from the most dehumanized group of people in human civilization?

Those of us in the AICC movement — we are a coalition of many Christian groups from mainline to Pentecostal

&ndash; refuse to strip this right from the Dalits or any oppressed group. And we acknowledge there are two sides to the coin. Thus, we refuse to take away this right even from those who are Christians but may choose another faith. Simply said, we believe that, without the freedom of conscience, all other freedoms become meaningless.

We unconditionally condemn all forced and fraudulent conversions and we consider the terms themselves as oxymoron. We condemn proselytizing or any effort to denigrate another faith.

The targeting of Dalits who turned to Christianity in Orissa is now out in the open. This is blatant violence against Dalits who exercised their freedom of conscience. The Dalits are not stupid in matters of conscience. Their leader Ambedkar has shown them the way. They neither need the State nor upper caste religious leaders to tell them how to make their choices.

The AICC is determined to protect and serve the Dalits. We have stated long ago that we will love and serve them unconditionally with Christ&rsquo;s love whether they are Christians or not.

The Dalit Christian ethnic cleansing of Orissa must be contested by every means possible under the Indian Constitution and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The freedom of religion must be supported in every corner of our beloved country.