

FEAR AND RELIGIOUS STRIFE: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CHURCH BOMBINGS IN INDIA

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Abstract

The bombings of churches, symbols of Christianity in India are part of on-going violence against minorities. In exposing these crimes, a vigilant media creates an environment of fear even as it raises awareness of hate crimes.

INTRODUCTION

When I visited India in June 2000, the newspapers carried extensive reports on several recent church bombings. Generally limited to South India, the bombs were triggered when the churches were not in use. While there was no loss of lives, churches were damaged, and property destroyed. Even though the bombings did not destroy life, they were extensively covered in the mass media.

MEDIA COVERAGE

The newspaper coverage, mostly descriptive, often placed the responsibility for the bombings on the ruling party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). More specifically, blame was ascribed to the radical wing of the party in power. The BJP, a loose coalition of various parties, considers Hinduism, the religion of the majority of Indians, as the core of Indian identity. Consequently, non-Hindus are regarded as not being Indian enough. When the church bombings began to occur, most analyses held the militant wing of the BJP accountable for the violence, though occasionally Pakistan, a country with which India has had a less than affectionate relationship, was blamed for the bombings. Some newspaper stories traced the roots of the violence to forced religious conversions of poor Hindus by Christian missionaries.

Newspaper reports commonly placed these bombings in the context of other attacks against Christians occurring since 1998. For instance a few months earlier, an Australian missionary and his young children were killed in a car burning. A Catholic priest was killed, a nun raped, and graves in a Christian cemetery were desecrated. Shourie (2000) contends that a few of these incidents, such as the alleged rape of a nun, did not take place. The nun, investigative reports stated, only had superficial, self-inflicted injuries. It is likely that some of these incidents were isolated crimes. However, the consequence of all these crimes was the same: the creation of fear in the minority population. *The Hindu*, a leading Indian newspaper stated, "The Archbishop of Bangalore said that the incidents had created fear among the Christians and made them doubt the safety of their religious places" ("promise to Christians," 2000).

Media researchers have commented on the culpability of the media in creating and maintaining a culture of fear (Glassner, 1999). News stories can also set the agenda and bring important issues to the attention of their audience. In this instance, media coverage of violence against Christians exposed these incidents and eventually led to expressions of outrage against such violence. The fear was an unfortunate consequence.

ETHNIC VIOLENCE AND FEAR

Ethnic violence is a recurring, vile story in recent Indian history. The forms it takes vary depending on the place, time, and motives of those involved. The story in June 2000 was about violence against the church, the symbolic structure of the Christian religion.

Christians compose 2.5% of the Indian population. The church provides a community for its people. It is the place where weddings are blessed, babies are welcomed into the fold, and retreats are organized. Educational institutions, often founded and supported by the church, thrive in close physical proximity to the church building. Much like Black churches in the United States, churches in India are primary sources of religious beliefs, promoters of educational institutions, and support structures for families (Morris & Robinson, 1996).

Violence against a symbolic structure is symbolic violence against those associated with it. Places of harmony become places of danger as the attacks create a geography of fear (Taylor, 1995). Arousing fear in a very public context is a tool of domination. It creates helplessness, mistrust, anger and hatred. "No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999, p. 475). Collectively, violence from the perpetrators and fear in the victims ravage a community.

There are other consequences too. With violence becoming the focus of attention, serious problems such as poverty, lack of basic amenities, unemployment, are ignored. Worse, the problems may be blamed on the objects of hate. In emphasizing Hinduism as an integral part of Indian identity, the BJP is drawing on the religious affiliations of its citizenry. In difficult times the move may assure continued political power unless a vigilant media creates awareness in its audience.

In a country like India, a democracy with several languages and religions, and a huge, dense population, arousing fear on religious grounds is a dangerous sign. Scattered religious violence, problematic during normal times, if left to fester, will be perilous during times of crises.

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