



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

An Unfinished Business in India



BY DR M.D. THOMAS

Mr Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, in his historic address at Sirifort Auditorium, New Delhi, on 27 January 2015, declared on crystal clear terms, 'India will succeed as long as it is not splintered along religious lines'. This was a clarion call to all the stakeholders of the 'development' of India as well as to the custodians of the Constitution of India, which proclaims the supreme ideal of religious freedom for its citizens.

President Barack was addressing an audience of invited dignitaries and students, at the end of his overwhelming and much enjoyed visit to India, as chief guest of the Republic Day celebrations, in response to the warm invitation of Prime Minister Modi. He reiterated Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees religious freedom, as a strong statement against fundamentalism and extremism in India as well as in U.S. It may also be recalled that President of India, Mr Pranab Mukherji, in his speech on the eve of Republic Day,

reiterated 'tolerance and goodwill among diverse communities' to be preserved with utmost care and vigilance.

Political circles corroborated to the statement of Barak Obama. 'Without religious freedom how can we have development?' asked Sharad Yadav, President of the Janata Dal (United). Digvijay Singh tweeted, 'would Modi take his friend Barack's advice and ask his friends in the VHP to shut up and request RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat, to stop justifying *Ghar Vapsi* (religious conversions)?' Congress leader Manish Tewari said, 'I hope the Prime Minister listened to his guest carefully'. All these observations raise the vital concerns of the people of this country and speak volumes to all persons in responsible positions.

Obviously, the above message goes, and has to go as well, directly to the ears of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi that majoritarian politics could lead to the splintering of the country. He is the executive custodian of the Constitution of



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the country, which is the most sacred book of its citizens. Even the smallest instance of the violation of Article 25, which guarantees freedom of religion in this secular country, has to disturb his sleep. While legitimately flying high with the romantic friendship with the head of the most powerful country in the world, the timely caution from Mr Obama is to be taken seriously, lest the country slips into really 'bure din', in the place of 'achhe din'.

It is a fact that Mr Modi reached the position of the prime minister through Bharatiya Janata Party. It is also true that he was an active worker of RSS before he came into politics and that the all out support of RSS has been a crucial element in the sweeping electoral victory BJP secured in the last general elections, whose prime ministerial candidate he was. All the same, once he got sworn in as the prime minister, he is the 'prime minister of all citizens in the country', may they belong to different political parties or communities of diverse affiliations. Mr Modi is the prime minister of even the 69% of the citizens who have not voted him or his party in. It is the fundamental right of every citizen and every community to feel that the prime minister is my prime minister and prime minister of the entire country.

What causes anxiety is the secular character of the Constitution of the country that is being shattered. The minority communities are relegated to the status of second class citizens in the country. Violating freedom of faith and religion and discriminating citizens in terms of religious belonging is going to be really disastrous. This is

exactly the anxiety of President Obama, as well. This is a matter of serious concern to all well-meaning persons from all communities in India.

'Vasudhaivkutumbakam' is the most sublime motto of our country. Considering the entire society, the entire earth, as one family is perhaps the most outstanding sentiment in human life. But, while proclaiming the lofty ideal in the most elaborate and eloquent way, failing to consider the citizens of our own country as members of the same family, evidently, is a topsy-turvy of affairs, if not a hypocrisy. There is lot of scope for putting the house of our country in order, before crossing borders of our country. The high-handed practices of our country violate and terrorize the members of our national family and those ways need to be mended on an urgent basis. Before things get worse and go out of control and before other nations laugh at our petty and selfish ways and label us as 'uncivilized', it is timely to take the great lesson from the great friend of India, President Obama.

Yes, religious freedom is an unfinished business in our country. The ball is in the court of the Prime Minister, first and foremost. The citizens of this country expect him to play and that too, play decisively to win and to win together. A winning game is to uphold Article 25 of the Constitution of India and ensure every citizen and every community in this country the freedom of his or her conscience and faith, both in theory and practice.

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