
Persecution: A Theological Perspective

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Abstract

In India, religious persecution is ideologically motivated. Christians endure persecution in various forms. Religious polarization is more disastrous than any other division in society today. Any violation of freedom of religion is against the spirit of human freedom. In this article, Persecution, a violation of religious freedom, is looked at in two dimensions: human rights and faith. Both constitute the content of the theology of persecution. The author argues that while defending the freedom of religion in all possible ways, Christians should face its violation (persecution) with the hope of its redemptive value and heavenly reward. It has spiritual and missional capital also.

Key Words: Persecution, Religion, Minorities, Suffering, Hope, Hindutva

Introduction: Locating the Issue

In India, religious minorities particularly Christians come across various forms of persecution. In the recent past, the Christians had experienced physical assaults, the vandalism of their houses, schools, and worship places, forceful close down of churches, and the arrests of the Christian priests and community workers on the grounds of false allegations of inducing conversions.¹ The fringe groups frequently threaten

¹ Ziya Us Salam, "Christians as Target," *Frontline* (August 28, 2020): 58-59 at 58; "Nuns accused of conversion, forced to get off train Jhansi," *The*

their freedom of religion (right to profess, practice, and propagate) in different ways. They continue to be the victims of hate campaigns and vigilante violence. The call for a campaign against alleged “forced conversions”² leads to “physical targeting of Christian worship services” and activities.³ Sadly, majoritarian religious sentiments aroused by fringe groups do vitiate the social atmosphere. Everything is looked at through the eyes of religion. Even if a voice is raised against injustice or corruption, ‘who raises it’ (religious ‘who’) matters a lot today. Surprisingly, as observed by Pramanik, “Today, religious slogans (Jai Shri Ram) became political slogans.”⁴

We also witness a state slowly getting ‘shaped’ into majoritarian religious nationhood. Religion-coated hyper-nationalism leads the country towards ‘Mob Country’ where not only the marginalized communities but also the religious minorities are subject to mob violence (mob lynching). They are forced to publicly chant “Jai Shri Ram and Jai Hanuman.”⁵ On many occasions, religion (in the case of minorities) determined his/her fate in the hands of the mob.⁶ Many Christian priests/preachers and believers have endured aggression, including mob violence, in the past and continue

Hindu (Lucknow), March 24, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/nuns-accused-of-conversion-forced-to-get-off-train-in-jhansi/article34153286.ece> accessed July 20, 2022; Ziya Us Salam, “Christians at Receiving End,” *Frontline* Vol 39/No.1 (Jan 1-14, 2022): 56-58 at 56 & *The Indian Express* (Pune, Thursday, September 1, 2022), 2.

² *The Indian Express* (Pune, Thursday, September 1, 2022), 1.

³ Ziya Us Salam, “Christians at Receiving End,” 57.

⁴ Probir Pramanik, “Bugles Before Round Two,” *Outlook* (June 17, 2019): 20.

⁵ Vincent Rajkumar, “Editorial,” *Religion and Society* Vol 64 /No. 3 (July, 2019): iii-vi at iii.

⁶ Mahtab Alam, “Why Do Mob Lynchings Still Continue Unabated?” *The Wire*, September 7, 2019, <https://thewire.in/communalism/mob-cow-lynching-vigilante> accessed August 10, 2022 & Ashutosh Sharma, “Spectre of Mob Lynchings Continues...” *Outlook*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/spectre-of-mob-lynchings-continues-to-haunt-india-amid-lacklustre-laws-news-193743>, accessed August 10, 2022.

to face the same in many places though those incidents often go unreported in the mainstream media. For instance, according to the Religious Liberty Commission Yearly Report 2021 of Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI), there were “505 individual incidents of violence” against Christians in India in 2021.⁷ Even the Covid-19 and national lockdown did not reduce the attacks against them.⁸ “The fresh spate of attacks against churches and Christian organizations,” according to Vijayesh Lal, general secretary of EFI, “is all part of a systematic strategy to once again center-forward the term ‘conversion,’ and use that bogey to attack Christians both physically and structurally...”⁹

Instead of condemning mob violence, some try to trace its origin and attribute it to Jesus Christ. Mohan Bhagwat, RSS chief, publicly alleged that “the word (lynching) comes from an incident in the Bible (referring to the incident of a woman caught in adultery, John 8: 1-11) where Jesus Christ told the people to hit a woman with stones if they had never committed any sin in their past.”¹⁰ Without fully understanding the incident and its context, he wrongly accused Jesus, who protected a woman from a mob (men), for promoting mob lynching. All India Catholic Union (AICU) strongly condemned his remarks about mob lynching and stated that he intended to “denigrate Christianity and shift the focus from the rash of lynching of Dalits and religious minorities by gangs, who claim to be protectors of the cow.” In fact, Jesus’ intervention rescued the woman from “a kangaroo court justice” of the

⁷ Religious Liberty Commission Yearly Report 2021,” <https://efionline.org/2022/02/15/religious-liberty-commission-yearly-report-2021/>, accessed August 10, 2022.

⁸ Ziya Us Salam, “Christians as Target,” *Frontline* (August 28, 2020): 58-59 at 58.

⁹ Ziya Us Salam, “Christians at Receiving End,” 57.

¹⁰ “Term Mob Lynching Comes from Bible, says Mohan Bhagwat,” *India Today*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/lynchings-being-used-to-defame-india-hindus-rss-chief-mohan-bhagwat-1607257-2019-10-08> accessed July 20, 2022.

time.¹¹ The existing trends point to a societal atmosphere ripening with a religious flare-up, in which the minority communities are most affected. Christians are more vulnerable because they are numerically less in many places, but not incapable of raising their voice. The reality of persecution identifies our location as the site of the violation of the freedom of religion.

Methodologically, this article attempts to look at persecution from a theological perspective informed by contextual, biblical, and theological resources and documented experiences of the persecuted. It is an ideological and theological engagement that exposes ideological support for persecution and provides a theological framework for resistance against persecution. In this article, I have tried to develop a theology of persecution that invites everyone to participate in the journey of protecting freedom of religion and challenge its violation biblically and constitutionally. Though I know different levels and dimensions of religious persecution, I have restricted the discussion to physical violence/vandalism, one of the expressions of persecution in India.

Persecution and Freedom of Religion

Humans are born free, but unfortunately, they are bound to tradition, religion, culture, ideologies, and class/caste mechanisms. Generally, people enjoy freedom at different levels. In the case of religious freedom, some enjoy restricted freedom if they do not follow majoritarian/official religion in a state. Others, by the virtue of living in a secular state, enjoy equal freedom (theoretically but 'not' always practically) with co-citizens who belong to different religious traditions. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18) affirms that irrespective of state and context the freedom of religion is

¹¹ "Lynching: Christian Body Fumes over RSS Chief's Remark," *India Today*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/christian-body-fumes-over-rss-chief-s-lynching-remark-1608889-2019-10-13>, accessed September 3, 2022.

an inherent human right. It says that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion: this right includes freedom to change his (her) religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his (her) religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.”¹² According to Article 25 (1) of the Indian Constitution, freedom of religion is a fundamental right of a citizen. It says that “Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion.”¹³ The freedom of religion is important because “...a person’s religious convictions are the result of his/her inner convictions,” and “it (freedom of religion) is essential to experience the other forms of freedom.”¹⁴ Today, though not completely, this secular society is polarized in the name of religious identities. The religious polarization appears to be more disastrous than any other sort of division in India. It spews out the poison of intolerance, which in turn results in the persecution of minorities, the violation of the freedom of religion. Any form of violation of freedom of religion is against the spirit of human freedom.

Persecution: Ideologically Motivated

Religious persecution is not simply a spontaneous, emotional outburst in India. Neither it can be fully framed within the box of the conflict of mundane personal or community interests. The various forms of persecution inform us that it is ideologically motivated and strategically executed. According to Bipin Chandra, “Communal violence (persecution), on the other hand, seldom takes place without the prior spread of

¹² “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” in M.A. Thomas, *The Struggle for Human Rights* (Bangalore: ATC, 1992), 112.

¹³ *The Constitution of India* (Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, 1989), 12.

¹⁴ S. Robertson, *Freedom of Religion: A Human Rights Issue* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2007), 244 & 245.

communal thinking (ideology).”¹⁵ For the minorities, particularly the Christians, Hindutva ideology, which identifies them as religious ‘outsiders,’ determines the content of persecution. The aggressive proponents of Hindutva ideology argue that the Christians do not have a love for this land because it is not their holy land although it may be their fatherland. V.D. Savarkar who articulated Hindutva ideology very categorically defines that this land belongs to the people who consider it as their fatherland and holy land. For him, Christians may fulfill the first clause (fatherland), but they fail to prove that India is their holy land because for them Palestine is their ‘holy land.’ Therefore, naturally, their love and loyalty are divided. However, the ‘choice of love’ invites them into the Hindu fold.¹⁶ He wrongly argues that the ‘holy land’ is theologically important for Christians. Jawaharlal Nehru gives a beautiful response to the attempt of defining Indian converts as outsiders, “Indian converts to some of these religions (Christians, Jews, Parsees, Moslems) never ceased to be Indians on account of a change of their faith. They were looked upon in other countries as Indians and foreigners, even though there might have been a community of faith between them...An Indian Christian is looked upon as an Indian wherever he (she) may go.”¹⁷ But, the predicament is that the attempt to ideologically locate Christians outside the landscape of their motherland just because of their religion facilitates persecution.

While Savarkar ideologically placed Christians outside of Hindustan and gave ‘choice of love’ to the Hindu fold, M.S. Golwalkar demanded them to be “wholly subordinated to the Hindu claiming nation nothing, deserving no privileges, far

¹⁵ Bipin Chandra, *Essays on Contemporary India* (Revised Edition, Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1999), 125.

¹⁶ V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva* (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, Fifth Edition, 1969), 113-116.

¹⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (London: Meridian Books Limited, 3rd Edition, 1951), 46.

less any preferential treatment- not even citizens' rights."¹⁸ For him, Christians are "internal threat" because they are involved in proselytization. They are disloyal and anti-national, and with the change of religion, their love and devotion for this nation disappeared.¹⁹ His religious outlook demanded that Christians be submissive to the Hindus (a majority of them least expect it) and prove their national loyalty. For him, religious identity alone defines the loyalty of a citizen. His disciple, Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, another Hindutva ideologue, strongly endorsed his views on religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians. He opined that "the Muslim problem is the oldest, the most complicated and it assumes ever-new forms. This problem has been facing us for the last twelve hundred years."²⁰ He advocated for Hindu *rashtra* (nation) and demanded that Muslims and Christians must identify with Hindu culture.²¹ According to Aakar Patel, "structurally, we have already arrived at a Hindu *rashtra*. What is happening today is the use of the existing law (laws restricting freedom of religion and banning cow slaughter, etc.) to brutalize India's minorities in innovative ways."²² What disturbs the minorities is that the views of the pioneers of Hindutva ideology continue to reflect in the intimidating and inflammatory statements and actions of many Hindutva

¹⁸ M.S. Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan, 1947), 55-56. Today many Sangh Parivar organizations disown this particular position and the book. But their outlook is already shaped by it. It is very much evident in their approach to religious minorities.

¹⁹ M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* Second Edition-Revised and Enlarged (Bangalore: Jagarana Prakashana, 1980), 248, 251 & 256.

²⁰ B.N. Jog, *Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya: Ideology and Perception-Politics for Nation's Sake*, Vol VI (Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 2014, 73), quoted in Shamsul Islam, "Suitable Heroes!," *Indian Currents* Vol. xxviii/No 41 (October 10-16, 2016): 20-22 at 21.

²¹ Pavan Kulkarni, "Deendayal Upadhyaya, Bigoted 'Guiding Force' of a Hindu Rashtra," *The Wire*, October 30, 2017, <https://thewire.in/history/deendayal-upadhyaya-guiding-force-hindu-rashtra>, accessed July 31, 2021.

²² Ziya Us Salam, "Interview with Aakar Patel, former director of Amnesty International India," *Frontline* Vol 38/No 6 (March 26, 2021): 95-97 at 95.

exponents.²³ Though they may represent a minority view, their impact casts anxiety, fear, and pain on the life of religious minorities today.

Anti-conversion (ideological) discourses also contribute to the persecution of minorities. Conversion is discouraged because it develops disruption in the family and community. A convert is even portrayed as an enemy. Swami Vivekananda said, “Every man going out of the Hindu pale is not only a man less but an enemy the more.”²⁴ When people are taught of the negativity of conversion, those who willingly embrace other faith and the members of the respective faith equally face the fury of indoctrinated minds. It happens in the land which once provided shelters to the persecuted and the refugees of all religions. Anti-conversion discourses come from the unwarranted fear of the numerical decline of a particular religion and the loss of political power.²⁵ In India, every incident of persecution is directly or indirectly caused by the influence of the Hindutva ideology articulated in different ways. One may identify extreme, medium, or mild expressions of it. However, the essence of all expressions of Hindutva ideology is the same: you are Christian; therefore, you may not be equally preferred. This outlook fundamentally questions the

²³ For instance, Rajeshwar Singh, an RSS Pracharak and leader of Dharam Jagran Samiti (an organization involved in reconverting Christians and Muslims to Hinduism) said “Muslims and Christians will be wiped out of India by December 31, 2021.” <https://sabrangindia.in/article/muslims-and-christians-will-be-wiped-out-india-december-31-2021-bjp-leader-rajeshwar-singh> accessed March 31, 2021. During the general election in 2019, K.S. Eshwarappa, a BJP leader, said “Christians are not loyal and honest citizens of India. Loksabha (Parliament) tickets (candidature) cannot be distributed to Muslims and Christians under quota. Tickets should be given to those who are loyal to the country.” <https://www.mangalorean.com/bjp-leader-eshwarappas-remarks-christians-are-not-loyal-honest-citizens-of-india-fumes-christians/> accessed March 31, 2021.

²⁴Arun Shourie, *Harvesting Our Souls* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 2000), 1-2.

²⁵E.V. Mathew, “Secular State in India,” in *Secularism: Collection of Articles*, compiled by Vincent Rajkumar (Bangalore: CISRS, 2018), 95.

freedom of religion enshrined in the Constitution. In this social and ideological context, how do we look at persecution?

Theology of Persecution

Persecution, the violation of the freedom of religion, can be looked at in two dimensions: human rights and faith. For me, both constitute the content of the theology of persecution. The former takes us to God who affirms every human being's 'rights'²⁶ and stands with him/her when the rights, including the freedom of religion, are violated even though human beings misinterpret the nature and work of God conveniently. For example, the Book of Exodus portrays how God restored the rights of the people of Israel, who had gone through violation of basic human rights, particularly the right to worship their God. The Egyptian bondage curtailed their freedom of religion.²⁷ When the Israelites demanded their liberty, the Pharaoh responded by persecuting them with increased daily work. (Exodus Ch 5). However, the divine intervention and subsequent liberation of the people of Israel underline that freedom of religion is as imperative as any other form of freedom for meaningful human existence. According to Tertullian, "It is only just and a privilege inherent in human nature that every person should be able to worship according to his own convictions; the religious practice of one person neither harms nor helps another."²⁸

Jesus revealed God, the cause of human rights, by his incarnational act and lived as the champion of freedom of religion. Jesus' act of cleansing the Temple (Matthew 21: 12-13), his assertion of the first of the greatest commandments

²⁶ Today's language

²⁷ M. Stephen, *Human Rights: Concepts and Perspectives* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2002), 40.

²⁸ Robert Louis Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 1.
https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Liberty_in_the_Things_of_God.html?id=2ik_vAEACAAJ&redir_esc=y accessed April 5, 2021.

(Matthew 22:28) and his respect for others' faith (e.g., dialogue with Samaritan woman, John 4) provide a base for Christians to assert their right of practicing religion. According to Russell Chandran, Jesus' concern for human rights had both spiritual (freedom of religion) and physical components.²⁹ Hence, the Christian faith, built upon the life of Jesus Christ, upholds freedom of religion and disallows any form of persecution. This should shape Christian behavior in any context of the violation of freedom of religion.

God-talk is God-praxis. Therefore, in the context of persecution where Christians are a minority, the Church, the community of Jesus that derives energy from God, who commanded them to worship God alone and defended the rights of the vulnerable, must strive to protect religious freedom. According to K.C. Abraham, the Church must internalize every human right assertion as a divine endeavor.³⁰ It should lead her to take initiatives of awareness on the violations of religious freedom, express solidarity with the persecuted, initiate legal actions against the violators, participate in the activities of human rights movements, join with similar voices of liberty, sharing the resources with the victims, participate in the life-affirming processes, etc. Though it is risky, the Christian faith demands the community to walk on the perilous path. Though the Christians of one tradition suppressed the freedom of another tradition within Christendom in the past³¹ the recognition and protection of religious freedom must be intrinsic to the life and the mission of Christian communities (Daniel 3; Mt 22:39; 28: 19-20). For John Perkins, "A separation of Church and rights (freedom of religion) is like the separation of faith and works, words and deeds, theology and sociology, theory and practice. There is no

²⁹ J. Russell Chandran, *Christian Ethics* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 137.

³⁰ K.C. Abraham, *Transforming Vision* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2006), 132.

³¹ Robert Louis Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* 1-2, 83-89, 101 & 109.

biblical basis for these separations.”³² Therefore, human rights, particularly religious freedom are “the matter for the Church.”³³ Moreover, the Biblical God works through us because “Our God is an ethical God, not a magical God.”³⁴ It gives a theological framework for our participation in the protection of freedom of religion.

Of course, freedom of religion is a divinely ordained fundamental human right and we need to resist any attempt of its violation. However, what should be our attitude if fringe elements with the connivance of political establishments crush our attempts of resistance? Here comes the second dimension: faith. It refers to the spiritual and missional capital that emerges out of religious persecution. In other words, what is its spiritual and missional value? Affirming the spiritual value of persecution is not to encourage a resistant agency to be silent in times of persecution. Instead, it strengthens the persecuted to put up a resistance with the hope of building up a better tomorrow in this world (history proves it) and the world to come (the resurrection of Jesus gives the assurance).

Biblical stories teach us that persecution is often the inevitable destiny of those who follow the path of God. The prophets endured suffering because they stood for the faith, upheld moral values, and fearlessly proclaimed God’s message to the people and the rulers. For instance, Jeremiah was beaten, chained, and imprisoned (Jeremiah 1:8,17, 5:3, 18:19, 20:2,10, 37:13-16, 38:6, 40:1). Amos was asked to be silent (Amos 2:12, 7:10,12-13). Micaiah was slapped and ordered to be imprisoned (I Kings 22:24). Elijah had to face a death threat from Queen Jezebel (I Kings 19:1). Zechariah and Uriah

³² Shimreingam Shimray, “Tribal Theology and Human Rights,” in *Tribal Theology: A Reader*, edited by Shimreingam Shimray (Jorhat: ETC, 2003), 159.

³³ Robert A. Evans and Alice Frazer Evans, *Human Rights: A Dialogue between the First and Third Worlds* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 164.

³⁴ Robert A. Evans and Alice Frazer Evans, *Human Rights: A Dialogue between the First and Third Worlds*, 197.

were killed (2 Chronicles 24:21, Jeremiah 26:20-23). Jesus endured rejection, mockery, threats, and death on the cross because he did not move away from the mission of God. It gave him a new image, 'suffering servant.'³⁵ John the Baptist was beheaded because he castigated Herod for his immoral relationship (Matthew 14:1-12). James, the brother of John, was killed by King Herod to please the Jews. He imprisoned Peter (Acts 12:1-4) also. Paul was arrested, faced trial and imprisoned (Acts 24-28). These examples of persecuted life prove that persecution happens when he/she lives out his/her faith and boldly participates in the mission of God. It may happen both inside and outside of the faith community.

A Christian is called "not only to believe on him but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29). According to John Chrysostom "This is our life, that is, the natural consequence of an apostolic way of life is to suffer countless evils...So the apostolic life is purposely designed to suffer abuse, to suffer evils, to never have a respite, to never have a cessation of hostilities. And for however many are vigilant, they are not only not harmed by these events, but instead profit from them."³⁶ Being a Christian is a costly experience and risky task. Dietrich Bonhoeffer beautifully narrates the inseparability of discipleship and persecution. For him, 'Discipleship involves suffering. When Christ calls a man (woman), he bids him (her) come and die.' It involves not only sacrificing personal comforts and aspirations but also experiencing suffering and shame at the hands of those who hate Jesus Christ. There is only one option left for the disciples in such a situation: forgive the sins of others as

³⁵Alan J. Delotavo, "Images of Christ in Filipino Culture and Atonement Experiences," *Asia Journal of Theology* Vol. 15\ No 1 (April, 2001): 143-144.

³⁶ Christopher A. Hall, *John Chrysostom's "On Providence": A Translation and Theological Interpretation* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1991), 361, quoted in Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1998), 99-100.

Jesus did on the cross. The passion of Christ provides the energy to forgive the tormentors. Bonhoeffer goes on to say that ‘suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. Following Christ means *passio passive*, suffering.’ This suffering is not an ordinary experience. The persecuted share the fellowship of suffering from Christ on the cross (I Peter 4:13; 2 Corinthians 1:5). It gives him/her joy amid suffering.³⁷ The words of Sr. Meena, a nun raped during anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal, Orissa in 2008,³⁸ express the feeling of being partaken in the suffering of Jesus (Colossians 1:24), “Looking back, I feel that Jesus is not dead on the cross. He is alive on the Cross and is still suffering.” “I feel happy that I got a chance to undergo the experience of being crucified.”³⁹ The experience of direct fellowship with Christ overcomes the pain of persecution.

Though physically and emotionally unbearable, the history of Christian persecution reveals that the persecuted stood firm in faith and hold on to their bold hope. An example of such hope is evident in the words uttered by Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador just a few days before his assassination, “If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people.... A bishop will die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never perish.”⁴⁰ It was long proven in the life of early Christians also. John Chrysostom asked, “In what way were the martyrs harmed, whose souls were broken by the most severe tortures? Didn’t they all shine most brightly at the very moment they were abused, at the time others set traps for them when they nobly stood firm while suffering the worst

³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillan Company, Revised and Unabridged Edition, 1966), 99-101.

³⁸ During the anti-Christian violence in 2007 Christmas and August 2008, according to the Orissa government, 38 Christians lost their lives, while Christian workers compiled a list of over 90 Christians who sacrificed their lives. (Anto Akkara, *Shining Faith in Kandhamal* (Bangalore: ATC, Revised Edition, 2010), 31.)

³⁹ Anto Akkara, *Shining Faith in Kandhamal*, 67 & 69

⁴⁰ Robert A. Evans and Alice Frazer Evans, *Human Rights: A Dialogue between the First and Third Worlds*, 194.

agonies?”⁴¹ We see such bold faith and hope back at home in the testimonies of the poor Christians in Kandhamal. Though it was designed to destroy the faith, the persecution witnessed the expressions of emboldened faith experience. An illiterate Kumaro Kanhar had no hesitation in saying that “I am ready to give up everything for my faith.”⁴² For him, nothing on earth can replace his faith experience. It reveals the power of the persecuted faith, a faith that gives hope for the future. Even at the point of severe persecution, this faith shines forth in the life of people. Leaving the faith, for them, is unthinkable. Asmita, a wife who could not even see the body of her husband who was a pastor, said “That is the last thing (leaving the faith) I would do in life.”⁴³

While experiencing the suffering, the persecuted consider their faith as the source of comfort, hope, and courage. They don't immerse themselves in disappointment (I am not negating such an experience altogether) but move on by the energy they received from the faith. The words of Christudas, who lost his wife, reflect it when he says “This earth is not our final or permanent place. We are only pilgrims here. That is our faith.”⁴⁴ This is not an otherworldly self-consoling statement but a bold expression of internalizing the faith in the time of persecution. A study shows that persecution increased their faith in God⁴⁵ and the courage to stand with their faith. For Abhiram Digal, “Each beating that they gave me has given me more courage and I will never give up my faith.”⁴⁶ It reflected in every aspect of life, including giving Mission Sunday offering out of the small amount they received from the

⁴¹ Christopher A. Hall, *John Chrysostom's "On Providence,"* 334 quoted in Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, 97.

⁴² Anto Akkara, *Shining Faith in Kandhamal*, 58.

⁴³ Anto Akkara, *Shining Faith in Kandhamal*, 34.

⁴⁴ Anto Akkara, *Shining Faith in Kandhamal*, 60.

⁴⁵ Benson Abraham, *Psycho-Social Dimension of Persecuted Christians Experiencing Post-Traumatic Situations in the District of Kandhamal, Odisha: A Pastoral Response* (MTh Thesis, Pune: UBS, March 2012), 68.

⁴⁶ Anto Akkara, *Shining Faith in Kandhamal*, 64.

government to rebuild their destroyed houses.⁴⁷ Surprisingly, the life of the persecuted is the site of shining faith and the persecution (I am not glorifying it) is the time of being vulnerable but strong and hopeful in faith.

The Bible teaches us that earthly persecution is compensated with heavenly reward (Mathew 5:10-12). According to John Calvin, Christians are persecuted because they live out the Gospel which resists the desires of the 'flesh' and continuously exposes its vices. It is, indeed, their destiny on the earth. It does not mean that Christians should always be subjected to or long for persecution, but 'rest on the hope of future reward' if they are persecuted. Christ called us to experience that hope in this world.⁴⁸ For the persecutors, the persecuted may appear to be losers, but they are not!⁴⁹ They are the inheritors of heavenly life. The heavenly reward is the assurance and the rationale for the persecuted to rejoice in the time of suffering (Acts 5:41; 2 Corinthians 4:17; I Peter 1:6-9).⁵⁰ The Christians in Kandhamal affirmed it when they lost their houses, life partners, pastors, livelihoods, and worship places. They embraced the hope of heavenly reward and disproved that they were 'Rice Christians.'⁵¹

God suffers (participates in suffering) with His persecuted people (Acts 9:4). The persecuted are the extended body of Jesus in whom God took human form. Though not equal to the vicarious suffering of Jesus on the cross, the suffering of the persecuted has redemptive value. It is suffering that simultaneously manifests the spirit of forgiveness. This forgiveness brings the tormentors closer to Jesus Christ, who

⁴⁷ Anto Akkara, *Shining Faith in Kandhamal*, 107.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists-Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989 Rpt), 265-266.

⁴⁹ R.T. France, "Mathew," in *New Bible Commentary*, edited by D.A. Carson and et. al. (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 911.

⁵⁰ D.A. Carson, "Mathew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol 8 (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 137.

⁵¹ Anto Akkara, *Shining Faith in Kandhamal*, 20.

is the ultimate embodiment of divine forgiveness. It facilitates the persecutor to experience the saving grace of Jesus. The redemptive value of suffering lies in the very act of forgiveness. Rajnikant Digal, a persecutor who became Christian in Kandhamal, testified that he was attracted to the faith by the forgiving attitude of the persecuted.⁵² Since God participates in the suffering, the persecuted not only exhibit forgiveness but also experience the 'will-to-overcome' the pain inflicted upon them. It touches the mind of the persecutor and may bring him/her into the community of faith. Junos Digal is one such example. He said, "They (Kandhamal Christians) are still suffering. But they have no complaints and they are living happily. There is certainly something special about how their faith strengthens them to overcome difficulties. This has brought me here."⁵³ Forgiveness is not the weakness, but the weapon of the strong in faith. It is the forgiving and reconciling nature of the persecuted Christians that made this faith (once the faith of the weak in many contexts) attractive and redemptive for many, particularly those who sought to destroy it. However, divine participation also calls for human solidarity (Christian solidarity) with the persecuted in times of rejection, humiliation, torture, and death.

Conclusion

Any form of persecution that occurs in the name of religion is a violation of the freedom of religion. It fundamentally challenges the creative design of God, who cares for the people of different faith persuasions. In India, religious persecution is mainly an outcome of the mindset shaped by the Hindutva ideology that frames non-Hindus as the 'other.' It is ironic that both the persecutors and the persecuted share more cultural and historical commonalities than differences. Yet, religious distinction is considered anathema in a pluralistic society. Persecution pushes the minorities into the periphery and

⁵² Anto Akkara, *Shining Faith in Kandhamal*, 117.

⁵³ Anto Akkara, *Shining Faith in Kandhamal*, 115.

restricts one's choice of faith in a secular democratic state. Though the Constitution guarantees "the right to profess, practice, and propagate the religion,"⁵⁴ unfortunately, the nation witnesses the persecution of minorities. Often the moral and political will of society is not bold enough to uphold the values of the Constitution. It is the responsibility of every citizen to respect and protect the free expression of fellow citizens' faith. For Christians, persecution is expected in their faith journey. But it cannot destroy the faith. While defending the freedom of religion in all possible ways Christians should face its violation (persecution) with the hope of its redemptive value and heavenly reward. It is not an experience of passive suffering but of suffering with resistance. It involves fighting for the right (resistance) and faith experience.

⁵⁴ *The Constitution of India* (Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, 1989), 12.