

Excerpts of the speech by His Eminence Telesphore P. Cardinal Toppo, The Archbishop of Ranchi, India on August 10, 2010, in a reception hosted by the Indian American Christians in Washington, DC:

(The Cardinal was visiting Washington after his meeting with Cardinal George, the President of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in Chicago.

His Eminence Toppo was the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) for two terms. He is one of the important leaders of the Christian church in India which comprises of Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical and Orthodox churches.

His Eminence Toppo was made Cardinal by Pope John Paul II on 21 October 2003 and he took part in the 2005 Papal Conclave which elected Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI.

The purpose of His Eminence Cardinal Toppo is to raise support for building a Medical school and a hospital in Northern India.

The Catholic church in India consists of 164 Dioceses and Archdioceses. It runs over 15,000 educational institutions benefiting over 700,000 students in any given year in India. Within the same network, there are 5500 healthcare facilities, of which 750 are hospitals. A polyglot, His Eminence Toppo is fluent in Oraon, Hindi, Sadri, English, and Italian languages).



The Church in India is 2000 years old, but it is still a growing and a promising Church. Christians comprise a meager 2.3% of the total India population of over a billion people, and yet the Church is a force to reckon with. It has 160 Dioceses with over 27,000 priests, 90,000 religious sisters, 4,300 religious brothers working in the numerous parishes, mission stations, educational

and social institutions spread across the Indian subcontinent.....

We can say there were four phases of evangelization in the life of the Church in India. The first phase began in the first century, affected by St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew, the Apostles who came to India. The second phase came after the coming of the explorers and traders from Portugal in the 15th century and along with them the missionaries came, prominent among them being St. Francis Xavier. The third phase was marked by various European Missionaries who at the initiative of the Congregation of the Evangelization of Peoples were sent to different parts of India. The fourth phase of evangelization was dominated by indigenous congregations and local missionaries.....

In India where 70% of its population live in poverty, the Church offers her service to all people, but does so especially to these poor, and preferentially so. To this the Blessed Mother Teresa of Kolkata, bore particular witness, one that focused the attention of India, Asia, and the world, on Jesus.....

It is in the light of the transformation of the poor affected by the mission of the Church that we have to see some of the challenges confronting the Church. As recently witnessed in Orissa, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and other places of India, the persecutions of Christians and missionaries has been basically a fallout of this transformation of the poor brought about by the Church. In Orissa during the first spate of violence in December 2007, it was sad to see the diabolical act of desecration of our places of worship and massive destruction of institutions that we had built over the years for the sake of development of the local people. Whatever that could be looted was taken away, whatever that could be burnt was reduced to ashes and whatever that could not be taken was damaged beyond redemption. The people were left with nothing and have to start from scratch

The second wave of violence followed after the murder of a religious leader on August 23, 2008. Christians were falsely accused of this murder and what followed against them were dastardly and still worse inhuman acts of violence and heinous

crimes. As reported, village after village was attacked, people killed, raped, places of worship ransacked, homes belonging to Christians leveled to the ground, and thousands of Christian people had to flee to the jungle.

Even though some relief camps were established, food distribution and shelter against inclement weather, was far from satisfactory. Christians who were languishing in the jungles unable to return to their homes due to threats from the radicals and of those in the relief camps were intimidated by the same elements. If one wanted to return home, one had to publicly renounce their faith, sign a document stating that one joins the Hindu religion and undergo a humiliating purification rite. This is plain forced conversion.

During recent times, it is more and more that the Church is falsely accused by radical Hindu groups and even political parties, of converting poor people by force, allurements and fraudulent means. Recently many States have introduced anti conversion law despite the Indian Constitution that guarantees the fundamental right of freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion of choice. On the other hand, however, many poor *dalits* and tribals are rampantly 'reconverted' to Hinduism by force in mass campaigns.

What is the real story behind allegations of forced conversions of Tribals/*Dalits* to Christianity? One of the greatest fears of the radical Hindu organizations to stop conversions to Christianity lie in the safeguarding of its own power structure protected by the age old Caste System. Though initially a systematic distribution of work among peoples according to ones capacities, over the years it ended in the discrimination and suppression of lower caste people involved in menial jobs who had to work merely for the benefit of the higher caste people doing white collar jobs. Caste System turned out to be the bane of Hinduism. Conversion to Christianity on the other hand brought about a social transformation in the life of the peoples especially of those belonging to the lower castes. The *Dalits* are the lower caste people whereas the Tribal people have no caste system and were

never Hindus as the radical Hindus claim them to be part of Hindu religion. If the *Dalits* and Tribals which together form 25% of the Indian population convert to other religion, the radicals among Hindus fear the marginalization of their power structure, consequently of the higher castes.

Caste System and Conversion have been major issues of contention with differences even among great Indian Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar. (Dr. Ambedkar is also known as Father of the Indian Constitution who drafted the Indian Constitution). However the consensus on these issues is well expressed in the Indian constitution that guarantees the right to practice and propagate one's religion and conversion is a necessary corollary to this right. If poor and illiterate tribals and *dalits* are capable of voting and choosing governments, surely they must be capable of choosing their religion. Conversion is a legitimate act of social liberation from the Hindu oppressive caste culture. This is now being suppressed by radical Hindu organizations and political parties.

Hinduism is not essentially intolerant. There have been great sages like Swami Vivekananda who preached his exalted Advaita spirituality to the "brothers and sisters of America" in Chicago in 1893 during the World Parliament of Religions. But now unfortunately there also exist many fanatics who are prepared to force Christians to tonsure their heads, drink holy cow urine mixed with cow dung (for purification) and to forcibly reconvert them to Hinduism. However, a minuscule minority of enlightened Hindus have been advocating religious freedom during these turbulent days, while a moderate silent majority enjoy the benefits of Christian services in various fields while ignoring appalling violence in remote areas of the country.

Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh had rightly termed the recent violence against the Christians in Kandhamal region as a "National Shame" - a sentiment shared by most Indians. Atrocities against Christians in India during the last decade are innumerable. Ironically it was Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, who deeply followed many of the Jesus' teachings of

peace and forgiveness and attained freedom for India through *Satyagraha* (adherence to truth) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence).

It is in the midst of increasing elements of communalism, divisiveness and suppression of religious freedom, that the mission of the Church of proclaiming the good news of Christ and serving the poorest of the poor has taken the beating.

In the *Post-Synodal Exhortation* of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II, "Ecclesia in Asia", released by Pope John Paul II during his visit to India in November 1999, the Pope giving credit to Indian historical figures such as Ashoka, Akbar, Shivaji, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Viveka-nanda, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, underlined the importance of universal brotherhood and religious freedom, which he said, constituted "the very heart of human rights". He emphasized that individuals must be recognised as having the right to change their religion, if their conscience so demanded. Indeed it is here that the International Community needs to advocate and pressurize Indian leaders to curb religious fanaticism and the suppression of religious freedom.

The Pontiff also said the "legacy of so many wise teachers in India and in other lands of Asia point in a similar direction" as that of the Christian saints who had the "inexhaustible capacity of the human heart to love God and man, even when this involves great suffering." He said the world would only be transformed if men and women of goodwill, and whole nations, accept that the only path worthy of humanity is that "of peace, of mutual respect, understanding and love, and solidarity with those in need."

Connectedly the Church in India also faces the challenge of the prevailing of rampant inequality and injustice in the country. While some of the richest people live in India, it is also home to the largest number of the world's poor. It is reported that over 200,000 farmers have committed suicide during the last 10 years due to poverty, debt and frustration at their miserable condition. This is part of the dark side of development, and comprises millions of poor people of India, ironically the second fastest growing economy in Asia.

My own homeland, Jharkhand, one of the Union States of India, was mainly created to advance the development of the poor tribals, the original inhabitants of the land from time immemorial. Sadly, today, seven years after the creation of this State, this development remains a distant dream. On the contrary more and more tribals are marginalised, exploited and even displaced.

In India too, although we may have created world-class education and health care institutions, we still have a long way to go before we can ensure quality education and health services to large sections of the population, particularly to the poor and the marginalized. Paul VI said “Development is the new name for peace” and his successor, John Paul II told us there is “no peace without justice”, but it is clear that many governments, many rulers are not listening.

The Church in India runs numerous Educational and Social Institutions especially for the upliftment of the poor. Yet a lot of work is still to be done and millions of people still to be reached. It is here that the mite of generous people can still make a big difference to the life of the poor.

Overall, people across the globe especially Christians need to fervently pray for the Church in India. This is indeed a turning point. If the Church over the world has grown over the last 2000 years despite, the numerous persecutions, the Church in India will also grow even to become stronger. Therefore it is indeed important to pray for the Church in India that during this time of tribulation, Christians may bear true witness to the Gospel and be examples of peace, love and justice.

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+ Telesphore P. Cardinal Toppo
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