

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > India > Fundamentalism, communalism, extreme right, secularism (India) > **Indian nuns protest: Why we must cheer the revolution under way in (...)**

Indian nuns protest: Why we must cheer the revolution under way in Kerala's Christian community

Saturday 20 October 2018, by [THAMPU Valson](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2018).

The support extended to protest by nuns in Kochi has exposed the myth that the Church leadership exercises a hypnotic control over its flock.

Nuns in Kochi on September 13 hold placards during a protest demanding justice for a nun who has accused a bishop of sexual assault in Kerala. The placards, written in Malayalam, say: "Why is the government silent?", "Police, do justice", and "Our lives are threatened". | Sivaram V/Reuters

I rarely see young people attending Sunday services in good numbers in Kerala anymore. I hardly see the church clergy and its leadership making a meaningful effort to cultivate them, either. They simply do not have the means or the courage to deal with young people. This is a clear signal that the Church has lost the nerve to face its future.

Here is a pointer to what lies ahead. I was interviewing candidates for admission to St Stephen's College a few years ago. A candidate from Kerala, conspicuously Christian by name, chose not to be classified as one, despite the immense advantage it entailed by way of gaining admission into the minority run institution. When I asked him why that was, he replied, "I do not want to benefit from my identification with the Church. If I do not make the grade without it, I do not want to be admitted."

Advertisement

This is not a random occurrence. In my experience over the last two decades, young people who take an informed and voluntary interest in church are shrinking in numbers. Many of them are offended by the hypocrisy they see in the Church, or afflicted by the lifelessness of its worship. Many have lost faith in the priestly class and Church hierarchy, whom they hold as irrelevant to their life and times.

This was also evident in the spontaneous support extended earlier this month to the protest by five nuns in Kochi, demanding justice for a colleague who has accused a senior member of the clergy, Bishop Franco Mulakkal, of raping her. A quarter century ago, such a protest would have been inconceivable. The protest, and the support it has received, indicates that much earth has shifted from beneath the foundations of the church in Kerala.

To join the priesthood, Mulakkal took a vow of chastity. Whether he sexually assaulted the complainant is for the courts to ascertain. But to a dispassionate observer, it is strikingly clear that he was treated with uncommon latitude by the investigating agencies. The Kerala police arrested him only on September 21, three months after the nun first filed her complaint alleging that he had sexually assaulted her 13 times between 2014 and 2016 in a convent in the state. The arrest came less than two weeks after nuns from the Missionaries of Jesus congregation, to which the

complainant also belongs, started their protest near the Kerala High Court in Kochi demanding Mulakkal's arrest.

A change on the ground

The struggle of the nuns signals a profound reality – that a groundswell of opinion against blindly following the directives of the clergy is developing among the state's Christian community. It is a shift that all stakeholders of the destiny of Kerala, especially its politicians, need to reckon with.

Advertisement

Several political entities in Kerala, including the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Democratic Front government, are keen to be seen patronising the Church. The political patronage elicited by church leaders is based on the myth that Christians follow the directives of priests and bishops. They do not. The strike by the nuns is a very public expression of this. Community members who see through the hypocrisies of the priestly class and dismiss their exhortations far outnumber those who follow their directives. Nothing else explains the massive support the striking nuns received. This is unlikely to escape the notice of politicians, who tend to be hawk-eyed about what can be profitable to them.

There is no doubt that the Church leadership has fallen short in its response to the nun's complaint. Church officials allegedly failed to act against Mulakkal despite several representations by the complainant. Attempts also seem to have been made to protect Mulakkal from the arm of the law. Days before the nun filed her complaint on June 27, a [case was registered](#) against her and her colleagues by a representative of the Jalandhar diocese for threatening to kill the bishop. Later, the Missionaries of Jesus also issued a statement calling the allegations against Mulakkal "baseless", and condemning the protest by the five nuns of the congregation.

Behind this most unedifying response of the Church seems to be a deep-seated and well-founded anxiety – that if a handful of the faithful take to the street in search of justice denied to them by the Church, it could open the floodgates of grievances. This will in all likelihood not be limited to sexual harassment or assault. Other forms of corruption abound in the church. Such protests usually have a domino effect.

Rape accused Bishop Franco Mulakkal outside a crime branch office on the outskirts of Kochi in Kerala, on September 19, 2018. (Photo credit: Reuters/Sivaram V).

Silver lining

For Christianity in Kerala, however, the struggle by the nuns is the best news yet. It signifies a spiritually authentic phase in the life of the Christian community in the state. If what is spiritually authentic seems religiously anarchic, it points to the alienation between religion and spirituality, between the church and Jesus.

Advertisement

The foremost message from the nuns' struggle is this: It is high time a liberation movement took place with respect to religions. Freedom of religion is an illusion without freedom of conscience. Every system that succumbs to corruption is inhospitable to human welfare and social sanity.

The Mulakkal controversy is a lesson not just for Kerala's Christians, but for all who set their store by religion, especially for those who are beguiled into believing that the threat to a religion is from without. No religion has ever fallen to external attacks. This is a perverse lie.

The [fake Windows update](#) is a never ending process which can prank your friends when you open it in full screen (F11) on their computer.

Valson Thampu

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Scroll

<https://scroll.in/article/895663/nuns-protest-a-religious-revolution-is-under-way-in-keralas-christian-community>