

The Believer's Travails

“Religion is not only oppressed but can also be the oppressor, especially when it is institutionalised. The anti-progressive verdicts of the Deoband school of Islam against female sufferers of sexual violence in India, and the child abuse scandals of Christian churches across the world demonstrate how religion can legitimise conservatism and patriarchy.”

[BY SREERAM CHAULIA]

The death on July 5th of Thich Huyen Quang, Vietnam's crusader for Buddhist religious freedom, extinguished a valiant flicker that refused to bow to French colonialism, American occupation, and communist dictation. Quang spent many decades in gaol and house arrest to fight for the ideal of a Buddhism that is free of state control and manipulation. His dogged determination to prevent Buddhism from being gagged and assimilated into structures of political domination resulted in an extraordinary career of sacrifice for principles.

When a defenceless monk resists mighty authoritarians to preserve the independence of his sect from cooption, it reifies the prized value of religious freedom. For millennia, exemplary individuals and groups have tried to speak truth to power and shield weak religious communities from the onslaught of invaders and predatory states, which anticipate subversion from faith-based movements.

For refusing to toe the communist government's line of state-sanctioned Buddhism in Vietnam, Quang's non-violent followers were branded as “extremist elements working to sabotage the Vietnamese state” and subjected to systematic suppression. Even though they were wedded to the ideals of pacifism, Quang's disciples were relentlessly harassed and hounded as peddlers of “state secrets” and inciters of mutiny.

Because of their doctrinaire atheism, communist states are paranoid about religion.

Faith, after all, is an emotion-tugging force that can lead to mobilisation of the masses. An uprising to save religion from dying could be infectious and incorporate socio-economic and political grievances. If Marx deemed religion to be the opium of the masses that distracts them from the goal of revolution, the post-revolutionary communist state deems religion as the adrenalin of the public that must be neutralised.

The agony of Tibetan Buddhism in China is more poignant than that of Vietnam, since the former has the added dimension of discrimination based on ethnicity. Tibetans are minorities in a Han-majority country as well as Buddhists in a communist state. Buddhism is one of the three major belief systems of China alongside Taoism and Confucianism and there has been a recent relaxation of state restrictions on practising it, but this is limited to the Han people and does not extend to Tibetans. Lama Buddhism of Tibet is chained under the watchful eye of an imprisoning state.

Following the upheaval in Tibet in March 2008, the Chinese state lashed back through a predictable crackdown on Buddhist monasteries. Monks were arrested and confined for long spells and made to undergo compulsory “re-education” classes. These are crude brainwashing sessions in which agents of state compel monks to denounce the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism's spiritual head, and foreswear against his mission of restoring Tibet's cultural autonomy.

Over the years, the Chinese government has sown terror among Tibetans for the crime of adoring Buddhist symbols and

interfered mercilessly in Buddhist succession rules. The most egregious case is that of the disappearance of the traditionally anointed Panchen Lama in 1995 and Beijing's imposition of a pseudo pretender in his place. These softer ways of squeezing Tibetan Buddhism followed the far more brutal methods of Mao Zedong's era, when “class enemies” were smashed with an iron fist.

Before the Chinese Communist Party fully seized Tibet in 1959, there were a total of 4,573 Buddhist monasteries housing 280,000 monks and nuns. Six years later, only 553 monasteries and 6900 monks and nuns were left. In contemporary parlance, Buddhism in Tibet suffered a cultural genocide from which there has been no recovery. Yet, the flame of struggle for religious freedom glows brightly in Tibetan hearts. For faith and homeland, Tibetans still persevere even though the international climate has taken a turn for the worse by placating the emerging superpower, China.

Apart from communist states, there is a tendency for some Islamic countries to be notorious for quashing religious freedoms. In this category of states, minority sects are viewed as threats to “social order” and vectors of viruses that pollute ‘true Islam’. The reasoning behind persecution of certain religions here is that the state is beholden for legitimacy to fundamentalist elites who claim to represent the majority of Muslims. Tolerating minority sects would anger hardliner clerics and their vast base of supporters, thereby endangering the pillars of state stability.

One of the worst examples of religious

oppression under majoritarian tyranny is that of Ahmadiyyas or Qadiyanis in Pakistan. This Islamic reformist sect was founded in 19th century India and avows beliefs considered controversial by mainstream Muslims. Ahmadiyyas' assertion that other prophets followed Muhammad and that Jesus Christ escaped from the Romans to reach Srinagar in Kashmir aroused widespread anger in Pakistan and led to their banishment as non-Muslims by the state in 1974.

The furore to declare Ahmadiyyas as unbelievers was unleashed by Pakistan's chief purveyor of fanaticism, the Jamaat-e-Islami, whose larger goal is to enforce theocracy in the country. So totalitarian is the project of the Jamaat that it felt the need to first weed out Ahmadiyya kufr (disbelief) as a prerequisite to the ultimate establishment of primacy of the Shar'ia.

Today, all madrassas in Pakistan prescribe essential reading materials for students to refute Ahmadiyya 'blasphemy'. Teachers and pupils of even Westernised private schools of Pakistan have been found to treat Ahmadiyyas as the least deserving minority in terms of equal opportunities. Violent incidents of hate crimes against Ahmadiyyas are routine, and the state, be it military or civilian-ruled, is reluctant to rein in the perpetrators. Unlike Pakistan's harassed Shiites, Ahmadiyyas suffer from a paucity of numbers and lack of global sympathy in the Islamic world. With Bangladesh and Indonesia also joining the bandwagon of intimidating Ahmadiyyas and gutting their sacred places, there is little hope. Still, this unfortunate group has defenders who are waging courageous battles.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a poor track record of safeguarding religious freedom of minorities. The Baha'i faith, which upholds non-violence and oneness of humanity, has been a pet target of Iran's ultra-conservative clerics. From the 1979 Islamic revolution to 1998, 200 Baha'is were executed by the Iranian state on the grounds that they were apostates and "enemies of God." Baha'i homes and temples have been repeatedly vandalised by Iranian mobs and government agents, leaving no viable recourse to the victims. Orders from Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's spiritual supremo, to state security agencies and ministries to monitor and demote Baha'is from different walks of life have caused deep anxiety around the world

“ In contemporary parlance, Buddhism in Tibet suffered a cultural genocide from which there has been no recovery. Yet, the flame of struggle for religious freedom glows brightly in Tibetan hearts. For faith and homeland, Tibetans still persevere even though the international climate has taken a turn for the worse by placating the emerging superpower, China. ”

for the safety of this community.

Iran is also infamous for harsh treatment of Sufis, the universal mystics who transcend the theological barriers of mainstream Islam. Sufis are demonised in the jargon of the Iranian state as "deviationists" who are perverting Shiites from the correct path. The Nematullahi and Naqshbandi schools of Iranian Sufism have been vilified in state media and consistently attacked by security services and firebrand fundamentalists. The seat of Shi'a Islam in Iran, Qom, is known to issue authoritative decrees to "eradicate" Sufis for their alleged "links with foreign countries." The popular attraction of Sufism's openness and liberalism is seen as too dangerous to be left unmolested by the theocratic state.

Malaysia is a relatively freer country compared to Pakistan and Iran, but it too has witnessed a steady Islamisation of social life and politics that is sending ominous signs to the Hindu minorities of Indian origin. Hindu rights groups, which grabbed international headlines in 2007 for embarking on Gandhian-style peaceful street protests and boldly facing assaults and arrests by Malaysian police, have drawn attention to the state's "unofficial policy of Hindu temple cleansing" in Kuala Lumpur and neighbouring Selangor.

While the government dismissed the charges as politically motivated and touted its multicultural credentials, the reduced margin of the ruling coalition in the elections of March 2008 owed partly to the protest vote of Hindus, who comprise about 7 percent of Malaysia's population. The poll verdict showed unmistakably that beleaguered Hindus had en masse lost confidence in the ruling establishment. It was one more instance of the thirst for religious freedom which has motivated humans to strive against great odds.

Religion is not only oppressed but can also be the oppressor, especially when it is institutionalised. The anti-progressive verdicts of the Deoband school of Islam against female sufferers of sexual violence in India, and the child abuse scandals of Christian churches across the world demonstrate how religion can legitimise conservatism and patriarchy. I once visited a prominent Hindu temple in New York and came across booklets distributed by the priests in which it was prescribed that it is the "duty of women to obey their husbands." The attitude of most world religions towards homosexuality is even more stifling.

While believers of persecuted faiths sacrifice themselves in the search for dignity and fairness, it is worth recalling that there are individuals and minorities within minority religions who have been marginalised or outcast. Exploitations of religions and within religions are twin sources of injustice in the world against which the human spirit will perpetually revolt. ☪

Sreeram Chaulia is a researcher on international affairs at the Maxwell School of Citizenship in Syracuse, New York. He can be reached at sreeramchaulia@hotmail.com