

Welcome the Ordinance Swami Dayananda Saraswati

I welcome the promulgation of the ordinance by the government of Tamil Nadu to ban religious conversions “by use of force or by allurements or by any fraudulent means.” This is a long-awaited step. A step that ensures for the citizens of Tamil Nadu the most basic of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) in December 1948 holds in Article 18 that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief....” While the article endorses each person’s right to change his or her religion, it does not in any way allow for another person to change a given person’s religion. On the contrary, a systematic, coercive effort to impose one’s religion on another “by use of force or by allurements or by any fraudulent means” is a clear violation of this basic human right. Further, Article 5 of the Bill of Rights states that no one shall be subjected to degrading treatment. No conversion is possible without denigrating the religion and the religious practices of the target person. This denigration hurts the family members and the community of the converted person. He or she has to disown his or her parents and all of their family, denouncing them as wrong, while he or she alone is right. If this doesn’t hurt a person, I wonder what else can cause hurt. The denigration of one’s religion and the humiliation that accompanies the conversion experience are violations of the dignity ensured to every human being. Article 19 grants every person the freedom to hold opinions, and matters of belief, no matter how fervently held, are only matters of opinion. Article 22 ensures that everyone is entitled to the cultural rights indispensable for his or her dignity. Everyone who is a convert from a non-Christian tradition suffers an irreparable alienation from one’s culture and, tragically, from one’s own family. The family, in turn, is alienated from the community. With the conversion experience come shame, isolation, deep personal conflict and ultimately, the seeds for discord. History testifies to the devastating loss of rich and diverse cultures, gone forever in the aftermath of religious conversion. Article 26 (2) of the Declaration of Human Rights requires that education “shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.” Religious conversion is anathema to this. It promotes discord, intolerance and enmity, and as such, is an act of violence. I again say that conversion is an act of violence because it hurts deeply, not only the members of the family of the converted, but his or her entire community. The religious person in every individual is the deepest, inasmuch as

he or she is connected to a force beyond the empirical. One is connected to various persons in one's world. The religious in a given person is connected to a force beyond. That is the reason why the hurt of a religious person is deep and when it becomes acute, it explodes into violence. Conversion is not only violence, it does generate violence.

The hue and cry made by some of the Christian leadership protesting this ordinance against conversion only show that they want to continue their conversion activities. I appeal to them to think about how conversion affects the converted person. This is the time for the Christian leadership to come forward to point out that the ordinance does not violate, but on the contrary, ensures the right of any person to practice his or her religion. Further, it does not single out any particular religious group. In fact, it is the responsibility of the leadership of all religions to allay the fears of the people within their individual fold who have such misgivings. It is not, on the other hand, either responsible or moral for any religious leader to use a distorted interpretation of this ordinance to establish a right to convert. The more such leaders protest, the more they are alienating themselves from the mainstream population who support a religiously plural and just society, committed to the respect and well-being of every one of its members.

India has a long tradition of living in harmony with people of numerous religious beliefs. Hindus did not have any problem whatsoever with the Parsis living in India for centuries. Why? Because they do not cause any hurt by a planned program of conversion. A planned program of evangelization and conversion is a war waged against the native tradition of a country whose people have an openness of heart that is very well known. Their very concept of Isvara allows that kind of accommodation. In fact, the concessions the minorities enjoy in India cannot be seen anywhere in the world. On the other hand, India is the only country where the majority feel oppressed.

I appeal to the political leadership of all other States in India to promulgate similar laws and make sure that all possibilities of religious conflict are avoided, and the tradition of religious harmony in India is maintained. While I congratulate the government of Tamil Nadu for the promulgation of this ordinance, I request all the religious leaders to refrain from doing anything which causes religious disharmony.

Om Tat Sat

Compiled by Swamini Agamananda. This is the ninth and final article of nine articles based on Pujya Swamiji's talks on the said subject matter.