

## RELIGIOUS CONVERSION\*

I wish to discuss in this paper some of the crucially important aspects of the problem of religious conversion in the context of our country and argue, in their light, that, at least in our present context, religious conversion is not only a matter of wrong application but also of the very wrong direction, content and conception of it.

### I

Before we begin consideration of the important aspects of the problem of religious conversion in our country, it is necessary to bear in mind the following points in order to be able to avoid the sort of misunderstandings and confusions we are otherwise likely to fall prey to : (i) It is indeed true that constitutionally we have accepted secularism. So also freedom to follow a certain religion, found and run religious institutions has been proclaimed to be a fundamental right. But none of these, jointly or severally considered, is a licence to indulge in converting followers of one religion into those of another and merely the fact that at least the so-called voluntary religious conversions are not explicitly prohibited by the constitution cannot, in itself, exonerate one from the sin and guilt that indulgence to bring them about is likely to bring with it. (ii) Very often it comes to be said that religious conversion comes to be resorted to as a means of putting an end to inequality and discrimination otherwise noticeable — no matter whether the discrimination and inequality under consideration is religious, social, economic, political or of any other sort. But it needs to be understood that eradication of inequality and discrimination is not an exclusive and unchallenged prerogative of any one religion. Nor is it true that a certain religion is a unique and an exclusive dust-bin of all sorts of discriminations and inequalities that one can imagine. In fact those religions to which religious conversions are commended, as a means of getting rid of inequality and discrimination, abound with some or the other sort of inequalities and discriminations, however hard their followers may find it frankly to acknowledge. (iii) That we constitutionally and culturally uphold religious tolerance should not in any way be understood as a sign of our impotence to be religiously aggressive or incompetence to contain our weakness.

and inefficiency, provided we are left to ourselves and this, in turn, should not be taken to be an inducement to resort to religious conversion. It will be noticed that religious tolerance is a cultural trait and is found reflected in all the religious traditions entrenched, nurtured and reared in our own cultural tradition — Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina, Sikh or any other. Further, the fact that we are tolerant about other religious traditions, no matter whether grown in our cultural tradition or not, in itself, does not justify their tenability or rationality. However, this is an altogether different issue. Nevertheless, our religious tolerance should not, in any way, be considered to be a basis of whatever sort of conclusion one might be pleased to draw from it. (iv) Given that about 85% population of our country is Hindu it is but natural that the ethos or the general system of beliefs guiding our life in all its aspects is and shall have to be Hindu. This, however, does not mean that we must nip in bud plurality of religious faiths or that Hinduism should be the only religion of the land. But, any step going against the Hindu ethos or an attempt to eradicate or even subvert it will have to be considered to be against our national ethos. It is said sometimes that persons of various different religious faiths are equally citizens of the country and hence all of them should be considered when we are talking about our ethos. But this is a mistake. To be a citizen is one thing and which shall be our ethos is different. Further, there is no question of determining our ethos on the basis of any particular religion. For, to say that our ethos is and shall have to be Hindu is neither to aggrandise for hegemony of Hinduism, nor to accept Hindu polity or Hindu fundamentalism, though it is certainly the case that whatever religion one follows one will have to be respectful of the ethos under consideration, and one's following a religion other than Hinduism cannot absolve one from this obligation, no matter whether he is a citizen of our country or not, atleast so long as he is in our country. (v) It is incorrect to say that we must discuss the issue of religious conversion in a context-free situation and milieu. To begin with, the issue of religious conversion does not arise in a context-free situation and, therefore, there is just no question of its being considered in that kind of situation. No religious conversion, problematically worth the name, has been ever resorted to solely for spiritual, religious or even humanitarian consideration.

There always have been political, economic, social—in other words, extra-religious—considerations which are at the base and back of it and it is this that creates an issue out of it. Paṇḍitā Ramābāī or N. V. Tilak voluntarily became converted to Christianity. But this did not create any issue; nor is any instance of this kind likely to create one. The cry of discussing the prolem of religious conversion, context-freely, therefore, is untenable. No one, it seems, except a philosopher with long training in absurdity could succeed in subscribing to it and that too on the basis of rash credulity and lack of intellectual prudence. Lastly, (vi) although it is often said that there should be no objection to voluntary conversion and that such a kind of conversion is a necessary consequence of religious freedom or liberty yet, as remarked earlier, such a kind of voluntary, individualistic case of conversion does not generally create any issue. If all cases of conversion were of this kind then all exercises in propagation of a message of the founder of a religion, propaganda gimmicks, sending missionaries, founding missionary institutions, lures, benefits or promises of benefits — material or otherwise — would all be exercises in futility and redundancy. Thus, the most important reason why a problematic religious conversion becomes a crucial issue is precisely because every case that generally falls under its umbrella and raises a problem is the one that necessarily falls outside the gamut and gambit of the phenomenon of an alleged voluntary religious conversion. A failure to realise this shall hardly enable us to see the different aspects of the problem in their proper perspective.

## II

While one is discussing the problem of religious conversion in our country one should bear one more point in mind. Even if we take into account the problematic cases of religious conversion, in the context of our country, they will be seen to fall under two principal heads : (a) cases of conversion from Hinduism to any other religious traditions where both of them fall within the cultural context of our country; and (b) conversions from Hinduism, on the one hand, to Christianity or to Islam, on the other. Though there are persons belonging to other religious traditions in our country — Judaism, Zoroastrianism etc.—nonetheless, the question of problematic religious conversion does not arise in their relation.

Conversions from Hinduism in the two above-mentioned different directions are very fundamentally different and the sort of problems they raise are, likewise, very crucially dissimilar. Where there is a case of conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism, Jainism or Sikhism, etc. followers of religions on both the sides subscribe to religious tolerance—tolerance of other religious faiths, though not necessarily to their tenability. In the case of conversion from Hinduism to Christianity or Islam, on the contrary, there is not only a transition from one religion to another, or from a religion brought up and nurtured in one cultural tradition to that brought up and nurtured in another but also a transition from religious tolerance to religious intolerance. Therefore, it is incorrect to bring all problematic conversions under one banner simply because each one of them is problematic or even because each of them is prompted by extra-religious consideration. The religious traditions of Christianity and Islam are not only intolerant of those that are nurtured in our cultural tradition but are also intolerant of each other. Otherwise it is hard to understand their followers having fought crusades with a view to establish unquestionable and lasting supremacy of one over the other. That they did not succeed in their pious objective and that they came to adopt a conciliatory attitude towards each other, in itself, is no guarantee that they permanently stand reconciled towards each other and that they will not clash come what may. Likewise, what is reported being done to Zoroastrians and Bahais in Iran, under the guise of firmly establishing Islamic Fundamentalism, is a testimony to the attitude of Islam towards other religions. Hence, the fact that followers of Christianity do not raise a voice against conversions undertaken by those of Islam or vice versa is more a matter of their combined and common religious politics rather than a stance stemming from their conviction of and faith in religious tolerance. They do not, thus, resort to explicit mutual intolerance in our country more as a pragmatic move in their race in religious politics and policies non-discordant with it. However, their so-called tolerance of each other should not deceive us and should not in any way be read as a change of heart on their part. It is not unlikely, therefore, that followers of these two religious traditions may clash against one-another when their political interests will come to collide. And who will be those who will clash in this way in our country

except the converts to these respective traditions? Unless we wish to re-enact the drama of crusades once again and that too in our country, then alone, we can remain unconcerned and undisturbed by the phenomenon of religious conversion in our country. But it is a move that is anti-national and we as citizens of our country should not be a party to it either through doing or refrainment. It is further important to remember that there had been large-scale conversions from Hinduism to Christianity or Islam when members of those religious traditions were rulers. The conversions under consideration occurred with a view to gain membership of the ruling class — or at least be as close to it as possible—while their pace has been considerably slowed down in independent India and where they occur they are prompted by the politics of vote-box. This needs to be understood primarily because this sort of conversions are going to be against our national interest, while the other sort of conversions may not be. For, whatever we do there is no likelihood of our being able to maintain cohesiveness and unity of our country in the face of conversions from Hinduism to Islam or Christianity. History has already taught us one bitter lesson and we should not turn our blind eye to it in order that it may dangerously come to be repeated. This is not to say that other sort of conversions i. e. conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism, Jainism etc. shall not create a novel weakness in us or proliferate an already existing one in us if we do not remain vigilant. But the fact remains that while, other things remaining the same, we may be in a position to contain such a kind of weakness in their face, in the other case this is impossible. Hence the plea to understand the fundamental difference between the two and hence also the need of our paying a close, vigilant and concentrated attention to the phenomenon of conversion from Hinduism to Christianity or Islam with utmost possible urgency. For, any postponement on that count is tantamount to hastening our doom. This is further so because in case of our such a kind of doom there is no country we can look to, while in the case of Christians and followers of Islam there are number of alternatives. We must, therefore, become serious and concerned before it is too late for us to realise that the carpet under our feet is about to be totally snatched away from us and that we stand on the brink of doom's day.

In this context it is not impertinent and irrelevant to refer to the

Memorandum which representatives of various Christian organizations submitted to the Chairman of High-power Panel on Minorities—Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Weaker Sections — demanding, among many other things, that Christians of the origin of Scheduled Caste etc. be granted the same concessions as members of these castes—not because they are Christians but because they belong to Scheduled Caste etc. The memorandum under consideration confuses not only between converted and non-converted members of the Scheduled Castes etc. but also between those converted to Christianity and Islam on the one hand and those converted to Buddhism etc. on the other. Christianity otherwise does not believe in religious discriminations, but for seeking benefits at somebody's cost there is no harm in doing so! What a double-think!! But it also wishes to give the Christians of the origin of Scheduled Caste etc. a double benefit—one because of conversion and another in spite of it, and this is not to be counted as a case of religious discrimination! But it also amounts to confusing between conversion to Buddhism, Sikhism etc. and those to Christianity solely on the ground that even those members of the Scheduled Caste etc. converted to Buddhism etc. continue to get concessions meant for members of the Scheduled Caste and other such communities. Though going rigidly one may think that Buddhists, Sikhs etc. of Scheduled Caste origin should not get those concessions meant for members of Scheduled Castes, yet this is not tenable. For, in the case of the former their hope of their not being discriminated against has come unfortunately to be belied, while in the case of Christians of Scheduled Caste origin this has not happened. Nonetheless, Christians who submitted the above mentioned kind of memorandum indulge into confusion of this kind because it is in their interest to do so; but we need to understand this sort of exercise on their part to be against our national interest and hence need to oppose it.

### III

When one comes to consider the question of religious conversion in the context of our country one notices that the very conception and content of it is sought to be articulated and its framework defined in two principal ways : (a) on the one hand, certain attempts have been made to articulate, describe and justify religious conver-

sions in our country on what, *prima facie*, are taken to be academic grounds; (b) on the contrary, the phenomenon of religious conversion is sought to be understood and justified on extra-academic grounds. Each of these attempts brings in a different kind of problematicity and questionability about it and about religious conversion to the surface, though both of them share the same extra-religiosity as their basis. It is, therefore, necessary to look at each of them separately with a view to see that divergent aspects of religious conversion are at stake and our failure to understand this is likely to hide vitally and crucially important truth about it from us. But to the extent to which this has happened or is likely to happen our comprehension of the phenomenon of religious conversion in our country is likely to be impoverished, inadequate and perverted.

Coming to the academic defence of religious conversion. Here one notices that such a kind of sophisticated attempt at describing and justifying religious conversion has been made especially from the Christian side, irrespective of the distinction between Roman Catholic or Protestant. This is understandable given the fact that it has had a fairly long tradition of intellectual sophistry and that it stands profoundly anchored in Greeko-Roman cultural tradition. We shall attempt, in this section, to briefly outline the important allegedly academic arguments put forth with a view to rationalise and vindicate religious conversions, postponing consideration of extra-academic arguments to a later section, and take a sketchy critical notice of them. They are : (i) First, it is held that an individual is above everything else and it is this consideration that is the backbone and spinal cord of religious conversion.<sup>1</sup> But in this that individual is a member of society is sought to be isolated from that society is made up of individuals, and that individual and society together form an organic whole is sought to be ignored. This seems further to be emphasised with a view to isolating an individual both from society and other individuals and exploiting individual's gullibility, vulnerability and credulity a smooth way is sought to be paved towards his being converted. Instead of, therefore, saying that primacy of individual entails conversion it would be better to say that primacy of individual is brought in with a view to rationalise religious conversions. Further, necessity of religious conversion, according to those who

put forth this argument, is a foregone conclusion and given their unwavering commitment to it they seek to rationalise it. (ii) Second, it is claimed that religious liberty or freedom, which presupposes supremacy of individual, brings in a certain duty and a certain responsibility. The duty consists in discovery of religious truth while the responsibility consists in one's fearlessly accepting it, once it is discovered. Not only that, it is further claimed that once one discovers religious truth it is also his duty to propagate it.<sup>2</sup> Thus, priority of religious truth (over religious falsehood) combined with nobility and primordality of individuality are said unmistakably to necessitate two important but inevitable consequences, viz., subscription to the so discovered truth and its propagation. Implicit, however, in this argument are two crucial twists : (a) The belief that truth—religious truth for that matter—is in the most exclusive, coveted and enviable custody of the religion to which being converted is duly solicited, exhorted and commended, and that (b) propagation of such a truth, once one discovers it through abounding mercy and boundless grace, is an unavoidable consequence following from the irresistible dictates of supremely commanding conscience. We call them twists because neither religious truth is an exclusive prerogative of a given religion nor clear conscience alone dictates and obedience to which we find irresistible. For, even blurred and shaky conscience may demand unwavering obedience to its disastrous command. Further, religions in the world are not classifiable on the count of repertory of truth and those that are repository of nothing else but religious deception and falsehood. This being the case, the argument under consideration fails to provide correct content and conception of religious conversion. (iii) Third, it is claimed that although each religion aspires to discover religious truth yet each one of them does not come to discover the same truth.<sup>3</sup> If that were the case, various religious traditions should have turned out just to be alternative channels and avenues of reaching the same truth and all roads should have led to Rome, sooner or later, by shorter or longer, by comfortable and easily negotiable or torturous and strenuous ways. But all roads do not in this way lead to Rome, though they are, by manipulation if not by design, expected to. So, the argument continues, the truth different religions reach or can reach needs to be relativised and graded. Given this, conversion to

that religion which enables us to discover the zenith and pinnacle of religious truth, in the terminale ascendancy of them, is the only gateway through which alone one can hope to enter the heaven of everlasting peace, prosperity and progress. As almost a logical corollary of the argument we have outlined above, it is further argued that there is such a thing as hierarchy of religions (books like that of Galloway's expound this view and such books in our country are, unfortunately, sacred texts for courses on Philosophy of Religion) and given such a kind of hierarchy, in which certain religions — nay, every other religion with the solitary exception of the one, conversion to which is the only pass through which one may hopefully go to heaven—are permanently denied the right and accessibility to the redeeming, emancipating and liberating religious truth, and to work tirelessly and ceaselessly for converting people belonging to other religions traditions on the lower rung of the ladder in their hierarchy to the one in whose permanent and covetable custody paramount religious truth is exclusively stored is but an inescapable consequence. And further, that with this end in view even if force is resorted to as a means of conversion it should be understood to be an exercise stemming from mercy and compassion towards converted rather than as encroachment on the nobility and supremacy of their individuality. Such an exercise needs to be understood with the same sympathetic and understanding eye, it may be argued, as one needs to take mother's thrashing her own child, for such an exercise is simply of shephard's taming sheep or bringing deliverance to the very doorsteps of the converted, however unconscious, ungrateful and even uncharitable they might be. This argument too is equally untenable. For, first, what kind of doctrine of gradation of religious truths or hierarchy of religions in this? What is its basis and unshakable foundation? Second, whatever its basis, why should the to be converted subscribe to it and on whose authority? Third, to say that conversion is an inevitable consequence of this allegedly un rebuttable argument is a travesty of confusion, error and misunderstanding. It is an exercise in deception of a very high order. It would rather be more correct and accurate to say that in order that religious conversion may follow as a deductive consequence from it the above-stated argument and its corollary are brought in as a sort of super-premiss. But the whole exercise smacks the rat of circularity and

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amounts merely to be rationalization and legitimization of conversion to which independently of this argument one stands already committed. That the sophistry, involved in it, is deceptive and tricky needs to be grasped before we unwittingly and gullibly fall prey to it. (iv) Fourth, it is argued that although one has a natural tie with one's mother-tongue or although one's relation with the culture in which one is born, nurtured and brought up is unalterable, yet such is not the case with one's religion.<sup>4</sup> One's relation with the religion one subscribes to is, after all, contingent, alienable and alterable and this situation unmistakably demands and justifies religious conversion, given, of course, that followers of a certain religion should not subscribe to the religion to which presently they do. This argument has a double twist in it brought in to justify and legitimise conversion without slightest reference to the extra-academic and extra-religious reason on the basis of which it is resorted to and brought in vogue. The double twist is this : while the followers of the religion to which conversions are sought to be engineered need not sever their relation with their language, culture and religion, provided they already subscribe to it, the followers of a religion other than the one to which they are to be converted have no right to subscribe to this kind of commitment. But more importantly, however, while on the part of the former their not changing the religion they follow is what is consistent with the culture they are nurtured in, in the case of the latter their changing their religion is what is non-discordant with the culture they are nurtured and brought up in. Thus, the very logic and rationale that is brought in to legitimise religious conversion itself is discriminatory and it not only classifies and grades religions but also cultures! Secondly, it is a fact that every religion bears a stamp and seal of the culture in which it originated and blossomed. In so far as this is the case no religion can legitimately be severed and alienated from its appropriate culture. But in so far as this is sought to be done, the very basis of conversion remains questionable. The argument seeks to give an impression that religion is, after all, a garb that one is to wrap up oneself in not so much for spiritual, religious or cultural reasons, but rather purely for extra religious reasons! We find it extremely hard to understand as to how one's relation with one's religion can be so unnaturalised and made alterable and alienable just

erratically and whimsically, although for un-announced political reasons. As one's relation with one's mother-tongue or one's culture happens to be built through one's gradually but strenuously being nurtured and brought up into it likewise one's relation with one's religion, and the relation of a religion with its appropriate culture by the same token should be understood similarly. If there is nothing wrong with Christianity or Islam being tied with Indian culture then by the same token there should be nothing wrong with Hinduism or Buddhism or Jainism being tied with European culture. Has it happened? Never. But why? Because something of this kind happening is considered to be unnatural, artificial and untenable. But Christianity or Islam being united with Indian culture is, however, considered to be very natural. In fact it is held to be the most obvious destiny in the direction of which we all should turn our footsteps under the able and unmistakable stewardship of those at whose hands being converted to their religion is our enviable privilege and the surest pathway in the direction of our total and permanent redemption. But, in this way, we are not only out to be usurped of our religion but gradually, although unmistakably, of our culture and civilization as well. It may further be held that there is nothing wrong with a culture, civilization or even religion borrowing something from other culture, civilization or religion that is worthy of immolation and noble enough for absorption. But if this is so as there are number of illustrations of our having borrowed from other cultures and religions—even Christianity and Islam—how many instances of their borrowing from our culture and religion can be cited in support of the argument under consideration? Is it because our culture and religions have nothing worth the name to offer, worthy of being absorbed and praiseworthy of commanding recognition objectively? Certainly not. But this has not happened; nor is there any likelihood of something of this kind happening in the near future at least. This is simply because no sooner it will happen the need for and legitimacy of conversion would have also automatically ceased to have that appeal which it now is claimed to have. Even the alleged service to humanity and nursing and caring the sick, from the so-called humanitarian consideration, through a battalion of nurses, which is considered to be a gift of Christianity to the world at large, is a child of world-war and it is this that

generated Florence Ninetingale and not Christianity, although Christianity was in vogue almost two thousand years prior to that event. This is an illustrious example of exploiting and universalizing an accident of Ninetingale's being a Christian for political design at the hands of Christian missionaries all over the world. (v) Fifthly, it is sometimes argued that contemporarily religion has been acting as a powerful secularising force. Given this and combining this feature of religion with the (alleged) hierarchy of religions, on which religious conversion is (said to be) inevitable, religious conversions could be justified as an important secularization force and instrument.<sup>5</sup> This argument is fallacious, mischievous and misleading. The fallaciousness of the argument consists in the fact that necessity of conversion is not established on the basis of its secularization force but rather via the doctrine of hierarchy of religions and we have already seen that the latter itself is fallacious. Secondly, secularising aspect of religion needs to be established and not assumed, and this can be done only if one succeeds in proving that secularisation is part of a religion by its very design. In fact in the case of some religions it can very well be shown that they and secularization are simply inconsistent with each other and in so far as this is the case it is fallacious to argue that secularization is a built-in-feature of any religion. The mischievousness of the argument consists in the fact that secularization is a cultural trait and will be found to be reflected only in those religious traditions, however derivatively, which are born and brought up into the atmosphere of a culture having such a trait. The Greeco-Roman culture never has secularism as its trait and if religions born and brought up in it have come to soften their theological dogmatism or sever their mysticism from their world-view it is more because in face of growing scientific knowledge these aspects of them cannot be expressly and publicly subscribed to. So, under such compulsion and circumstance, where religions come to adopt an allegedly secular stance it is more because their non-secular aspect is incapable of being publicly maintained and defended. Thus, here, secularism is a cosmetic which religions come to wear on their dark and ugly faces of entertaining poison of non-secular aspect. Such a stance may, however, come to be adopted as a part of religious politics and policies consistent with it. But then secularism and the alleged secularisation force of such a religion is

deceptive and mischievous rather than a feature built into it. The argument is misleading in the sense that it assumes that secularisation is due solely to religion and not otherwise. But where secularism is a cultural trait and where secularisation emerges not because of but in spite of religion it is misleading to say that it is consequent upon a certain religion being born and brought up into the given culture. If secularism is a constitutional feature proclaiming national policy towards the phenomenon of religion then it is not only misleading but absurd as well to claim that this is resultant of a religion. For in secularism and secularisation the force and role of religion is sought to be neutralised rather than highlighted and elevated. But this is precisely what the argument under consideration attempts to deny. It also brings in another absurdity viz., to convert a secular constitution into a religious one. Thus, to hold that secularism and secularisation, being consequential to subscription to certain religion alone, necessitate religious conversion is to embrace absurdity par excellence and hence the argument needs to be rejected without any further ado.

Thus, the major academic arguments in support of religious conversion fail to provide a proper content and conception of it and more concentratedly one attempts to examine them one begins to smack the rat of misconception, illegitimacy, untenability, sophistry and illicit legitimization of it. None of these arguments singularly or jointly supply that sort of content and conception of religious conversion that they seek academically to, although they do unmistakably give us a hint as to which direction it is in which the Juggernaut of religious conversion is slowly but firmly moving. But beyond a glimpse of dangerous direction of subversion and political design of religious conversion along with its untenable conception and wrong content we gain nothing from the examination of such allegedly academic arguments. This is not, however, a small gain. But let us not stop arbitrarily here. Let us proceed to see what additional and yet enlightening information we get approaching the problem from a slightly different angle. Leaving, therefore, the so-called academic justification of religious conversion behind us let us turn to extra-academic justification of it with a view to see whether that at least can provide a proper content and conception of it.

## IV

On the count of extra-academic defence of religious conversion in our country number of arguments have come to be advanced, the principal of which we sketch below and take a critical notice of them within the limited space at our disposal. They are : (1) It has been very often claimed that the lot of persons belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Hindu society has been extremely precarious. They have been subjected to various kinds of discriminations for no fault of them. The humiliation, subjugation, discrimination, inequality, deprivation and denial they are required to endure surpasses all calculable limits. Under such prolonged condition of deprivation it is just not possible and desirable that a certain community can thrive as a human community. In order to get them out of this crime against humanity and blot on human race and in order to enable them to live with minimum honour, dignity and respect they should be taken away from the Hindu society where they have been rotting and should be admitted within a community — especially religious community—wherein such a kind of discrimination is absent by its very design.<sup>6</sup> Religious conversion, especially conversion to Christianity or Islam, is considered to be the only viable and dependable alternative with this end in view. Religious conversions, thus understood, are the best antidote to the very deep seated disease of religious discrimination to which members of these communities have been ceaselessly subjected over centuries. It is this kind of situation that can account for the fact that of the total Christian and Muslim population in India about 5 and 25 million Christians and Muslims respectively are of Scheduled Caste origin. It is indeed true that members of these communities have been discriminated against and this has been one of the principal weakness of our society. Apart from other reasons, a prolonged Muslim or Christian rule also seems to have contributed quite considerably for the emergence of this kind of weakness. After independence quite a number of steps have been taken to ameliorate their lot and plight and the quantum of progress that has been made on this count in a short span of 35 years has been unprecedented in any society in the entire human history. This, however, is not a matter of self-complacency. Nor does it mean that enough has been done and nothing more is required to be done. Indeed,

much more needs to be done and that too quite urgently. But it is certainly the case that it is totally false to hold that nothing whatever is being done to improve their lot. The weakness, however, of our society remains. But to say, advocate and proclaim that conversion to Christianity or Islam is the only way to get over this kind of weakness and counting this to be the very solid basis of it, working mercilessly to bring it about, amounts to taking undue advantage of our weakness. To take undue advantage of weakness in this way is immoral to say the least. But further still, to work for it with political end in view is a step not only in the direction of taking undue advantage of our weakness but also precisely to deepen, augment and proliferate it. On both the counts the measure is both untenable and immoral. But it is against our national interest too. In so far as this is so, it needs to be opposed. But it also needs to be understood that the measure is wrong not only in its application but also in its very content and conception. Some champions of conversions of this kind have gone on record to claim quite audaciously that in spite of ameliorative steps being taken to improve the lot of Scheduled Caste persons in independent India no member of that community has ever come to be appointed to be a priest ! In this context it needs to be realised and understood that change of religion is not a guarantee of change of actual social or economic condition. (But it is also no guarantee of a change of actual religious or educational condition.) But it is also no guarantee of a change in one's religious status even within the community of the followers of a particular religion to which we are exhorted to be converted. As no Scheduled Caste person is appointed a priest so also no Christian of Scheduled Caste origin has ever come to be appointed a Cardinal gracious, nor has an Indian Christian come to be elected a Pope and this, too, in spite of the fact that missionary activities have been going on in our country at least for 200 or more years. Likewise, even after conversion converted Christians or Muslims do not enjoy that sort of status in their respective community which their superior ancestors enjoy. But this is to be counted more as a matter of the gracious organization of that religion rather than that of religious discrimination! Nothing can be further from truth than this!! (2) Though, thank Heaven, public and spirited defence of religious conversions per force and compulsion has not come to be put forth, taking advantage of

helplessness, weakness and deprivation on the basis of inducements, lures and benefits has been indeed not only practiced but also publicly defended.<sup>7</sup> It may be argued that conversions are never prompted entirely by spiritual consideration or promise of social mobility. It is almost always an outcome of tangible benefits. Inducements that are offered are built into the national policy of the particular religion. It is also claimed that donor agencies have a universal outlook and donations made from humanitarian, universal and charitable consideration should not be frowned at. They rather need to be understood with that sympathy, consideration and understanding that they so richly deserve! In this argument there are quite a few points which are highly objectionable. First, it is presupposed that there is nothing wrong with religious conversion, no matter whether this is brought about through fair or foul means. Second, it is presumed that offering inducements is inextricably linked up with rightness and desirability of conversion and that such inducements are merely part of the game. Thirdly, benefits are showered on those prepared to be converted out of intentions which are quite respectable and so nobody needs to raise the dust and cloud of objections. Those who do so raise the sort of objections they do more out of jealousy and privation than on any tenably reasonable basis. But the whole argument is simply fallacious. Its non-innocuousness becomes apparent as soon as one considers that, first, all of conversions themselves are part of religious politics. Secondly, charities and donations are made on the presupposition of conversion and not independently of it and hence the plea of their being understood charitably simply does not arise. Even the sincerity of donors is no argument. For, when sincere persons partake in bad programmes it leads to consequences which are far more dangerous and appalling, than when insincere persons partake in good ones. Thirdly, such inducements for religious conversions cannot be justified on the ground that they are part of the national policy of the religion concerned. The so-called national policy of the religion and a policy that a nation adopts are not the same. In the case of national policy of Christianity and Islam it needs to be realised that they are dangerously anti-national and subversive and it is this aspect of it that demands opposition to them. (3) It is sometimes argued that one needs to distinguish between actual and threatened conver-

sions, where the latter kind is more an exercise directed in the direction of getting benefits which otherwise members of Schedule Castes are denied. Such threatened conversions, too, are part of religious politics and are nothing else but steps in the direction of black-mailing the government and society. But in so far as this is so it is futile to undertake an academic exercise of distinguishing them from actual religious conversions.<sup>8</sup> The exercise is also part of the game of religious politics designed to threaten and weaken national cohesiveness and unity. It is no use to say that such tactics are not expressly prohibited by the constitution. So many things are not prohibited by it. But this is no ground to indulge in them. In fact every legitimate step needs to be taken to curb them. It is, therefore, baseless and wrong to hold that threatened conversions are in order since they do not amount to be actual conversions. (4) It is claimed that there are certain rights which any religious community must be able to enjoy — say the right to appoint authorities, establish religious institutions, carry on their management, collect, disburse, own and distribute property or wealth for such purposes etc. It is also further said that religious freedom is a human right and it is a duty of a government to protect it. Government can certainly oppose, it is held, compulsions in conversion but it cannot be its business to prevent anybody from being converted.<sup>9</sup> Take the first half of the argument. A given religious community of course can do something without any hitch as far as things go. But when religious communities wish to use rights they can enjoy for subversive, balkanising, anti-national and disunitary aims and goals they need to be opposed rather than protected and defended. Likewise, to say that a national government should not oppose religious conversion simply because they are not proved to have been compulsorily brought about, however subversive and antinational in conception and design they may be, is the limit of shamelessness, hypocrisy and deception. No national government would be able to subscribe to this view unless it wishes to bring national calamity at the very next door of the citizens of the concerned nation. That such arguments are not only advanced but defended in the name of religious freedom is itself a matter of very grave concern.

Enough that we have looked into some of the extra-academic arguments in connection with the phenomenon of religious conver-

sion in our country. Even in this domain of the consideration of religious conversion it turns out that not only its application is wrong but its very content and conception too remain wrong, untenable and unacceptable. Even if we combine both academic and extra-academic defences of religious conversion in our country the matter does not improve even an iota-wise. The whole range of arguments marshelled in its defence and justification, the means adopted to bring it about, the content that is poured in it and the conception of it that is articulated are all parts of the same game — religious politics aimed at subversion, through taking undue advantage of our weakness and helplessness and engender disunity and incohesiveness. Preparing the necessary ground through such means is directed at a victory that is sought to be gained through vote-box. But it needs to be realised that the very game that is sought to be played is against our national interest, untenable in its content and conception and unacceptable as a means to the realization of national aspirations and national goals. It also has an element in it that makes it immoral and anti-human as well so far as it involves taking undue advantage of our weakness, deception, fraud and cheating. But we need not labour too hard and longer to bring out additionally darker sides of it. It is enough to realise that a game is played upon us which, if not checked in right earnestness and quite urgently, will devour us one day and that such a day is not too far. Hence the plea for alarm and vigilance! \*\*

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#### NOTES

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1. Feyes, John., "Īsāi darśana kī dr̥ṣṭise dhārmika svātatrāntā" *Pāramarśa (Hindi)*, Vol. II, No. 2, March, 1981. pp. 114-118.
2. *Ibid*, p. 116.

3. Dr. Feyes presented the argument orally in a symposium on Religious Conversion in the Annual Session of the Akhil Bhāratīya Darśana Pariśad held in Kanyakumari, in December, 1982.
4. *Ibid*,
5. Berger, Peter; *The Social Reality of Religion*; Penguin University Books, 1973.
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Shah, A. B., Lederle, Mathew, Pereira, A. J.; "And Now Christian Communalism" – *New Quest*, 34, July-August, 1982.
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8. *Ibid*,
9. Feyes, John; "Īsāī darśana kī dṛṣṭi se dhārmika svatantratā", *Parāmarśa (Hindi)*, Vol, II, No. 2, March, 1981.  
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