



The Shankaracharya of Puri

When Leaders Mislead Puri Shankaracharya Exceeds His Brief

○ **Madhu Kishwar**

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I sincerely hope that the various news reporters who carried a summary of the press conference of the Shankaracharya of Puri held on June 4, 2000, misheard or misunderstood him. However, if the Shankaracharya has indeed been quoted accurately, I feel gratified that I can remain a Hindu, without having to accept decisions of this or that Shankaracharya - or, for that matter, any other religious leader. We have reason to feel shocked that a man of his stature should make such irresponsible and self-demeaning statements, and mesmerise himself into believing that, by doing so, he was protecting the Hindu faith.

To begin with, the venerable Shankaracharya proposes the building of "special and separate low cost" swastik temples all over the country and in Nepal to allow reconverts from Christianity and Islam the right to worship according to Hindu rituals.

Why the emphasis on "special and separate" temples? "To avoid embarrassing situations" - so says the Shankaracharya. The implication

clearly is that the "high cost" temples for "higher castes" will not be open to what he still believes are "lower" or out of caste creatures. He seems to want to invite these people to join the Hindu fold while at the same time calling upon the Hindus not to accept the reconverts as real Hindus. The Christian priests at least offer those they seek to convert hope of a better community life of fellowship among believers, even though in most cases the hope is belied. What does Shankaracharyaji have to offer the reconverted tribals? Apartheid even in matters of worship!

Next he might even suggest that the Hindu deities which are installed in the lowly swastik temples, be also considered untouchable and banished from the regular Hindu temples. If he can't even conceive of common spaces for prayer for people from different communities,

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why not let them go to whichever religion offers them such forms of solace and dignity? The Shankaracharya of Puri seems to be living in a warped world of his own. Temples in India do not have the legal right or moral right to bar entry to people of this or that caste or tribe. He may be able to continue to practice such apartheid only in the few temples under his direct jurisdiction because the people have not yet challenged him sufficiently strongly on his rulings. But his writ does not run beyond those select institutions. In any case, this version of Hinduism is not likely to attract many converts or followers. So there is not much chance of the Shankaracharya of Puri confronting too many "embarrassing" situations.

Personally, I don't like conversion drives of any kind -religious or secular. Yet, I for one don't challenge the Shankaracharya's right to convert people to his version of a faith, just as I would not like to put a legal ban on the conversion drives by various Muslim and Christian missionary groups. But the venerable Shankaracharya would do well to understand that if he opts for this route, he logically and morally loses the right to oppose conversions by other religious zealots. In this context, it is equally wrong, logically and morally, that Christian leaders are upset because

some Hindu leaders have also switched over to proselytizing and are trying to win back the Christian converts of India into the Hindu fold.

Some Christian leaders have even asked for an “investigation” into the legitimacy of these reconversions, alleging that the 72 people who the Shankaracharya of Puri brought back into the Hindu fold did not make a free and informed choice. By marshalling the same arguments which the Puri Shankaracharya uses to attack conversions to Christianity, the Christian leaders are actually weakening their own case. By their logic the government should “investigate” every single conversion to see if it is “authentic.”

The Shankaracharya of Puri has repeatedly expressed anger over the fact that Christian missionaries attract the tribals by promising them wealth, and that they distribute chloroquine tablets as *Yeshu's prasad*. He considers their methods as immoral and a fraud on innocent tribals. But his own methods of inviting conversions are truly bizarre. He assumes that Christian tribals should feel honoured by even outright insults, since the insults are showered on them by someone who thinks he is twice born, and is at a higher spiritual level than them because of the accident of his birth as well as his office. If his brand of Hinduism cannot even offer equality of worship, leave alone a chance to build a better life for themselves, why shouldn't many poor and marginalised tribals prefer Christianity?

Consider the following mandate he issues: “The reconverts would have all the rights that Hindus enjoy except for marriage” with caste Hindus. It seems that our religious

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leaders who are allowing themselves to be used for partisan political purposes are forgetting the limits of their jurisdiction. The power or authority to decide who can marry whom has never ever been entrusted to any Hindu religious leader. Even if I were not to talk the language of modern democracy, with its emphasis on individual rights, the fact is that even traditionally, no Hindu community was expected to seek permission from any Shankaracharya for choice of marriage partners. This matter is usually decided within the family and *biradari*. If I, as a born Hindu, wish to marry an ex-Christian tribal, who would dare condemn it, except perhaps my relatives? That too only if they were living in a cocooned world of their own.

In all humility I would like to remind the Shankaracharya of Puri that he should not be usurping rights

that do not belong to him. One of the greatest strengths of Hindu culture is that there is no unified commandment giving authority, or a single text, requiring unconditional obedience from all those groups and communities who identify themselves as Hindu. Even our *shastras* and *smritis* repeatedly emphasise that codes of morality must evolve with changing times, places and requirements of groups of people. An oft-repeated maxim in most of our *shastras* is that reason and justice are to be accorded greater consideration than mere textual mandates. Most important of all, most of our *rishis* and *smritikars* emphasised that a *dharmic* code is one which is “agreeable to good conscience.”

This is indeed the essence of Hinduism as understood and imparted by some of our greatest sages and philosophers. By this yardstick, the prescriptions of the Shankaracharya of Puri are completely *adharmic*. To advocate a new form of apartheid in religious worship is a setback to what it means to be a Hindu in our age. To forbid inter-caste and inter community marriages by arrogating to himself the power to issue such religious



Christians demonstrating against attack on Churches

commandments is to parody his faith. We expect religious leaders to provide spiritual guidance and solace so that we can draw on our inner resources to face the current social and political challenges. Instead, the Shankaracharya of Puri has chosen new ways to promote civil strife and ill feeling between the different communities of India. The irresponsible zeal of *Hindutvavadis* like him is encouraging criminal elements among Hindus to vandalise and loot Christian Churches and even indulge hi murder of Christian priests.

The way we are treating certain castes and communities in India ought to be a matter of great shame for which we should be ready to offer acts of meaningful repentance. This is the time to make amends for all those historical wrongs - not to add new insults to existing injuries.

It is very encouraging that strong voices of protest have already emerged,

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especially from within Orissa. A leading Hindu Pundit, Sarat Mohapatra of the ancient Lingaraj Temple has made a strong statement condemning the proposals mooted by the Puri Shankaracharya. The Vice Chancellor of Utkal University of Culture, Prof. Bimalendu Mohanty feels swastik temples “will make a mockery of the Hindu religion.” Former Chief Minister of Orissa, J.B. Patnaik has said such divisive ideas will harm the essential social and cultural fabric of Orissa.

Hinduism was never a religion to which one could be “converted”. Those who wish a new form of

Hinduism to imbibe the proselytising zeal of Christianity, should also imbibe its spirit of social service. Even today Christian schools and Christian hospitals are considered among the best in the country. So much so that even our diehard *Hindutvavadis* do all they can to secure admission in missionary schools for their children.

“Low cost” Hindu temples is not what the tribals need. They can build their own places of worship to suit their budget and other requirements. What they need is respect as fellow human beings, and safeguarding of their economic, social, educational and political rights. If the Shankaracharya of Puri and others of his persuasion don’t dare take on these challenges, they would do better to leave the poor tribals alone so that they can, according to their own wisdom, make their own choices without fear. □

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