Voices of Sisters
Ministry
Social Justice



A member of the Missionaries of Charity interacts with the children of a kindergarten Aug. 30, 2016, inside the Nirmala Shishu Bhavan, a home for orphaned, destitute and abandoned children in Kolkata, India. The congregation has been forced to shut an orphanage in Uttar Pradesh state, after its lease expired. (CNS/Reuters/Rupak De Chowdhuri)



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On this, our India Republic Day, I think about how our constitution came into effect on Jan 26, 1950 — a day celebrated and observed most solemnly than our Independence Day, Aug. 15. And I pray for our country.

As pre-novices, we served on Fridays at Mother Teresa's Nirmala Hriday (Immaculate Heart) home for the dying at Kalighat, Kolkata — a home for dying, destitute, orphaned, rejected, unwanted and unloved sick men and women, generally picked up from the street.

I vividly remember my first day there: a patient was yelling and gasping for his last breath, other patients were screaming at each other, and the sisters engaged with them in total dedication. It was challenging. I wished my formator spared me from this experience. I prayed for courage and continued working.

Almost every day people died, and new patients arrived. We helped the sisters and volunteers in collecting urine and excreta of bedridden patients, cleaned and dressed patients, changed bedclothes, fed them, washed their dishes and clothes, and cleaned toilets. Soon, the humble work and the unique stories of some patients captured me.

After six months I finished my experience with the sisters, realizing I did not have the gifts they have for a lifetime commitment to such services. Caring for these dependents and dying people wasn't easy. The sisters do it with love, faith and humility — running orphanages, homes for those dying of AIDS, caring for leprosy patients, refugees, the blind, disabled, aged, alcoholics, the poor and homeless, and victims of wars and natural calamities in India and across the world.

No government organization performs their ministry.

Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize for devoting her life to the poorest of the poor, regardless of caste and creed, and received a state funeral. Pope Francis declared her a saint in 2016.

It is surprising that now the Missionaries of Charity Sisters are being harassed.



A member of the Missionaries of Charity is pictured in a file photo feeding a child at an orphanage in Kolkata, India. Indian church leaders suspect the police investigation initiated against a Missionaries of Charity-run orphanage in Gujarat

state may be intended to denigrate the globally renowned institution founded by St. Teresa of Kolkata. (CNS/Reuters)

In 2018, the Indian government ordered the immediate inspection of all their childcare homes, accusing them of child trafficking. Sister Prema, the superior, denied the charges.

In 2021, the sisters were accused of forced conversion in a girls' shelter home in Vadodara, Gujarat, western India. According to the report in UCA News, the allegations were that the girls "were made to wear crosses around their necks and keep the Bible in a storeroom they used regularly." I say, surely even a good Hindu can read the Bible!

At Christmas 2021, the Home Affairs Ministry refused their registration for foreign contributions, citing some "adverse inputs." The Hindu's report cited a tweet by a local government official that said about "22,000 patients and employees have been left without food & medicines." On Christmas Day, the sisters served food to thousands of people lined up at their gates wherever they are, distributing blankets, rice, and other essentials to the poor and needy lying on the pavement.

The move brought widespread press coverage, and even members of the U.K. parliament debated and condemned the decision. The Ministry of Home Affairs restored the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (or FCRA) registration of the Missionaries of Charity on Jan. 7.

Mother Teresa's sisters were not the only ones whose FCRA registration was not renewed: According to The Hindu, 6,000 nongovernmental organizations — including Oxfam India, which works for the economic and gender justice of vulnerable communities — lost their registration.

These NGOs — which cannot now receive funds from foreign sources — serve the poorest and neediest, providing food, health, sanitation, education and work for the social, economic, constitutional rights of the vulnerable.



A sign is pictured outside Nirmala Shishu Bhawan, a home for orphaned, destitute and abandoned children run by the Missionaries of Charity in Kanpur, India. The congregation was forced to shut its orphanage in Kanpur after its lease expired. (CNS/Handout via UCAN)

Also in January, the Missionary of Charity sisters were evicted from their Shishu Bhawan (children's home) in Kanpur Cantonment. The Defense Estates Office claimed the children's home was built on leased land, and the 90-year lease expired in 2019. The claim added that the nuns were trespassers and could have to pay penalty charges or face eviction. Indian Currents cited a press release from a Catholic organization reporting that "in fear and trembling, the Missionaries of Charity meekly surrendered before the army authorities and handed over peaceful possession of their home" on Jan. 3.

The children were transferred to other facilities operated by the Missionaries of Charity. But would the government care for children and run the home with the same zeal and compassion as the Missionaries of Charity sisters?

The largest democracy in the world, India's founding members fought for a united, secular and democratic state. That is the India we hold close to our hearts. Unfortunately, the fabric is being destroyed by some politically motivated people. There have been countless attacks on Muslims in the recent years and on Christians as well.

Dr. Suresh Mathew, the editor-in-chief of Indian Currents, has listed attacks led by the right-wing to vandalize, disrupt and obstruct Christmas 2021 celebrations mostly on Hindi lands. The press has been full of descriptions of vandalization of churches at Christmas.

As The Wire reported, people set fire to an effigy of Santa Claus in the middle of the street; held protests by places of worship crying "Jai Shri Ram" ("hail the Hindu god Ram") protesting conversions, posted threatening messages on Facebook that any school that would make a child dress as Santa Claus without a family's permission would have a case filed against it; vandalized statues of Jesus; disrupted Mass; and threatened and stormed a school organizing a Christmas celebration.

Muslims have been the top target of the Hindutva (Hindu nationalism as an ideology) in the past years. They are lynched, killed, incarcerated, and painted as anti-patriotic terrorists.

Hindutva leaders at an event in Haridwar in December spread hate speech and called for Muslim genocide in a Dharma Sansad (religious assembly). The group seems deeply concerned for religious minorities (especially Hindus) under threat in neighboring countries but is encouraging anti-minority fury here in India.

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So violence, threats and hate speech against non-Hindus have been premeditated to create insecurity and fear among millions of minorities who live in the country.

The Indian Constitution gives freedom of religion, subject to public order, morality, and health. There has been an ongoing violation of these rights. It is disheartening that the prime minister remains a silent spectator to these. His silence certainly "emboldens" divisions and disunity, and even more. So does the official church.

As UCA reports, Catholic religious question the silence of the Indian church on violence. In fact, it is time for all of us to come together to fight for a united, peaceful and loving country, and pray for a better India, where leaders don't divide the nation based on Muslims and Christians, Dalits and Adivasis — where no religious or political leader is allowed to get away with hate speech or incitement to violence.

We pray for an India where everyone upholds the plural and inclusive tradition, not seeking to demean other faiths. Where NGOs can receive foreign donations. Where dissent isn't criminalized, and minorities are treated equally.

Let us learn from St. Mother Teresa and all our freedom fighters — irrespective of religion — the values of love, sacrifice and humanity. On this day, we also hail B.R. Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution, for one of the finest constitutions, one with which we can fight against all the anti-constitutional evil forces.

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions** feature series. View the full series.