

## **Address at Wilton Park event, 10 February 2015**

### **Session: Promoting FoRB in an era of growing religious nationalism: the case of South Asia**

Ram Madhav, General Secretary of Bharatiya Janata Party, New Delhi

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Greetings from India. I would at the very outset like to underscore an important point with regard to the theme of the session 'Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in an era of growing Religious Nationalism: The case of South Asia'. 'Religious Nationalism' as you all understand in Europe and the West is not the right description of the situation in my part of the world. It is neither 'Religion' nor 'nationalism' as understood in Europe. Nationalism as understood in Europe from your experience of Germany and Italy is different from how we understand it in India. Similarly, Hinduism and Buddhism, two dominant religions in South Asia, are markedly different in their worldview from the Semitic religions of Europe. Unless we understand this difference we can't address the issue of FoRB.

Eastern religions have evolved into a distinct way and view of life that is omni-theist in religion, pluralist in society, universalist in values and tolerant to reform in thoughts and ideas. For millennia they continued with these distinct characteristics without any difficulty.

The advent of Semitic thought, which is monotheist in religion, non-pluralist in society, religion-specific in values and intolerant to reform, posed a major challenge to the Eastern worldview. It is thus more in the nature of protecting and preserving their worldview, that has evolved into their identity, that the Eastern and Semitic religions came into conflict with each other.

The fundamental problem with western approach to FoRB lies in the fact that you see it from a Semitic perspective which has largely shaped the western thought. For example the eastern cultures believe in omnipresence of the divine and hence accept various different paths to realise that divine as valid. They do not just tolerate, but accept; not just accept, but celebrate the diversity in religious thought. Multi-religious and multi-faith society is very in-house to the eastern religions.

The Semitic idea differs with the eastern idea on this question. It believes in one god, one religion and one path. How to achieve harmony between the two distinct worldviews is the real challenge to address.

Freedom of Religion or Belief is at the core of the eastern religions. Even without the Semitic religions they have always been multi-religious societies only. They have successfully accommodated Semitic religions too in their fold. Millions of followers of these faiths live with dignity and honour in these countries as equal citizens. Followers of these faiths have come to occupy important constitutional positions including Heads of Nations. India has had a Muslim President, Sikh Prime Minister and a Christian and Muslim Chief Justices all at one time. We must contrast this with the situation in countries dominated by Semitic faiths, whether in South Asia or Europe.

It is important for us to understand that FoRB is not a one-way street. For example the question of religious conversions: it has to be relooked at from the perspective of the eastern worldview. The Constitution of India has enshrined it as a Fundamental Right. Every citizen has a right to choose his/her religion. He can change it anytime he wants to; and any number of times. But two important questions need to be addressed; one, if a person chooses a particular religion for some time and then decides to return to his previous religion, how can we object to it? If conversion is a fundamental right, then reconversion is not?

The second question is whether it includes 'my right to choose my religion' only or 'my right to choose your religion' too? Indian law says that the FoRB is not extendable to converting others. Every religious group has full freedom to preach, propagate and practise its religion; but that doesn't include mass proselytising through an institutional activity of missionaries.

But there is a more profound question to address; what does religious conversion entail. In India people practise various different faiths, but they don't really affect their day-to-day mundane matters. But a conversion from an eastern religion to a Semitic religion entails many changes in one's life and that include one's own name also. In a pluralist setting where a person is born into a cultural milieu believing that all forms of god deserve same respect how to manage a change of religion that demands him to give up those cultural values? That is where some kind of regulation is needed. It can either be a self-regulation by religions themselves or some form of government led regulation.

Many Christian subjects in India have beautifully married the aspects of eastern and Semitic religious beliefs to create an Indian version of Christianity. They live in absolute peace and harmony with the rest of the society. Where such a situation doesn't prevail the governments were forced to promulgate laws. These laws are described as 'anti-conversion' laws whereas the nomenclature used is 'Freedom of Religion' Acts. They don't curb freedom of religion but only regulate the activity undertaken through force, fraud and allurement.

India is a country with a vibrant democracy and independent judiciary. FoRB concerns are well taken care of in India by its government, institutions and most importantly the society. Fundamentalist elements will be there in every society. One form of fundamentalism breeds another opposite form of the same. Each fundamentalist group thrives on the other. One fundamentalist group may draw strength from within while the other from outside. Blaming any one group doesn't help.

Like no freedom, FoRB is also not absolute; it is to be interpreted in the social, cultural and civilizational context of each country.

Thank you.

Ram Madhav