

PRESS RELEASE

MAHARASHTRA MANTHAN: STRENGTHENING SECULARISM

More than 75 people from across Maharashtra State, representing Churches, Institutions, Civil Society Organizations, NGOs and Political groups came together at MLA Hostel Nagpur from April 30 to May 2, 2018 in a program called “Maharashtra Manthan” organized by National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) and United Maharashtra (UM). The program was purported to discuss and share ideas about strengthening secularism in Maharashtra State and in the country.

The Program started with a scan of the context which revealed that the emerging socio-political trends in India depict a discouraging, even disturbing, picture where the democratic fabric of tolerance, secularism, fraternity, and harmony is shredded to pieces. Polarising forces with divisive agendas are working to create a religious and cultural political hegemony that is detrimental to the unity of the country traditionally known as the home of many flourishing ancient cultures, languages and faiths. Rape, lynching, injustice, corruption, impunity and state’s apathy are rampant and pose a real danger to the idea of a humane India. The impact of the damage, resulting from misplaced priorities, discrimination, bigotry and partisan policies, is crushing the hopes, aspirations and rights of the marginalized, the historically disadvantaged, the minorities and other weaker sections of society. Citizens, both in rural and urban areas, face increasing assaults on their identity and human dignity, including their right to life, to food, to shelter and to primary health care.

Dr. John Dayal gave examples of various Christian political leaders of India and discussed their contributions to the Christian communities in general through a critical examination of their services. Dr. Dayal observed that the contemporary problems the country is faced with are due to the demoralized and communal unhealthy conditions in the country. Rev. Vijayesh Lal, General Secretary of EFI, highlighted how the church is suffering because of threats such as disunity, casteism, political naivety, corruption and persecution. He expressed his concern to be united in order to counter the ill effects of communal ideologies which are penetrating in the society rapidly. In another session, Dr. Ram Puniyani, while presenting the history of the country, talked about the pseudo-historical accounts which are propagated by the right-wing fundamentalist groups who tamper the historical accounts of Indian history and distort these. He also highlighted the concept of “Social common sense” which he later described as a kind of thinking which is common or understandable to everyone who thinks with an open mind. Dr. Geeta Singh, professor of Hindi literature from Nagpur spoke about secularism and other values from an RSS perspective. Other speakers, Rev. Devashish Dubey, Rev. Dr. Sunil Sardar, Bishop Dr. Roshan Jambhale, Prof. Vijay Barse, Mr. Satish Mahendre, Mr. Ashish Shinde, Mr. Pradip Bansrior, Mr. Rajesh Jadhav, Mr. Kasta Dip, Mr. Drivedi, Mr. Munna Eltan, and Mrs. Vandana Benjamin, all explored various ideological perspectives and contributed to developing various sub-themes within the concern of strengthening secularism and democracy.

The gathering condemned the callous and communal role by political groups, a section of the legal fraternity, and section of media in the cruel and shameful rape of a child and young woman in Kathua and Unnao respectively and demanded justice for the victims, protection for their families and exemplary punishment for the perpetrators. These cases have brought the incidents of targeted violence against minorities and dalits to centre stage, thereby shaming the country.

The program concluded on a note of challenge to people to think and work together towards strengthening democracy, ensuring that our Constitution is protected, our judiciary strengthened and our administrative systems reformed. The rights won by the sacrifices of our freedom-fighters must be assured to the least of our people. There was concern about redeeming the trust of religious minorities, dalits, tribals and other weaker sections living in a secular country. Of special concern is the situation of farmer-suicides and of the security of the girl child and women now being increasingly targeted, and their attackers protected by the political dispensations.

As a result of the inputs and discussions facilitated by the program, the participants formulated and released the following statement-cum-message with elements in it for the attention for the Churches and for Indian society at large:

CALL TO CHURCHES

The Church in India, which should serve as the conscience of the nation and a moral force giving direction to, and empowering the people, must therefore:

1. Play a prophetic role in socio-political issues with boldness and truth. It cannot afford to be timid or a silent onlooker.
2. Raise awareness about issues that directly and indirectly affect the life, faith, witness and service of the church and the faithful. The pulpit, the institutions and the public sphere are agencies to educate the community at large on contemporary threats, opportunities and duties.
3. Stand united with civil society in defending India's secular polity, particularly in all issues of freedom of religion and belief as constitutionally guaranteed.
4. Encourage and support the participation of Christian youth in public spheres including active politics, civil services and other public offices.
5. Hold the government responsible and accountable for justice, truth, harmony and liberty in the country without any discrimination and bias at all levels of governance.

THE CHURCH SHOULD BE PART OF CIVIL SOCIETY MOVEMENTS

Celebrating the emancipating unity in Christ, the Christian community must work in empowering solidarity with their compatriots in India to:

1. Oppose any direct or subtle efforts to meddle with the secular, democratic and republic idea of India enshrined in the Constitution and guarded by the Supreme Court.
2. Challenge all divisive forces, regardless of their sources and ideologies that erode constitutional governance.
3. Work together in reinstating time tested policies and processes that have ensured equity, inclusion, participation, and equality.
4. Support a development agenda that urgently addresses basic issues of poverty, caste-based discrimination, unemployment, public health and education. Of special concern are insidious attempts to corporatize and communalize education.
5. Expose vested interests that ferment violence under any pretext, and particularly those that play on emotive issues of religion, ethnicity and regionalism.

PERSONAL COMMITMENT

Child, woman and man, every Christian in India is blessed with unique genius and possesses spiritual strength that comes from God. As such our task is not just to be concerned about our own selves or

our community. We are called upon to help build a healthy nation governed on values and concern for the welfare of the poorest of the poor. We are also committed to regional and global peace.

We, therefore, declare that we will:

1. Work to strengthen processes that help to remove suspicion and division between people and community.
2. Support government and private endeavour in protecting our children and especially our girls from gender violence.
3. Support the struggle of the Dalit Christians to get their constitutional rights from the Supreme Court and the Government.
4. Support the struggle of the Tribals and Adivasis in the Northeast and Central India for the protection of their traditional culture, land, water and forest.
5. Support diplomatic and civil society processes to strengthen security and stability in our neighbourhood in the South Asian region.
6. Participate in movements to save the environment and ecology from human-made devastation.
7. Exercise the constitutionally provided freedom and personal choices fearlessly and thereby strengthen the concept and practice of democracy.

We recall the last commandment of Jesus 'Love one another as I have loved you'. This is something we must continue to pursue in our personal, family, community and national life. Amen!