

Fanatics know of no human rights. But they cross every limit when the state is on their side. This is what has happened in Karpanic, near Ranchi, where teachers belonging to the Sisters of St. Anna's Congregation were assaulted. One woman cook was raped. The authorities are trying to cover up the crime. Medical report has been doctored, says Sister Anupa. She recalls how three men raped a young cook repeatedly and then dumped her in a bathroom to bleed.

"Instead of nabbing the criminals, the entire administrative machinery is out to bury the incident", says Anupa. The school has been closed. Anupa asks sadly: "What is the use of working among the poor when they themselves do not appreciate what we are doing?" The students, primarily Adivasis, have nowhere to go. In fact, the situation is so grim that nobody dares to go to the place where the school flourished at one time.

That the missionaries are hapless victims of a dastardly plan, which certain forces have hatched, to make the Christians feel insecure goes without saying. These forces are satisfied that they have 'disciplined' the Muslims. "It is the Christians' turn," they say openly. It is difficult to believe that such persons are important in a country which is proud of its secular credentials. The government is used to hush up such cases whenever they take place. Frankly speaking, when it comes to the minorities, particularly women, the state machinery is callous and collusive.

Take the sordid story of excesses against the widows at Varanasi. Not long ago, a woman director wanted to show their sad plight through a film, *Water*. Her's was the indictment of the Hindu society which had come to accept that a widow was an outcast, deserving a marginal existence. Even when she and her caste were driven out by the goondas from Varanasi, she did not give up. It was a mission for her. She changed the venue, decided to shoot the film in Sri Lanka and persuaded a private TV network to finance her. But

Human rights diary

Voice of the voiceless

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the UP government, more so its Minister for Tourism Asok Yadav, got the scent of it and once again hurled threats at her. The result is that the project has been abandoned. In a television interview, Yadav proudly said the other day that he did not allow *Water* to be shot because it was against the Indian culture. Who is he or, for that matter, his Chief Minister Rajnath Singh, who has banned beauty contests in UP, to define Indian culture? (The RSS has said that the honeymoon and the wedding cake impinge upon the Indian culture.) In any case, what do they know about culture?

Their attitude can be judged from their support to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Whatever else Yadav may have done, he has blatantly violated human rights of millions of people by not allowing them to see a film which touched their life. Talented Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi braved all the indignities heaped on them at Varanasi and had their heads shaved to be able to give a realistic plight of those women, whose life was worse than death. Indeed, Yadav should have been at least hauled up before a court of law for having denied the two the freedom of expression, which the Constitution guarantees.

The BJP-led governments at Lucknow and New Delhi are in league to keep out from public gaze the treatment meted out to the widows by the Hindu society. It is their way of denying the evil. It is their way of upholding culture. How does this help the Hindu

society which is so complacent? It needs to be exposed.

The BJP-ruled Gujarat has its own way to focus on culture. The socialisation of women into subordinate positions, male patriarchy and domestic violence. The state still does not provide any rationale for husbands' abuse against the wives. A recent study conducted in some rural areas in the state shows that two-thirds of women experience some form of psychological, physical or sexual abuse. As many as 42 per cent of them have been beaten physically. A study in Tamil Nadu puts the figure between 36 and 38 per cent. The percentage goes up to 42 to 45 in Uttar Pradesh. Eighteen to 45 per cent of married men in the state acknowledge that they have psychologically abused their wives.

A letter, which I have received from the International Centre for Research on Women, says that in a multi-site survey of nearly 10,000 rural and urban households, approximately 50 per cent of the women have reported experiencing some form of violent behaviour within their marriage. Of these, 65 per cent women reported severe physical abuses, including being kicked, hit or beaten. The data at National Crimes Record Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, reveal a shocking 71.5 per cent increase in cases of torture and dowry deaths from 1991 to 1995.

The Special Cell for Women and Children in Mumbai, established by the Police Commissioner to provide a range of support services to women

and their families, says that 43 per cent of women put up with domestic violence from the age of three to 17, before complaining to the police. The records also indicate that 6.2 per cent of women have attempted suicide before seeking outside help.

The fate of women is no different elsewhere. Globally, violence within the home is universal across culture, religion, class and ethnicity. Such violence is, however, not customarily acknowledged. It is considered a problem unworthy of legal or political attention. The social structure of the divide between public and private underlies the hidden nature of domestic violence against women. Legal jurisprudence has historically considered the domain of the house to be within the control and unquestionable authority of the male head. Thus, acts of violence against members of the household, whether wife or child, are perceived as a part of discipline, essential to maintain the rule of authority within the family.

No doubt, women activists have brought the matter to the fore. They have organised demonstrations against dowry or other deaths. An examination of court records between 1986 and 1997 in Karnataka alone confirms that domestic violence cases, unless linked to dowry harassment, are difficult to establish in a court of law under the present rules of evidence.

The International Centre for Research on Women believes that a comprehensive legislation is essential to provide immediate protection to women. They

think that a legislation covering various points will usher in a peaceful society, free of violence against women, and develop a comprehensive approach to reduce violence. Of particular concern is the report on Muslim women. But if the attitude of public is to be changed — this is a must from any point of view — the mere legislation will not do. There are numerous laws to deal with domestic violence but they fail to meet the evil because what happens in homes is viewed as a private matter. Even the best of human rights activists are considered outsiders.

Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, former member of the National Commission for Women, has brought out an excellent report, *Voice of the Voiceless*. It tells about the status of Muslim women in India, a subject rarely discussed. She says: "Muslim women are the weakest link in the generally disempowered chain of Indian womanhood. Syeda has held hearings from Ahmedabad in Gujarat to Tezpur in Assam and from Kerala to Kashmir. Testimony after testimony has shown that their (Muslim women) low status in every sphere of life is because of the men, who have pushed them into stereotype roles of earners, careers, bearers of children and the beasts of burden. The negligence is also attributed to the inefficiency of state-sponsored schemes and the lack of will on government's part to make them work. Illiteracy, ignorance, male domination and traditional beliefs have proved the major roadblocks in the way of progress of a majority of Muslim women.

The report points out that "the increase of communalism and the large number of attacks on the lives and properties of minorities is a cause for deep sorrow." Sayeda explains that such incidents are a blot on the good name of our country. Her inference is that the rioting is deliberately created by militant communal elements "who do not hesitate to sacrifice the strength and security of the country for their own narrow, nefarious ends." Will the BJP-led government at the centre pay any heed?