

PRESS RELEASE

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS A UNIVERSAL VALUE

Swami Agnivesh responds to the stand of the Govt. of India on the Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom

It is embarrassing that our government has taken a suspiciously defensive stand in respect of the Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2019. It would have been in order for us to identify and refute the factual demerits and misrepresentations, if any, in the Report. But to argue that religious freedom is only a domestic concern, and that any global scrutiny is violative of our sovereignty, is to adopt an indefensible stand.

The point of greatest significance in the present context is this. Why should the protection of religious freedom globally be the monopoly of the US? Why shouldn't India do its part to defend this prime human right? Nothing prevents us from being at the forefront of defending this, and other, human rights. The truth is that only a state that has emancipated itself completely from religion can play this role. The greatest threat to religious freedom is the emergence of the theological state. It is harmful, ironically, also to the religion it sponsors. The state is the guarantor not only of religious freedom for all its citizens, but also of all other kinds of freedoms and rights. Questions pertaining to the violation of religious freedom of certain sections of a country raise, therefore, also questions pertaining to the communalization of the state. That is where it hurts.

Being in the denial mode doesn't help. India is a signatory to various international conventions guaranteeing religious freedom. In doing so, we have already endorsed the idea that religious freedom is not a nation-state issue alone, but a universal value. What is universal cannot be incubated from global scrutiny.

I would insist at the same time that freedom of religion should not be abused by any religious community as an alibi for living like a 'nation within the nation'. All religious communities in India must voluntarily undertake a self-audit of their attitudes and advocacies in light of their responsibilities towards India as a 'socialist, secular, democratic republic'. Religious authorities who keep their co-religionists entrapped in communal ghettos in indifference to citizenship responsibilities and sensitivities are the greatest hindrances to religious freedom.

Every child, every person must have the freedom to choose, based on informed convictions, the religion she or he prefers as also the freedom to renounce religion altogether. In the end, there is only one religion: humanity. Our freedom as human beings is safe and robust only within this broad framework of a shared destiny on planet earth.