

Protecting Minority Rights

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Protecting Minority Rights

Protection of minorities is both a right and a responsibility of every member of society. Minority Rights Group, based in London, promotes minority rights by researching and publishing on the issue and raising awareness.

A G NOORANI

The ruling party, the BJP's mentor, the RSS, its armed wing, the Bajrang Dal, and its affiliate, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Society), which spreads religious hate in the US and elsewhere, have for long rejected the validity of the very concept of minorities in India. It is another matter that the compulsions of coalition politics forced the BJP to pledge, in its National Democratic Alliance, 'protection' of minorities. The bashing of Christian missionaries alone suffices to expose the hypocrisy that motivated the pledge.

The union home minister, and former BJP president for many years, L K Advani consistently denounced what he called 'minorityism'. The minister for human resource development, also a former BJP president, Murli Manohar Joshi, asked Muslims to call themselves 'Mohammedia Hindus', in short, Hinduise themselves.

Internationally, however, the trend is in the opposite direction. There is a greater awareness of the need not only to 'protect' minorities against physical attacks, but to respect their individuality, their distinct culture. To no small extent the Minority Rights Group (MRG) in London is responsible for fostering that awareness.

This international NGO was founded in the 1960s. It has behind it decades of experience of promoting the rights of marginalised, non-dominant groups within society. It does this by researching and publishing on minority rights issues, and seeking to raise awareness through its advocacy and outreach among governments and international institutions, NGOs, activists, the media, the general public and minority groups. MRG aims to promote the importance of minority rights and to promote an awareness of the international

laws, conventions and procedures which exist to protect them.

Thanks to its contacts with minority groups, NGOs, governments and international bodies, MRG is in a unique position to ensure that this awareness-raising on minority rights results in the development of practical policies and programmes which have a positive and direct impact, thereby promoting minority rights and conflict prevention. MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. It has an International Governing Council and is registered as a charity and as a registered company under English law.

Its address is 379 Brixton Road, London SW9 7DE (phone 171-978 9498; fax 171-7386265; e-mail minority rights @mrgmail.org; website www.minority rights.org).

The late Neelan Tiruchelvam succeeded John Thomson as MRG's chair in April 1999. The International Governing Council has 15 members from various parts of the world and diverse intellectual disciplines. Alan Phillips is its executive director.

Minorities are often among the poorest and most marginalised groups in society. MRG's activities though wide-ranging, focus on central, east and south-east Europe – a huge tinder box as events since 1989 have revealed – the Horn of Africa and indigenous issues in south and south-east Asia.

MRG's publications are both excellently documented and inexpensively priced. Recent titles are *The Adivasis of India* (£ 5.95) and *Muslim Women in India* by Seema Kazi. Apart from area studies like the ones on the North Caucasus, central Asia and East Timor, MRG has produced excellent legal studies, erudite and lucidly written. To name some, *Constitutional Law and Minorities* by Claire Palley; *The International Protection of Minorities* by James Fawcett; *Minorities and Human*

Rights Law by Patrick Thornberry. Thornberry is author of *International Law and the Rights of Minorities* published very recently by Oxford University Press (£ 19.90). He has also done an MRG paper on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Minorities while Gadmundur Alfredsson and Erika Ferrer have produced a guide to UN procedures and institutions concerning minority rights. Last, but not least, is the *World Directory of Minorities* edited by MRG (£ 100; 856 pp with 11 maps).

This splendid educative work comprises only part of MRG's activities. They also cover active intervention in the UN, especially in the UN Human Rights Commission. What is more, it facilitates "advocacy by members of minority and indigenous communities at international meetings".

High credit is due to MRG for the agreement of a permanent mandate for the UN Working Group on Minorities in 1998, the year the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on National Minorities went into force. Its annual report says: "MRG is embarking on a major new programme, minority rights and development, which is a joint initiative with minority communities, governments, donors and NGOs, to analyse how far minority communities have been able to participate in development processes and to find ways of ensuring their full and effective participation in the future. This will be a complex and long-term initiative with MRG recognising that minorities are often, but not always, the poorest among society. MRG has chosen to prioritise work with the Roma (Gypsies) in Europe, the adivasis and other indigenous communities in Asia, and vulnerable minorities in areas of conflict."

Indians concerned at the growing attacks on minorities should actively interact with MRG. Its activities deserve greater recognition and acknowledgement than they have received so far in our country. It bears mention, in this context, that on March 8, 1999 the UN general assembly adopted a Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom. This document (A/RES/53/144) runs into 20 articles. No citizen can ignore it. **EPW**