

Moral Policing: A Theological Enquiry

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In the last two decades, India has been witnessing the rise of right wing politics. It has extended its tentacles on every fibre of our society in different colours and banners. According to a study made as to the increasing frequency of the communal clashes in Dakshina Kannada in Karnataka, "Between 1998 and 2000, communal incidents were reported every six months, every month between 2000 and 2004, and from 2004 on, we find that incidents occur every week."¹ Moral or culture policing is one of the areas through which the agents of right wing politics unleash intolerance. On the one hand the civil society does not fail from time to time to register its protest and resistance against atrocities perpetrated by the moral/culture police. Yet, on the other hand they are gaining currency and legitimacy among the middle and upper middle classes. It is a very dangerous trend. It poses a big threat to the survival of the democracy in our soil. No concerned and committed member of our polity can close his/her eyes to this phenomenon. This article is an attempt to sensitise the people as to the issue of moral policing and to invite them to respond creatively from the perspective of Christian faith at their own level in the civil society. The first part of this article dwells on the various dimensions of the issue of moral policing. In the second part an attempt is made to critically look at this phenomenon from the perspective of Christian faith.

¹ Sugata Srinivasaraju, "Deccan, Chronic?" *Outlook* February 2009, 38.

Moral policing is a term increasingly used in the socio-cultural discourses today to refer to various types of activities in which 'culture' is instrumentalised to legitimise the existing social order and to arrest, even using physical violence, any social process that questions such a legitimacy and proposes a new social order with an alternative social vision. Therefore, the immediate concern of the agents who spearhead different movements and organisations that indulge in moral policing is not merely the arena of culture. On the contrary, their main concern is to protect and promote the existing socio-economic-political order that serves their interest. It is basically an ideological project of an elite group that benefit from the existing unjust social order. Hence the final effect of such moral policing on society, as described by an independent fact-finding team, is "social apartheid." It means that "a practice of segregating communities on the basis of religion and gender by self-styled vigilante groups as well as prescribing appropriate behaviour and conduct for separate communities."² First let us take an account of the various types of moral policing and then move on to examine how they are ideological in character.

Types of Moral Policing

Another term used for moral policing is culture policing, because culture becomes the rallying point for the 'moral police'. Since religion is the soul of the most of the cultures, moral policing is done most of the time, overtly or covertly, in the name of religion. In every religion we have a section of the people whose agenda is primarily political. They exploit the religious sensibilities of the people to realise their political agenda. In this way, we find moral police in every religion. No religion can exempt itself from this phenomenon. Yet in this article we discuss only the moral policing done in the name "Indian Culture" and "Hindu Religion," because in India this type of moral policing is more prevalent and it poses a greater threat to the Indian polity.

² Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed, "Culture Police" *Frontline* April 10, 2009, 108.

Demolition of Babri Masjid and the rise of the BJP to power injected new blood into the Hindu fundamentalists. Since then the act moral policing increased in number mostly with the connivance of the politicians and the police. The following are a few of the Sangh Parivar outfits which indulge in moral policing: Maharashtra Navnirma Sena (MNS), Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Shiva Sena, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), Sambhaji Brigade (in Maharashtra), Sri Rama Sene (in Karnataka).

The type of activities through which they “protect” culture are as follows: Disrupting Valentine’s Day celebrations, ransacking the offices of the newspapers and journals and the homes of their editors, disrupting the screening of films and documentary movies,³ destroying the art works, attacking the house of the artists and harassing them,⁴ vandalising research institutes and attacking the houses of the critical authors who reread history from subaltern perspectives,⁵ curtailing the freedom of women,⁶ attacking

³ Screening of the following documentaries and films were disrupted and cinema halls were attacked: Anand Patwardhan’s award-winning documentary on Ayodhya namely “Ram ke Naam” in December 1993 in Mumbai; In 1998 in Mumbai Deepa Mehta’s “Fire” which deals with the lesbian relationship; In 2004 for screening the film “girlfriend” that deals with same sex relationship; Amir Khan’s “Fana” in 2006 in Ahmedabd which demands the rehabilitation of the people displaced due to the construction of Naramada Dam.

⁴ The renowned artist M.F. Husain’s paintings and tapestries were destroyed at Ahmedabad in October 1996 for sketching Saraswati “nude,” and his house was attacked in Mumbai in 1998 for the same reason; In 2004 a group attacked an art gallery at Surat for displaying Husain’s art works; In October 2003 dancer Mallika Sarabhai was charged with the case of human trafficking for vocally criticising Narendra Modi for the Gujarat genocide and she has been continuously harassed by Modi’s government; A student artist was attacked by the hooligans and arrested by the police in May 2007 in Vadora for his “obscene” paintings.

⁵ Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) in Pune was vandalized for allegedly publishing a defamatory book on Shivaji; Nikhil Wagle, the editor of the Maharashtra daily “Mahanagar” was severely beaten and his face was blackened for an alleged derogatory remark on the Bal Thackeray, the leader of Shiva Sena; the house of Kumar Ketkar, the editor of “Loksatta” was attacked in 2008 in Thane for questioning government’s plan to erect a 309 foot statue of Shivaji in the Arabian sea; rampaging Mumbai University in 2009 for categorizing Marathi under elective subjects; attacking Rakesh Sharma’s crew for filming a rally held by a Hindu organization; B. V. Seetaram, the editor of *Karavali Ale* (The Coastal Wave) was arrested for criticizing Rajashekara Nanda Swami for his discrimination against dalit community members.

the intercommunal groups – groups in which boys and girls of different religions, caste come together,⁷ ban on cow slaughter⁸ and so on.

The moral police are able to aggressively fulfil their agenda, because they enjoy various support systems: political, police and media patronage. When the media reports the atrocities of the Sangh Parivar outfits, politicians tend to downplay the magnitude of the problem by describing it as a mere law and order problem and as an issue that does not deserve the attention of the public. For example, when women were attacked in the Amnesia Lounge Bar in Balmatta in Mangalore by the self-appointed custodians of “Hindu morals” and “Indian culture” on 25 January 2009, Mr. Yediyurappa, the chief minister of Karnataka commented on the media report that “It’s all media hype. A small trivial incident has been blown out of proportion. The media has devalued itself.”⁹ Politicians tactfully distance themselves forthwith from the groups that orchestrate the moral policing act. They appear to crack the whip against those responsible for such untoward incidents. But later as the public anger subsides, they withdraw all the cases and let the accused to go scot-free. For example, Yediyurappa, as the deputy chief minister withdrew 51 cases filed against the sangh parivar activists.¹⁰ Such incidents smack the political patronage extended to the self-styled protectors of morals. Political patronage also includes the communalised constabulary and media. In some places vernacular media have become in a subtle way the votaries of the communal forces. This political support to the outfits suggests that moral

⁶ National Congress Party in Maharashtra banned women from dancing in the bar in August 2005; attacking women in a pub in Mangalore in 2009.

⁷ In December 2007 Muslim boys studying in Star Tutorial College in Karnataka were attacked by the Bajrang Dal activists for eating ice cream together with the Hindu girls of the same college; Bajrang Dal activists also attacked a bus carrying a group of students consisting of Hindus, Christians and Muslims studying in Sri Mata Education Trust near Mangalore;

⁸ Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed, “Beefing up a Law” *Frontline* April 23, 2010, 121-122.

⁹ Sugata Srinivasaraju, “Deccan, Chronic?” 38.

¹⁰ Sugata Srinivasaraju, “Deccan, Chronic?” 40.

policing is basically a political programme to win legitimacy for its fascist ideology. Therefore, it is also an ideological programme.

One of the hidden agenda of the moral police is perpetuation of the patriarchal system.¹¹ Attacks on women who cross the "cultural boundaries" are on increase particularly after the Independence. Increasing access to education, exposure to the western culture, influence of media, politicisation of women's issues have empowered women to critically view every women issue as embedded in the patriarchal system in which men decide what the women should do. Men draw boundaries for women. Women's movements and other votaries of the rights of women are convinced that true liberation of women can be achieved only when the patriarchal system is questioned and deconstructed.

Another hidden agenda is a hindutva agenda of 'sanskritisation' aiming at a political goal of denying the Dalits their dignified life in the society. The ban on the cow slaughter has adversely affected the dietary habit of the dalits;¹² B. V. Seetaram, the editor of *Karavali Ale* in Karnataka was arrested charged with a defamation case for publishing a press statement of a Dalit organisation which accused Rajashekara Nanda Swami of the Gurupura Vajradehi Matha for his discriminatory behaviour against Dalits.¹³ Hence the unwritten agenda of the moral police is rereading, reproducing and reinforcing religio-cultural symbols to legitimise their hegemony on social, political and economic arena. They do this by forming a greater social coalition of backward classes/castes on economic platform too¹⁴.

Critical reading of the incidents of moral policing, thus, unmask the hidden motives and the vested interests of the group that benefit from the

¹¹ Vikram Ahmed Sayeed, "Taliban in Saffran" *Frontline* February 27, 2009, 32 .

¹² Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed, "Beefing up a Law" *Frontline* April 23, 2010, 122.

¹³ Vikaram Ahmed Sayeed, "Silencing Act" *Frontline* January 30, 2009, 127-128.

¹⁴ Muzaffar Assadi, "Hindutva Policies in Coastal Region: Towards a Social Coalition," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37 (2002) 2211-2213.

existing social structures. Under the guise of culture and morality they want to reinforce the existing social, political and economic arrangements. Hence, any response to moral/culture policing will remain very peripheral if we focus only on certain incidents and respond to them sporadically. Instead, simultaneously we should go to its social, economic and political roots and respond systematically with a long term plan. This response will bring about changes in the social structures. This is how Jesus also responded to the woes of the Palestinian society of his time.

Palestine: a Peasant, Patriarchal and Purity Society

In this section I rely on Marcus Borg's social analysis of the Palestinian society during the time of Jesus, because this would throw more light on the social meaning of his message and its implication for our society today. According to M. Borg, the first century Palestinian society can be characterised as peasant society, patriarchal society and purity society.

The main characteristic of the peasant society is that it is a class society organised on the economic system of the 'tributary mode of production'. In Palestine there were two main classes: the urban elites and the rural peasants. There was a striking inequality between these two classes, particularly economic inequality. Economic inequality was produced, promoted, sustained by increasing land consolidation by the urban-dwelling ruling elite. The economic system was organised in such a way that it brought more wealth to the ruling elites at the cost of the pauperisation of the rural peasants. Land rental and taxation are the two most important ways through which the rich gradually amassed wealth from the peasants. "In Galilee, the elites were large landholders, the Herodian court and retainers attached to both the groups. In Judea, the elites were concentrated in Jerusalem: the high priestly families and the traditional aristocracy and, of course, their retainers. As in peasant societies generally, wealth flowed to these elites through ownership of land and taxation."¹⁵

¹⁵ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994) 103.

The death of Jesus also offers a clear proof for the existence of a ruling elite who benefited from the then existing social order. The people responsible for Jesus' death are not merely the Jews, rather it is an elite group among the Jews who felt that Jesus was a threat to the systems that gave them all sorts of security. In Borg's words "Thus it was not 'the Jews' or 'the Jewish people' who rejected Jesus. Rather, it was a narrow circle of the Jewish ruling elite who, rather than representing 'the Jews,' are more accurately seen as oppressors of the vast majority of the Jewish population of Palestine at the time of Jesus."¹⁶

The Jewish society of the time of Jesus was also androcentric and patriarchal. "While androcentrism characterises a mind-set, patriarchy represents a socio-cultural system in which a few men have power over other men, women, children, slaves and colonised people." In brief, patriarchal and androcentric society is marked by two characteristics: hierarchy and male-domination. In the first century Palestinian society, accordingly, important institutions like family, temple and state were all ruled by the male. The sacred scriptures were written by male. Therefore the laws and customs of the Palestinian society were favouring androcentric perspectives and even male chauvinism. Women had a very restricted access to the temple. Setting Jesus' ministry in the context of patriarchal and androcentric society, all his interactions and encounters with women are perceived as "ignoring or subverting the structures of patriarchy."¹⁷ M. Borg interprets Jesus' invitation to his disciples to leave their families and to follow him as "an invitation to break with the patriarchal family – an oppressive hierarchical structure mirroring the society as a whole".¹⁸

¹⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 105.

¹⁷ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994) 106

¹⁸ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 107.

“Purity Society” is another distinctive mark of the Palestinian society of Jesus’ time. Purity societies “are explicitly organised around the polarities of pure and impure, clean and unclean. Pure and impure apply to persons, behaviours, places, things, times and social groupings... The social boundaries generated by the polarities and gradations of pure and impure are typically sharp and strong.” In any purity society, purity is neither a trivial matter nor a personal issue. Social structures are permeated by this value. Consequently, this value governs the entire social relations and thus produce a system. That is why the principle of purity in a purity society is basically a political issue.

The first century Palestinian society was dominated by the sense of puritanism. The temple and particular interpretation of Torah reinforced and reproduced the purity system in the Jewish society. The “holy of holies” in the Jerusalem temple was considered to be the place of greatest purity. Purity progressively decreases in outward concentric circles and ends at the border of the “holy land.” Second, the verse from Leviticus “You shall be holy as God is holy” (Lev. 19:2) was the core guiding value of Israel and Torah was interpreted around this value. But the crux of the matter is how the term “holiness” was understood. Unfortunately it was understood as “purity”, meaning separation from everything unclean.”¹⁹ Beside applying the purity principle to the temple and the interpretation of Torah it was also applied to persons and social groups. Consequently some groups of people were considered pure and others impure. The pure were called righteous and the impure were called sinners and the relationship between these groups was governed by sharp social boundaries.

Borg inspiringly makes a connection between the above-mentioned three characteristics of the first century Palestinian society: peasant society, patriarchal society and purity society. Accordingly in such societies the interest

¹⁹ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994) 109.

of the ruling elite is ensured and protected by the socio-political-economic systems in that society. Examining the Palestinian society of the first century he says, "They [rulers and governing class] were the purity elites as well as the political and economic elites. Politically, the internal affairs of Jewish Palestine during the centuries when the country was under the sovereignty of one foreign empire after another were generally in the hands of the high priests and his council. Economically, the high priestly families were large land owners. This was so despite Torah's prohibition against priests owning land, which they apparently interpreted *not* as meaning that they could not own land, but as meaning that they were not allowed to work. They could be landlords, but not agricultural labourers. Instead, peasants worked their land, as sharecroppers, renters, or day-labourers. Thus those at the top of purity system were traditional aristocracy, a political and economic (as well as religious) elites."²⁰

Moreover, purity system was also an ideology of the ruling elite. The purpose of an ideology is to legitimise the existing social order. In that way purity system as an ideology was used by the ruling elites of Palestine to support the class structures, because it supported their social position on two counts. First, purity system accorded central place to the temple. Consequently those who were associated with the temple, particularly the priestly class, were also given primacy in the social structure. Second, purity system also served the economic interests of the temple elites by applying economic coercion on the peasants. Any untithed agricultural produce, according to law, was considered impure. The land-owning aristocrats who were hand in glove with the priestly class and were committed to the purity system refused to accept any untithed produce as impure. This was an indirect way of coercing the peasants to pay the tithes which went to the income of the priestly class. Thus purity system also served the economic interest of

²⁰ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 109-110.

the ruling elite. Having examined the role of purity system in the first century Palestine society, Borg affirms that purity system “provided an ordering of society that established and legitimated the place of the temple elites – the native Jewish aristocracy – at the pinnacle of the social world... Its dominant social vision was a politics of purity in the sense that purity was the ideology of the elites”²¹.

Since the centrality of the temple legitimised the class structures of the Palestine society, the cleansing of the temple is seen not merely as purification of the temple but as death blow to the purity system that legitimised the class interests of the ruling elites. Jesus’ indictment of the money changers and sellers of the birds was not aimed at the ordinary merchants at the temple. Instead it focused on the temple elites who promoted a self-serving social system. Borg says, “It was an indictment of what the temple had become: the centre of an economically exploitative system dominated by ruling elites and legitimated by an ideology of purity grounded in an interpretation of Scripture. It was not an indictment of unscrupulous merchants, but of the elites themselves.”²² Commenting on the temple cleansing Borg says, “It was anti-purity rather than pro-purity: a protest against the temple as the centre of purity system that was also a system of economic and political oppression”²³

Jesus as a social prophet did not engage himself only with critiquing and unmasking of the socio-economic-political structures of his time built on the politics of exclusion to serve the ruling elites. He also offered an alternative inclusive social vision energised by the politics of compassion. The open commensality or the table fellowship of Jesus is the best example for his inclusive social vision.

²¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 111.

²² Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 114.

²³ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 116.

Our Response to Moral Policing

As a citizen of India, we have every right to protect ourselves legally. We should make use of all legal means to protect ourselves. We should also actively resist and protest against every concrete event of moral policing. We should not be intimidated by the evil designs of the forces that attempt to perpetuate the class and caste structures through moral policing. This should be done through the networking of all the agencies in the civil society that unveil the original motives of the moral police and call for a social restructuring. We should go beyond the confines of institutional Church and harness the resources available in the civil society. Every act of moral policing should be treated as an invitation to broaden the networking and intensify the crusade against the class society.

On the one hand, as seen early, the existing social structures and organisations in Indian society serve, to a large extent, the interest of the elites who are politically, socially, economically powerful. The marginalised identities – Dalits, tribals, women, Backward castes – have become aware of their marginalisation and subversively resist any attempt to continue to keep them as marginalised and subjugated identities. The minority elites who benefit from the existing social order are unable to tolerate the awakening of the excluded identities and device strategies to counter such resistance movements in the name of morality and culture. In this context, the most important way of challenging the agents of moral policing is to unveil their hidden agendas and unholy nexus; their mystifying myths will have to be challenged; their legitimating public discourses will have to be questioned. As Jesus' words and deeds laid bare the vested interest of the ruling class and the hegemonic forces and deepened the awareness of the common people about the structures of the society, the Church should also raise the awareness of the people about the different layers of the social structures and how they are arranged to protect and safeguard the socio-political-economic interest of a small section of the people who wield power over almost every arena in the society.

On the other hand, the Church should also promote many positive programmes and activities that would foster a counter culture to the dominant culture. Jesus did not stop with questioning the legitimacy of the structures of the Palestinian society of his time that served the interests of the ruling elites. He also initiated symbolic programmes that built inclusive communities. His table fellowship with the sinners and excluded ones is a strong symbol of an inclusive community. The Church should take measures to promote programmes and activities that would form, nurture and nourish inclusive communities. The main agenda of the moral police is to drive wedge between different communities. They manufacture discourses and interpret narratives to justify the exclusionary practices and to engage in hate campaign. To counter such diabolic forces, the church should create new discourses and interpret the existing narratives to give shape to inclusive communities at all levels.