



machinery and society with its Hindu-majoritarian agenda, must be welcomed. However, the transcript of the House of Commons (HOC) speeches makes for a curious reading. It reveals how Britain's alarm at the decline of religious freedom across the (non-Western) world is articulated through a series of imperialist assumptions.

The success of imperialist propaganda, of the modern European variety, cannot simply be measured by the degree of legitimacy that overt justifications of empire are able to gain in public discourse. It is revealed by the extent to which certain basic premises of imperialist ideology are rendered self-evident and obvious. One such assumption is that the achievement of Europe in any given field becomes the unquestioned yardstick against which the achievements and failures of all societies are measured. The Westminster Hall debate, which voiced concerns about the decline in freedom of religion, was almost casually "Eurocentric." Labour MP Fabian Hamilton was appalled that despite India being the world's largest democracy "there is still religious persecution and on a scale unimaginable in parts of Europe." India's record in ensuring religious freedom, therefore, is dismal precisely because it compares so unfavourably with the state of affairs in parts of (read "Western") Europe.

The consequence of this imperialist discourse of religious freedom is clear enough. The HOC debates give the impression that Christians and Sikhs are the only oppressed religious groups in India. Not a word is said about the fate of Muslims, who have been the primary targets of Hindutva violence in India. What accounts for this glaring omission? The only plausible answer is that the record of Britain (and indeed, of the rest of the "Western" world) in ensuring rights and freedoms of Muslim minorities may not qualify as an obvious parameter to compare Muslim experiences in India. This is admitted as much in a brief display of self-reflexivity by Hamilton who confessed that the UK has seen an unprecedented rise in hate crimes against Muslims in recent years. However, this moment of autocritique was drowned out in assertions such as those by the Conservative MP Edward Leigh that the most persecuted of all religious groups in the world are Christians and minority Muslims groups, the latter always suffering at the hands of other dominant Muslim groups (such as Ahmadis in Pakistan). Does this mean Muslims in non-Muslim majority states, such as India and Britain, are not persecuted because of their religion

and that if they are "inconvenienced," it is only to protect the world from terrorism?

Despite everything, even if the question of religious persecution is broached at all by the British government during its interactions with Modi, it will still be good news. But the possibility of this happening does not seem particularly bright. Responding to the discussions, Minister for Asia and the Pacific Mark Field promised that in his government's meetings with Modi, he will "do his best ... to ensure that Parliament's voice is properly heard." However, he reminded his colleagues that "diplomacy sometimes needs to be done behind closed doors, rather than with megaphones." If the reception given to Modi in 2015 by his government is anything to go by, Field's excuse for closed-door diplomacy appears more like telling parliamentarians in the most parliamentary language not to expect too much. Post-Brexit Britain is far more desperate to forge closer ties with India. Already there are reports of bilateral meetings being scheduled between Modi and British Prime Minister Theresa May where trade and business agreements are to be discussed. There is also talk of setting up a regional trade hub in India. It is unlikely that Britain will want to annoy the visiting Prime Minister with irritants such as issues of religious persecution.

There is no denying that oppression of Christian and Sikh religious minorities in India is a genuine issue. Christian victims of the 2008 Kandhamal violence still wait for justice, as do the victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom. But critiquing religious persecution within an explicitly imperialist frame, as has been the case in the recent debate in the British Parliament, exposes its limits. It remains complicit in the silence around some of the most horrific experiences of violence faced by Muslims in contemporary India. Such narratives also resist all nuanced understandings, such as complexities in experiences of religious violence. Christians in India are oppressed not simply because they read the Bible, but because they are also Dalits and Adivasis and, like other minorities in other parts of the world, often live on land and resources that global capitalism craves. Neo-imperialist ambitions of metropolitan capitalism in the global periphery are often the pre-eminent forces of oppression of marginalised groups across the world, including religious minorities. It is impossible, therefore, to discuss religious persecution within frames imbued with imperialist assumptions.