

February 5, 2024

‘Abide With Me’ for 2024

By: Sriram Panchu

A rendition of ‘Abide With Me’ for modern India.

A friend sent me a WhatsApp forward, one of the few worthwhile WhatsApp forwards that one gets. This one was outstanding. It was uplifting and utterly relevant to our times.

It was a group rendition of “Abide With Me”, perhaps the world’s most famous and best loved hymn. It was a favourite of Mahatma Gandhi. For many years it was played at the ceremony of Beating the Retreat in the forecourt of Rashtrapati Bhavan winding down the Republic Day celebrations. For a reason no one can fathom, it was removed in 2017.

“Abide With Me” has five stanzas. Each stanza, each line, carries meaning and resonates with the hope that man places in the Almighty.

It is especially important for our country and our times. We are seeing drastic changes. The very idea of India now has contesting claims. One is secular and based on a Constitution which promises to all equality, fraternity, liberty, upliftment and dignity. The other is predicated on certain view of the Hindu religion called Hindutva, which stresses dominance, unequalness and perhaps exclusion.

It’s interesting that this was sung in Saint Andrews Kirk, a very beautiful church in Chennai. Tamil Nadu and the South in general present a better picture of communal harmony in this country.

The original lyrics are:

*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide
The darkness deepens Lord, with me abide
When other helpers fail and comforts flee
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me*

*Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away
Change and decay in all around I see
O Thou who changest not, abide with me*

*I need thy presence every passing hour
What but thy grace can foil the Tempter's power
Who but thyself my guide and stay can be
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.*

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness
Where is death's sting?
Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me*

*Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee
In life, in death, o Lord, abide with me
Abide with me, abide with me.*

Great songs lend themselves to adaptation. Perhaps for Modern India it could be as follows:

*Abide with me, fast fails the secular tide
The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide
When opposition parties fail and legal protectors flee
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me*

*Swift to its close ebbs out the Republic's day
Its Constitution grows dim, its promises fade away
Change and decay in all around I see
O Thou who changest not, abide with me*

*We need thy presence every passing hour
What but thy grace can foil the temptations of power
Who but thyself our guide and stay can be
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.*

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness
Where is the tyrant's sting? Where, majoritarianism, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me*

*Hold Thou liberty and fraternity before closing of my eyes
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies
Let Freedom's morning break, and shackles on Equality flee
In life, and ever after, O Lord, abide with me.*

Sriram Panchu is a senior advocate and a mediator.