

The developmental facets of religious harmony in India

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Abstract India is a multireligious society with religious harmony. India upholds the values of secularism as the basic feature of its Constitution. Respect for other religions and their beliefs is one of the main characteristics of Indian society and the core of religious harmony. The life of each and every Indian citizen is very much rooted in their religious beliefs and practices, with true trust and confidence in constitutional values. The recent development of religious fanaticism or radicalism shakes the secularistic pillar of the nation and is a threat to religious harmony. A narrow-minded attitude toward other religions creates a feeling of insecurity and fear of survival among people. This can be considered a disturbing element of religious harmony and one of the major challenges India currently faces. Legislations related to religion can be seen as a small challenge in the developmental process of religious harmony. The judiciary holds an important place in securing and promoting this harmony. Interreligious dialog is a channel through which to ensure harmony in a pluralistic society. This paper analyzes the emergence of religious concord and its applicability to the current Indian context.

Keywords: religious harmony, secularism, irreligion, anti-conversion, religious tolerance, religious fanaticism, interreligious dialog

1. Introduction

India is a secular nation that is deeply ingrained with the ideals and tenets of numerous spiritual and religious beliefs or ideologies. India acknowledges and values the existence of several religions and accepts the absence of a national religion. Over the years, India has established a distinctive idea of secularism that treats all religions equally. Indian citizens are free to practice any religion they choose and to spread their beliefs and views without interfering with the nation's commitment to secularism. Many minorities with ties to numerous religions or belief systems exist in India. The fundamental outline of the Indian Constitution is thought to be secular in nature. Society is deeply rooted in the culture and fragrance of religious harmony. People fought for freedom from colonial rule irrespective of their religious practices and beliefs. They joined hands together to uplift and make India progress. However, there is tension or feelings of insecurity in the minds of few people. Everyone has the freedom to profess and practice religion as their wish. Religion is not something that is absolutely restricted to private life; rather, it is something that is frequently observed in the public domain. Even after 75 years of independence, secularism has not emerged as a reality for the Indian social and political order. The ideology and practice of secularism are questioned by various streams of thought. Although the concept of religious harmony is deeply rooted in the hearts of India, there always remains a suspicious inner attitude toward the ideology, beliefs and practices of other religions. Only healthy interactions between religions can ensure the values of religious harmony in Indian society. This paper analyses the evolution of religious harmony in India and its relevance to the uplift of the nation.

1.1. Indian concept of religious harmony

India has religious and cultural diversity. People belonging to different religions and cultures live together in harmony. The concept of religious harmony can generally be defined as the peaceful coexistence of different religions. Love, respect, concern, tolerance, cooperation and mutual understanding toward other religions foster the principles of religious harmony. As a multireligious society, India reflects the values of religious harmony. India upheld the values of unity in diversity in its very nature of being a secular nation. India is considered the birthplace of four major world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, the Sikh and Jainism. The Constitution of India assures and safeguards the principle of religious harmony in the concept of secularism. The spiritual heritage of the nation also follows the principle of equality of all religions and of their followers (Zuo'an, 2013). Tibetan Spiritual leader Dalai Lama praised India as role model of religious harmony in the world. The reason for Indian religious harmony has been the practice of nonviolence for years ("India Role Model for Religious Harmony in the World," 2021).

1.2. Religious harmony in pre-independence



India has the tradition of accepting different religious ideologies, and this paved the way for being a home of several religions. People freely practiced their beliefs, customs and traditions in the midst of a multireligious society. People of all religions lived together peacefully in the spirit of brotherhood. They observed and celebrated all the religious and cultural festivals without any hindrance. All major religions were thriving in the nation even decades before it gained freedom from British colonialism. Regardless of their religious beliefs, people battled together for the country's independence and advancement.

Throughout the debates of the Constituent Assembly, there was widespread agreement that the peaceful character of the nation would be preserved by the state's commitment to maintaining religious harmony through the secular nature of the state. The Constituent Assembly of India strongly emphasized the need for secularism in the country.

1.3. Religious harmony in post-independence

The Constitution of India asserts the secular nature of the country. India does not have any state religion. The Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act of 1976 included the word 'secular' in the preamble to the Indian Constitution. Citizens have the freedom to practice and follow any religion of their choice. Articles 25 to 28 of the Constitution ensure that its citizens profess and practice any religion without hindrance. The framers of the Constitution prioritized religious equality, religious neutrality and religious freedom to safeguard the harmonious nature of the country (Singh, n.d.).

The democratic and secular nature of India emphasizes equal religious freedom for all. People enjoy and observe the religious freedom to follow and practice their beliefs without curtailing the freedom of others. Citizens have the Constitutional surety to profess any religion of their choice. Indian society strives to maintain religious harmony from generation to generation.

The discord that has arisen around the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 (CAA) (Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019) hurts the mood of the nation, which is typically calm and harmonious. Many people believe that the Act violates the principles of secularism and the right to equality guaranteed by the Constitution of India since it does not protect all members of minority groups in the same manner.

The issues affecting religious harmony became quite controversial from the end of the 19th century onward. Tensions related to the conversion to other religions, and majority and minority conflicts began to occur in the secular soil of India. A feeling of insecurity amid different religions is common in people's minds. A suspicious attitude toward the teachings of other religions generates fear of survival and thereby diminishes the peaceful and harmonious nature of the country. The recent ally of religion and politics is a threat to the secularistic nature of India.

1.4. Appearances of religious harmony in India

As a multireligious society, India supports and upholds the ideals and tenets of religious harmony. The concept of religious harmony is not postindependence development but rather deeply rooted in the heart and soul of the Indian soil.

1.4.1. Religious tolerance

India treats all religions equally, and followers of different religions coexist happily with mutual understanding and mutual respect. Differences in the teachings, beliefs, practices, traditions and customs of religions are valued in Indian society.

1.4.2. Celebration of festivals

The unity in the celebration of numerous religious festivals in India can be recognized as the best example of the presence of religious harmony in society. There are several occasions in India, such as Diwali, Ramadan, Christmas, and Onam, where the exchange of feelings of joy and love unites people.

1.4.3. Fraternity & brotherhood

The Preamble of the Indian Constitution uses the term 'Fraternity' to denote the strong sense of brotherhood and patriotic attachment to the nation and its citizens. The bonds of fraternity strengthen the fabric of religious harmony in Indian society. Article 51A (e) of the Constitution of India describes the fundamental duty of its citizens to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood among the people of India.

1.4.4. Exchange of values

The multifaceted nature of Indian society places an emphasis on the significance of a shared sense of values among various religions to maintain the harmony and progress of the nation. The educational system in India provides opportunities to exchange the values of all religions to students and thus foster love and respect for other religions.

1.4.5. Religious interactions

Having an understanding of other religions contributes to greater unity and peace in the country. Indian citizens engage in healthy interactions with followers of different religions. Many religious communities organize interreligious dialogs and conferences to understand the principles of different religious beliefs and practices.

1.5. Threat to religious harmony in India

The secular character of India furnishes religious harmony in India. There are certain factors that threaten this harmonious nature of the country.

1.5.1. Politics-wedded religion

Recent developments in India reveal the pervasive usage of religiously motivated political movements. Politics and religion are both flammable topics; therefore, mixing them together will undoubtedly result in a fire (Chopra, 2011). The victory of the BJP in India's elections has led to an increase in the prominence of religious discourse in the country's political climate. Many political parties in India employ religious symbols for political gains (Vaishnav, 2019). The concept of religious nationalism, rather than secularism, will destroy religious harmony in India.

1.5.2. Anti-conversion laws

Anticonversion laws in the different states of India may expand the tension between religions. The enactment of the bills challenges the right to privacy of individuals as well as the right to religious freedom in the secular country. Citizens have the right to privacy guaranteed under article 21 of the Constitution India. The reasons for and motivations for conversion should be determined.

1.5.3. Fanaticism

The growth of fanaticism in India is a hazard to the harmonious culture of the country. The annual report of the RSS points out the growth of religious fanaticism in India under the cover of religious freedom ("Religious Fanaticism Rising in Country, Attempts to Divide Hindus as Census Year Approaches: RSS," 2022).

1.5.4. Majority and minority conflicts

The Constitution of India recognizes religious and linguistic minorities in India. There are several national and state packages for minorities to uplift themselves to the mainstream of society. Minorities often face discrimination and struggle to enjoy the basic human rights assured by the constitution of India. Reservations and concessions given to minorities are questioned by the majority. The community that constitutes majority thinks that special consideration to minorities may result in a reduction in the opportunities and privileges that have been enjoyed by them for many generations.

1.5.5. Ideological differences

Religious harmony is a philosophy rooted in the cultural and religious heritage of Indian society. Respecting the teachings of other religions ensures unity in the diverse nature of the country. The ideological differences between religions should be discussed in a peaceful and respectful manner. This failure leads to violence and tensions in society.

1.5.6. Communalism

Communalism can be seen as an aggressive political ideology linked to religion. The framers of the Indian Constitution rejected communal thoughts and formulated the secular nature of the country. Communal forces try to raise communal issues and create tensions in the minds of people (*Resolution against Communalism*, 2021). Anti-Sikh riots in 1984, ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Hindu pandits in 1989, demolition of Ayodhya Babri Masjid in 1992, Assam Communal Violence in 2012 and Muzaffarnagar violence in 2013 are examples of communal riots that disrupted the harmonious structure of the nation.

1.5.7. Social media

Social media holds an important space in the 21st century. Communication is becoming increasingly easier with the use of the latest technologies in social media. Social media is a powerful medium for the spread of messages related to communal tensions. People blindly depend on the media to obtain sensational and viral news. Many times, 'rumors' are circulated as 'news', which results in communal violence between religions or religious groups. The offensive comment about the Prophet Mohammad by a BJP ex spoke person Nupur Sharma, which resulted in a nationwide protest and criticism (Pandey, 2022).

1.6. Role of the Judiciary in protecting religious harmony in India

The judiciary is the custodian and guardian of the Constitution of India. A judiciary is an assurance for citizens to enjoy the rights enumerated in the Constitution. The judiciary is the sole hope against the infringement or rejection of their rights.

Judiciaries play a vital role in safeguarding religious harmony in the country. The Constitution of India emphasizes equal religious freedom to its citizens. Constitutionally India is a secular state. The independent Indian judiciary has been actively adjudicating disputes related to religion and religious affairs (Mahmood, n.d.). The judiciary upheld the secular nature of the country through its interpretation of the constitution in different landmark cases.

In *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (*Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*, 1973), the Supreme Court of India provided an interpretation of the idea of secularism as the basic structure of the Indian Constitution. In this case, Chief Justice Sikri said that the secular nature of the Constitution was its defining characteristic. In the *S. R. Bommai v Union of India* (*S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*, 1994), the Apex court confirmed the constitutionality of secularism as an essential component of the Indian Constitution. According to the Court 'secularism' refers to giving all religions the same respect and the state should maintain a position of neutrality regarding the many religions. It has also been stated that religion and politics should not be intermingled. Religion should not be used for political determinations. The Supreme Court emphasized the equality of all religions and equal treatment of all with respect in its various judgments related to religious matters.

In *M. Padmanabhan v. The District Collector, Trichy District* (*M. Padmanabhan v. The District Collector, Trichy District*, 2021), the Madras high court remarked that a temple shall not be a place for perpetuating communal separation, leading to discrimination. In the *Hijab Ban case* (*Aishat Shifa v. State of Karnataka*, 2022), the Supreme Court passed a split verdict by Justices Hemant Gupta and Sudhanshu Dhulia. Justice Hemant Gupta observed that the concept of secularism is applicable to all citizens and therefore permits one religious community to wear religious symbols against secularism (Ashok, 2022). According to Justice, Dhulia fraternity must be tolerant of other religious practices and allowing religious headscarfs in the classroom enables students to inculcate tolerance toward religious and cultural diversity (Sebastian, 2022). The only branch of government that has the authority to intervene in issues pertaining to religion and the practices of religious groups is the judiciary.

2. Gandhian Concept of Religious Harmony

The Gandhian view of religious harmony is deeply rooted in the spiritual unity of all mankind. He believes in the existence of relative truth in all religions. He advocated understanding a good sense of other religions and religious practices. He was not in favor of conversion to another religion. According to him, if everyone tries to understand the core of his own religion, there will be no room for tension, conflict or disagreement. He encouraged him to make personal friendships with people of other religions, which would help everyone understand the values of other religions. The attitudes toward other religions and religious practices should go beyond tolerance (Pande, 2011). From Gandhi's perspective, religious harmony can be achieved through interreligious dialog and cooperation. He held the belief that the most essential moral precepts are shared by all religions and instructed people to be good and peaceful. Serving and befriending everyone is the core of real religious teaching (Bagchi, 2003).

3. The International Concept of Religious Harmony

The Indian concept of secularism is different from that of America and France. American secularism emphasizes the complete separation of the state and the church. The government must be neutral between religious and nonreligious. This viewpoint helped American society to become more tolerant and to accept differences and diversity. Secularism in France emphasizes the strict separation of state from religion and the prohibition of religious expression in the public sphere. Religion is considered a private matter and does not give any special status to religious freedom over freedom of conscience (Parmar, 2016). Tibetan Leader Dalia Lama expressed that "relationships between different world religions is one area where peaceful coexistence has been extremely difficult throughout human history. While significant and unfortunate in the past, hostilities brought on by religious differences did not endanger the survival of humanity or the earth" (Ali, 2022) The secular structure of the country is the platform for developing religious harmony in the midst of differences.

Several races and religions coexist peacefully in Singapore. The Religious Harmony Act of 1990 played a vital role in ensuring harmony, peace and security in Singapore. The Act is based on two principles: i) followers of various religions should demonstrate moderation and tolerance toward one another and not instigate religious enmity or hatred, and ii) religion and politics must be kept apart. Through the legal framework, incidents of religious disharmony and foreign influence that threaten religious harmony in society are controlled ("Maintaining Racial and Religious Harmony," 2022).

4. Factors Leads to Religious Harmony

Religious harmony is a vital factor in ensuring unity and solidarity in a multireligious society. Religious pluralistic countries such as India should preserve a harmonious environment to peacefully leave. The factors that contribute to religious harmony should be supported and encouraged.

4.1. Embrace the core of diversity

Only when there is an understanding and acceptance of one another's religious beliefs and practices can peace and harmony exist among them. India is a multireligious and multicultural society that holds the essence of unity in diversity. All

things on earth grow at the same time without hurting each other, and similarly, all religious teachings in the world should grow at the same time without clashing (Zuo'an, 2013).

4.2. Develop the culture of mutual respect

Mutual respect can expand religious harmony in a pluralistic country. Everyone should respect the beliefs, teachings, practices, traditions and customs of other religions. Religious harmony can be simply understood as friendly coexistence among different religions (Zuo'an, 2013). It is important to avoid criticizing or provoking the practices of other religions. The measures taken by the government or any religious community to foster harmony should be supported and encouraged by society as a whole.

4.3. Shared responsibilities and collaborates

Different religious communities will be able to develop more trust in one another and respect one another if they share responsibilities and have experience working together (Zuo'an, 2013). After India gained its independence from British colonialism, religious communities played an essential role in the uplift of the nation. They were instrumental in the fight against deprivation on many fronts, including unemployment and illiteracy. In every nook and corner of India, various religious communities have founded educational institutions, medical facilities and initiatives that foster communal development.

4.4. Keep religion far away from evil purposes

In recent years, religion has been used to accomplish political motives, economic interests, communal benefits and territorial conflicts. The leaders of the religious community should be cautious to prevent the use of religious matters to foment disputes and tensions in society. Religion should promote reconciliation and resolve conflicts (Zuo'an, 2013).

4.5. Oppose religious fanaticism and religious radicalism

All religions encourage peace, love, concern, respect and cooperation. India is a secular country that treats all religions equally. Activities and practices that destroy the secular character of the nation should be unanimously opposed. One should have the mind to accept the values of other religions. There is no way of supremacy for any religion in secular India. An extreme or radical attitude toward religion may cause harm to religious harmony.

4.6. Encourage interreligious dialog

The philosophy of interreligious dialog is the communication and sharing of values between different religions. The healthy interaction between different religions helps people understand and recognize other religions and their practices, beliefs and traditions. Religions should provide opportunities for their followers to interact with other religions in a positive atmosphere. This would help them to accept other religious principles and remove ignorance of other religions.

4.7. Eradication of the backwardness of minority communities

Many minority communities in India are in a state of weak and deplorable decline. People in minority communities face discrimination and apathetic approaches from other communities. Living with dignity and security is the ultimate dream of every minority population. For the purpose of eradicating the backwardness of minority communities, special attention should be given to those communities. It is necessary for the government to take the proper steps to enhance the living conditions of minorities.

4.8. Regulation of media

Generally, the media is considered the fourth pillar of democracy. The media has a significant impact on today's society's everyday affairs. It influences the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of the public. Recent developments in these technologies have led to incredible media growth. The media had a notable role in the recent religious disputes that took place in India. Proper regulation of social media can assure religious harmony in a pluralistic society.

5. Conclusion

Interreligious harmony is an important factor in maintaining political and national integrity and stability. Religion has been portrayed as both a uniting and dividing factor throughout the course of human history. Religious harmony is vital for the peaceful life and progress of a nation. The influence of politics and other related motives can destroy the peaceful secular environment of the country. Respecting the morals and teachings of other religions can only improve religious harmony in India. In a multireligious society such as India, even a tiny amount of stress or conflicts linked to religious beliefs or practices might have negative effects on religious harmony. Religion should not be a barrier to making friendly relations. The tensions related to religion should be solved through interreligious dialog. Interreligious dialog provides positive interactions between

people with different religious beliefs and practices and leads to harmony and unity among people. People need to be more watchful and cautious about the sneaky media that circulate rumors as though they are real news. The role of the judiciary in safeguarding religious harmony is admirable. People have faith in the judiciary because it assures the enjoyment of fundamental rights in a pluralistic society.

Ethical considerations

Not required since the article is doctrinally grounded.

Conflict of interest

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