Religion And Society

Religious Communities In India

India is the birth place of four of the world's major religious traditions, namely Hinduism, Jainism,   Buddhism and Sikhism. Throughout its history, religion has been an important part of the country's culture. Religious diversity and religious tolerance are both established in the country by law and custom. A vast majority of Indians associate themselves with religion.

According to the 2001 census, Hinduism accounted for 80.5% of the population of India. Islam (13.4%),   Christianity (2.3%) and Sikhism(1.9%) are the other major religions followed by the people of India. This diversity of religious belief existing in India today is a result of religions assimilation and social integration brought to India by traders, travelers, immigrants, and even invaders and conquerors.

Christianity is **India's** third-largest religion, with approximately 24 million followers, constituting 2.3% of India's population. The works of scholars and Eastern Christian writings state that Christianity was introduced to India by Thomas the Apostle, who Kerala in 52 AD to spread the gospel amongst Kerala's Jewish settlements. Although, the exact origins of Christianity in India remain unclear, it is generally agreed upon that Christianity in India is almost as old as Christianity itself and spread in India even before it spread to many predominantly Christian nations of Europe.

Today Christians are found all across India and in all walks of life, with major populations in parts of South India, the Konkan Coast and the North-East. Indian Christians have contributed significantly to and are well represented in various spheres of national life. Indian Christians also have one of the highest literacy, work participation and sex ratio figures among the various religious communities in India.

Zoroastrianism and Judaism also have an ancient history in India and each has several thousand Indian adherents. India has the largest population of people adhering to Zoroastrianism and Bahá'í Faith anywhere in the world. Many other world religions also have a relationship with Indian spirituality, like the Baha'i faith which recognizes Lord Buddha and Lord Krishna as manifestations of God.

The Muslim population in India is the third largest in the world. The shrines of some of the most famous saints of Sufism like Moinuddin Chishti and Nizamuddin Auliya are in India and attract visitors from all over the world. India is also home to some of the most famous monuments of Islamic architecture like the Taj Mahal and the Qutb Minar. Civil matters related to the community are dealt with by the Muslim Personal Law, and constitutional amendments in 1985 established its primacy in family matters.

Islam is the second-most practiced religion in the **Republic of India** after Hinduism, with more than 13.4% of the country's population (over 138 million as per 2001 census). Matters of jurisdiction involving Muslims in India related to marriage, inheritance and wakf properties are governed by the Muslim Personal Law,[7] and the courts have ruled that Sharia or Muslim law, holds precedence for Muslims over Indian civil law in such matters

Citizens of India are generally tolerant of each other's religions and retain a secular outlook, although inter-religious marriage is not widely practiced. Inter-community clashes have found little support in the social mainstream, and it is generally perceived that the causes of religious conflicts are political rather than ideological in nature.

Indian religions is a classification for religions that originated in the Indian subcontinent; namely **Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism**.[7] These religions are also classified as **Eastern religions**. Although Indian religions are connected through the history of India, they constitute a wide range of religious communities and Indian religions are not confined to the Indian subcontinent.

The documented history of Indian religions begins with historical Vedic religion, the religious practices of the early Indo-Aryans, which were collected and later redacted into the Vedas. These texts are the central texts of Hinduism. The period of the composition, redaction and commentary of these texts is known as the Vedic period, which lasted from roughly 1500 to 500 BCE.

The late Vedic period (9th to 6th centuries BCE) marks the beginning of the Upanisadic or Vedantic period. This period heralded the beginning of much of what became classical Hinduism, with the composition of the Upanishads, later the Sanskrit epics, still later followed by the Puranas.

Jainism was established by a lineage of 24 enlightened beings culminating with Parsva (9th century BCE) and Mahavira (6th century BCE). Buddhism was historically founded by Siddhartha Gautama, a Kshatriya prince-turned-ascetic, and was spread beyond India through missionaries. It later experienced a decline in India, but survived in Nepal and Sri Lanka, and remains more widespread in Southeast and East Asia.

Sikhism was founded in the 15th century on the teachings of Guru Nanak and the nine successive Sikh Gurus in Northern India. The vast majority of its adherents originate in the Punjab region.

Problems Of Religious Minorities

Today, India is a unique example of plural society transforming itself into a modern nation state. The very plural nature of society is the root cause of the problem of identity and allegiance of various minorities to the modern nation state.

There are different kinds of minorities in India i.e. religious minorities, linguistic minorities, ethnic (tribe) minorities. Is India a multicultural society with religious diversity non-existent in any one nation. Minorities are always under the fear of loss of their identity therefore they go for blockade. They are also afraid of Cosmopolitan culture for example Delhi Punjabi living in Punjabi Bagh. In India Muslims and Christians are in minority as compared to Hindus. But the relationship of Hindus and Muslims are more stressful as compared to relationship between Hindus and Christians.

Gandhiji said that "the rise of Hindu fundamentalism is evolving into reactionary forces because Christian missionaries were engaged in conversion in tribal areas". People got converted into Christianity but were unable to abandon Hinduism completely e.g. elements of hierarchical relationship among people belonging to different caste is still prevalent within them. In Kerala Christianity is vertically segmentised into three hierarchical groups i.e. Syrian Christians, Latin Christians, New Christians (untouchables). Thus caste like hierarchy is followed and Christianity was getting Indianised unlike West.

In North East majority of the people are Christians. Tribes are segmented on the basis of ethnic identity which has resulted into conflict between them. Missionaries introduced modern values and ideology and introduced modern education which unified them. E.g. Mizoram is known today for very high literacy rate not because of state program but because of missionaries effort.

Logically minorities are as much the citizens of India as the majority are. To tackle the problem of various minorities, while formulating the Constitution of India, article 25 - 28 were included to ensure due respect and status to each religious group. Thereby not compromising with the civil rights of the people.

The biggest threat to Christian minority in India is the rise of Right-Wing fundamentalism that challenges to the civil rights, democratic rights of the citizens of the country. Christians are becoming victims of organised terror, standing alienated in their own homeland . The rise of fundamentalism is responsible for the vertical division of nation on the basis of religion affecting the cultural essence of Hindu society that was best known for tolerance and cultural synthesis.

The problems of Muslims In India

Muslims in India do have a population of hundred and 50 million i.e. around 12% of the total population of the country. Some of the educated Muslims are joining the mainstream of India by securing position in Administration, judiciary and other government services. But a majority of the highly educated Muslims are tending to migrate to the Western countries. This fact has deprived the Muslim masses of the leadership of their educated brethren. In particular, there is no worthwhile leadership for Muslims of India. What is known as the middle class community among the Muslim is a very small entity. This, in a way, reflects on the general social economic situation of Muslims community. The poor people among the Muslims are more in number, and an important section of them has been hit by the unintended de-industrialisation of India during the plan period. The next most important occupation after agriculture and rural India happens to be weaving and handlooms, and among the weavers employed in handloom industry Muslims constitute a majority segment. But the government policy of supplying cheap cloth, known as 'controlled cloth' for the general good of the people badly hit the handloom industry. Besides, the introduction of synthetic yarn also adversely affected industry. In other words, the Muslim segment which made its livelihood from handloom industry was uprooted because of the government's unintended policy of cheap cloth for mass consumption.

It is the general poverty of the majority of Muslims that is exploited by the vested Muslim interest, that is, the priestly community or the 'Mullas'. Apart from this disturbing situation, there is some amount of foreign interference, in particular that of Pakistan by various means. These two factors to a great extent generate communal disturbances in India. Underlying the communal disturbances between Hindus and Muslims is the third truth that a minority community anyway tends to be very touchy, and it also happens to be the first community to react whenever any suspicion is aroused. The psychology of the minority too cannot be helped. **John Stuart Mill** has rightly said that "the worst of the tyrannies is tyranny of the majority". This remark does not imply that majority community deliberately attempts to humiliate the minorities, but the general behavioural pattern of the majority community is such that it could be always asphyxiating to the minorities, as borne out by the simple reaction of a small groups of girls in colleges amidst majority of boys. In other words, the sensitive minority complex is a natural phenomena.

Apart from these specific factors contributing to the tensions between the two communities, there are various other factors that are at the root of communal conflicts, which are:

- Role of politicians.
- Anti-social elements in society.
- Bitter memories of the past.

The very fact, that communal disturbances occur very often in the northern belt, reveals that the memories of the partition days still linger in the minds of the people. Apart from this, Hindu revivalist organisations are also active in northern belt of India. This is borne out by the fact that communal disturbances occur as per the calendar, revealing that deep-rooted suspicions and bitter memories of yesterday have not been forgotten and forgiven as yet. However, if such clashes are not controlled in time, the state is to be blamed for it. Absence of adequate intelligence reports incapacitates administration to take the needed preventive measures. Worse follows when communal flareups break out. Subjected to various political pressures as well as owing to the fear of being dubbed communal, the parties tend to deal with a given situation in a mild mannered, and thereby let the communal trouble go out of control. It has always been proved that every such disturbance must be dealt with very firmly on its very early stage.

In brief, the communal tensions of today are partly caused by deep-rooted reasons, and partly because of secondary reasons. However, it should not be construed that communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims is totally absent or it has completely broken down. In everyday life there is not much of a difference between the lifestyles of Muslims and Hindus. In areas such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra the Muslim population speak the same language. The lifestyles too, including the dietary habits, happen to be similar. And, as we all know, some of the Jati practices are prevalent among Muslims also. Generally, the lifestyle of Muslims, whether they be in the Deccan and southern India or in northern India are the same as that of the majority group, and ordinarily they lead normal lives without fear. Communal troubles are occasional events and they are not always of any serious magnitude.

Muslims in India are about 19 the national population. Only Indonesia and Pakistan among modern nations have more Muslim citizens. Muslims of India have contributed to both Islam and Indian civilisation. However, indeed, it is also a stark reality that even Muslim villagers in India believe that their social organisation is different from that of Hindus. Some studies point out that orthodox Muslims resent the word caste being used for their religious group. Notwithstanding that, though their doctrine asserts that all Muslims are equal, their actual social practices defy it. Muslim in all regions of India class themselves into endogamous and heriditory groups which are ranked in relation to each other. Hereditary occupations are usually attributed to each group, because members participate in Jajmani relationship with families of other jatis in the locality. Where Muslim untouchables exist, they are treated alike both Hindus and Muslims. Theoretically, Islam is against any kind of caste system. But since most of the converts were Hindus, caste system and its interactive patterns have survived.

According to Sachar Committee Report, Muslims have very few representation in police, Administration and other government jobs in proportion to their population when compared to other communities. Only 4% of Muslim children complete class X and 2% complete class XII whereas only 1.2% are able to complete their graduation, apart from this women graduates are less than 1% among Muslim

population. According to this report on an average 249 communal riots take place in India every year and in these communal riots 80% of the Muslims lose their property and at times their life.

Major problems of Muslim in India advocates Deepak Mehta is minority psychosis. Though Muslims are the majority among all minorities in India but still there is a compartmentalization between Hindu and Muslims in terms of territory, dress and occupation. In a study of Dharavi (a slum in Mumbai), he points out that even little provocation from one side leads to acceleration of communal passion from the other side giving way to regular communal conflicts.

Educational problems of Muslim can be attributed to multiple factors. Firstly school curriculum is either in Hindi or in English and very little space is offered in a school curriculum to explain Islamic ideas, values, rituals and way of life therefore Muslim children find out school text as non-interesting and other's cultural product.

According to Islamic culture co-education system is not encouraged, however, nowhere in the country there are special schools for the education of Muslim girls.

Many state governments have encouraged Madarsa, paying little attention to secularization of education of the Muslims as a result, most of the Muslims go for religious-based education paying very little attention to rational knowledge which leads to huge gap between Hindus and Muslims in terms of education, income, occupation and possibility of social mobility.

Muslims are very often treated as vote banks by different political parties therefore instead of introducing public policies that can bring Muslims into mainstream education and economic frontier different governments are engaging into minority appeasing politics.

Zoya Hasan writes that, on one hand the orthodox religion and its leader and on the other hand state are instrumental for the perpetuation of backwardness of Muslim women in India. She finds out that **Uniform Civil Code** which could have really empowered Muslim women, has been out rightly rejected by vested interest who falsely propagate that this is a policy of Hindu agenda imposed upon Muslim minority. But in reality Uniform Civil Code is a national agenda for the empowerment of women.

Randhir Singh writes that, the worst fear of Muslim minority in India is the rise of "Islamophobia" that conceptualises that the roots of terrorism, and communal violence are the Muslims. The concept of Islamophobia glorified by right-wing fundamentalists is leading to isolation of Muslims from their own homeland, vertically dividing the society on the basis of religion which is leading to religious militantism questioning to the secular credentials of India.