

Inter-Religious Approach to Communal Harmony

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There is too much violence all over the world. The cause of violence varies. In the African continent it is mainly ethnical—like in Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi etc. some European powers are egging on different groups by selling them weapons or for getting minerals, oil etc. Middle- east is always in turmoil—partly political as in Iraq—both political and religious as between Israel vs Palestine, Labenon etc. This is true of the broken up nations of the former Soviet Union especially between Chechenya and Russia.

Inter religious violence also erupts between different sects of the same religion—the worst example is that of Iraq—Shia vs Sunni—complicated by ethnic situation in the case of Kurds. Even in Ireland, now and then violence does erupt between Protestants and Catholics. It is there in Spain, France etc. often some ethnic groups wanting to break away.

In India, unfortunately, violence has many dimensions. When it erupts between Hindus and Muslims it gets too much media attention. So also mainly politico-economical—with some caste ingredient—the Naxalite or Maoist violence is highlighted in the media. Violence against the dalits within Hinduism gets lesser attention of the media—perhaps because the media is controlled by the upper castes.

Historically speaking that too many human beings have been killed in the name of religion than due to any other cause—including the great First and Second world wars. The greatest tragedy recorded in human history is the death of millions of soldiers and civilians—due to bombardment—during the Second World War. The total death is estimated between fifty and one hundred million. But the number of Jews—who were killed by the Nazis exceeded the number of soldiers and civilians.

During the partition of India at the time of its freedom in 1947 millions of Hindus and Muslims got killed in the name of religion.

The casualties of religious conflict was less than that of world wars - in the Crusades—from Tenth to Fourteenth centuries. Yet people got killed in thousands.

It is in this context—the role of religion or Inter-religious approach to communal harmony becomes an important issue. Belief in religion is deeply in-grained in majority of the mankind. Though every religion has a message of love; compassion and service to humanity—some dogmatists—or bad elements within the religious groups often succeed in poisoning the minds of lay persons—saying that “our religion is in danger, you should take up arms and fight to save our religion—kill the enemies or get killed and become a martyr!”

Before arriving at a possible solution, one would try to understand the meaning of the word religion, analyse the role of religion vs civilization vs the state through History. Tolerance—rather than conflict—was a dominant factor when a nation or empire consisted of people of different religions. Violence in the name of religion, it seems increased tremendously in the twentieth century and in present times is posing a great and real danger to world peace.

Religions being complex, have different aspects or dimensions. A definition of any religion is next to impossible! Yet some common factors could be discerned. Thus the major world religions typically possess doctrines, myths, ethical and social teachings, rituals, social institutions and inner experiences and sentiments. These dimensions lie behind the creation of buildings, art, music and other such extensions of basic beliefs and attitudes. But not all

religions are like Christianity and Buddhism for example in possessing institutions such as the Church and the Sangha (Buddhist monastic order) which exist across national and cultural boundaries.

Religion was indistinguishable from the state in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Aztec and Mayan civilizations, and the cult of their nation–Churches were geared to the perpetuation of the cosmic order of nature and society. This state cult itself was an impressive educational device, as can be noted in the annual new years festival of cosmic renewal in Mesopotamia at which the great epic of creation (*Enuma elish*) was recited in its entirety and much of it was acted out, or in Egyptian so called Mystery Play of success on marking the transition from one Egyptian king to another.

These cultures were the products of significant developments in the technology of agriculture. There developed around this technology a pattern known today as sacred or divine kingship in which the king figure embodied the essential aspects of the civilization by combining in one functionary a responsibility for agriculture, the cosmos and the political survival of the state. Effective educational transmission was essential to the ongoing life of these civilizations. This education was usually conducted by priests and the schools were most often associated with temples. Whether assigned for the priesthood or more mundane pursuits, all education was of cosmic import in these ancient civilizations and all was essential for the survival of the state.

As empires arose in different parts of the world, the kings claimed divinity. The priest class facilitated the process. Thus the link between the religion and politics has continued all through history and religion has been an integrating or stabilizing factor.

In India right from the days of *Ramayana* (could be around 10th century BC) kings claimed divine origin—either *Surya* (sun) or *Chandra* (moon) *Vamsa*—both sun and moon are gods in Hindu mythology. As Pallava and Chola empires arose in the South India beginning from the 7th century AD, Bhakti cult also emerged and huge temples were constructed. The emperors often assumed the name of the presiding deity of the greatest temples. For the masses the king was indistinguishable from God. The king not only got legitimacy—again facilitated by the priest class—the country's social integration was ensured.

At least in India, the Kings and the society at large showed great tolerance towards different faiths and different religions. Perhaps this was inherent in the 'tenets' of Hinduism itself. Though it is one of the oldest religions in the world, it does not have a single god—head or a gospel or a single institution. There are too many gods—too many different beliefs and rituals. In pre-historic times atheism also was born in India. The Charvaks who were atheists posed a challenge to the priest class. They were tolerated. In fact the words 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism'—came into existence around 8th or 9th century AD. 'Hindu' was the term used by the Arabs and Persians to people living around and beyond the river Indus (also called Sindhu—and in the Persian language the letter V gets mispronounced as 'h'). No other religion in the world has this kind of a funny and accidental nomenclature! Prior to 'Hinduism' expressions like Sanatana Dharma, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shakta cult etc. etc. were the terms used for the religion prevailing in India.

Buddhism was just two or three centuries old during the reign of Asoka. The story is well known. After his victory in the Kalinga war in the third century BC, he gave up violence and embraced Buddhism. His edicts enjoin that sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another. It is important to note that though Asoka became a Buddhist, he did not announce Buddhism as state religion. Hinduism, and Jainism which also arose in India around the fifth century BC along with Buddhism—flourished in Asoka's empire.

In the south both under Pallavas and Cholas Buddhist viharas and Jain temples were part of the town's landscape along with the Hindu temples. The common man had the freedom to choose his religion. The Bhakti cult that arose with the Nayanmars and Alvars around the 7th Century AD became overwhelmingly popular in Tamilnadu and Buddhism and Jainism started

declining. Perhaps these religions could not match the sagacity and popularity of the wandering minstrels singing the praise of Hindu gods!

Akbar's Divine Faith

Not only for religious tolerance but for Religious integration an attempt was made by Akbar the great mogul emperor in India. Though he was not a man of letters - in fact he was an illiterate - he established a library in his capital Agra. He got works like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* translated from Sanskrit to Persian language. He acquired a deep and thorough knowledge of the religions of his times - (16th century AD) Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Jainism by arranging recurring dialogues with scholars of these faiths. Akbar liked to reason about particular components of each multi-faceted religion. Akbar was skeptical of the rituals of Jainism but he liked and opted for vegetarianism from that religion. Taking the essential elements from different faiths, Akbar found a new religion—Din-e-ilahi- meaning 'Divine Faith' or 'Religion of God'. He could not popularize it among the masses. It remained academic. Yet its importance could not be underestimated. That the greatest emperor of his times in the world could have devoted his time and energy for the study of religions and could come out with an idea of common religion is really a landmark in Human History. No king either before or after Akbar showed this kind of constructive attitude towards religions.

A word about the tolerance of other faiths not only under the Moguls but even before them under Khiljis, Tughlaks etc. would be relevant here. There is a popular belief or misconception that under the Muslim rule conversions to Islam took place on the point of sword. This belief deserves outright rejection - since Hindus continued to be the majority population both in the mogul capital Delhi and all over the empire even after five centuries of Muslim rule. In truth millions of Hindus especially Dalits and some classes of artisans who were denied entry into Hindu temples, embraced Islam since it offered brotherhood and inside the Mosque all are equal before Allah!

Spain came under the rule of Muslims—they were called Moors as they came from Morocco—in the 10th century AD and ruled the country for five centuries. There were no forcible conversions to Islam. In present times Muslims number less than five percent of the population of Spain.

The same religious tolerance was prevalent under the Ottoman empire (Turkish) which flourished from the 13th till the early 20th century. Especially between 1500 and 1920 Turks ruled over not only the Arabia (present middleeast), central Asia and Greece but also the Slavic nations like Bulgaria, Rumania, Yugoslavia (former) etc. Yet Christianity flourished in the Slavic nations, and in Turkey, Syria, Egypt etc. had Christian population lived in peace.

In January, 1935 Dr. S Radha-krishnan asked Gandhiji three questions:

- (1) What is your religion?
- (2) How are you led to it?
- (3) What is its bearing on social life?

Gandhiji's reply was:

"My religion is Hinduism which, for me, is religion of humanity and includes the best of all the religions known to me.

I take it that the present tense in the second question has been purposely used instead of the past. I am being led to my religion through Truth and Nonviolence, i.e., love in the broadest sense. I often describe my religion as religion of Truth. Of late, instead of saying God is Truth, I have been saying Truth is God, in order more fully to define my religion. I used at one time to know by heart the thousand names of God which a booklet in Hinduism gives in verse form and which perhaps tens of thousands recite every morning. But nowadays nothing so completely describes my God as Truth. Denial of God we have known. Denial of Truth we have not known. The most ignorant among mankind have some truth in them.

The bearing of this religion on social life is, or has to be, seen in one's daily social contact. To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life. Realization of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in and identification with this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me, there is no escape from social service; there is no happiness on earth beyond or apart from it. Social service here must be taken to include every department of life. In this scheme there is nothing low, nothing high. For, all is one, though we seem to be many".

In his famous constructive programme communal unity occupies the first place. In Gandhiji's words "Unity does not mean political unity which may be imposed. It means an unbreakable heart unity. The first thing essential for achieving such unity is for every person, whatever his religion may be, to represent himself Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Zoroastrian, Jew, etc., shortly, every Hindu and non-Hindu. He has to feel his identity with every one of the millions of the inhabitants of Hindustan. In order to realize his, every person will cultivate personal friendship with persons representing faiths other than his own. He should have the same regard for the other faiths as he has for his own.

The real danger in the present day world is the tendency to segregate and identify people on the basis of religions—like Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Sikh etc. Almost every country in the world has become multi-ethnic and is home for people from different faiths. Both the United States and England have substantial number of Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese etc. All of them are citizens of those countries. To segregate them as Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists etc could create complications. People have to understand the reality that they have multiple identities based on language, religion, nation, gender, profession etc. Use of religious identity alone as a rubber stamp is improper and dangerous.

Nevertheless, people have to face the reality—after 11th September 2001—the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York—Al qaida-Bin Laden etc. all Muslims have become suspect. Especially in the US and the European countries there is a tendency to suspect every Muslim—as a terrorist.

The word Jihad conjures up images of bearded clerics, frenzied fundamentalists, insane suicide bombers, and remorseless turbaned crowds who chant death for the infidels. These images derive from the religio-political goals.

In the literal sense of the term, jihad means an effort, or a striving. Islamic scholars say that the Quran and Hadith ascribe two meanings to the term: "al-Jihad al Akbar and "al-jihad al Asghar". The former means the "greater warfare", which is against one's inner demon while the latter means the "lesser warfare" against infidels. The perception of jihad in the former sense is subjective and has moral implications. It involves a way of life in which fleeting temptations have no place. Individuals become discerning subjects who comprehend that worldly temptations are ephemeral and have to be fought. It is also the ability to suffer virtuously the afflictions caused by the foe by following the commandment of Allah and to preach, through education, art and literature, the precepts of Islam, the religion of Allah.

The second meaning of jihad is the religious war against 'oppressive occupiers' of the homeland of Islam, Dar-al-Islam. An Islamic scholar, Syed Qutb, observes that this homeland is not symbolized by borders but by a community that accepts Shari'a as the law. The jihad is a defensive act: it is a war of last resort dictated by circumstances and compulsions confronting Muslims. In this context, Syed Qutb states: Those who state that Islamic Jihad was mainly for the defence of "the homeland of Islam", diminish the greatness of the Islamic way of life and consider it less important than their "homeland". Qutab further says, "The Jihad of Islam is to secure complete freedom for every man throughout the world by releasing him from servitude.... So that he may serve God."

Yet unfortunately some Maulvis and Maulanas are obsessed with the politics of communal power and preach false interpretation of jihad as fight against non-believers.

Now what is the solution? How do people ensure communal harmony and peace in this strife-torn world? One cannot trust the politicians. They are concerned only with votes. They would support and give a clean chit to a particular religious sect even when the police come forward with evidence of that group's involvement in large scale violence. The ball is in the court of Gandhians, all social Groups which stand for peace and harmony and above all—responsible leaders of different religions. Religious leaders have a tremendous responsibility. There is no religion in the world that does not speak about love, compassion and service to the society.

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