

Clash of Faiths

Many, possibly most, liberals and democrats, in this biggest showpiece of democracy, are fed up with secular rhetoric but that doesn't mean they are fed up with religion. Also religious leaders in most cases are passive politicians with considerable mass appeal. There is no religion that encourages hatred, anger and revenge. And yet religious extremism results in all this and it is on the rise despite the emergence of too many secularists who are bitterly contesting for political space without really hitting at the roots of inter-religious animosity. India is not a theocracy but clerics in this part of the globe enjoy enough liberty to get involved in politics. As a result the situation in India is more complex. As religion-based violence shows no signs of abetting, inter-faith dialogue is becoming popular across the world these days and many organisations are organising it in view of growing inter-religious tensions. America had not known it earlier but post 9/11 changed the scenario as Islam came under attack and tensions between Christians and Muslims increased exponentially and so many religious and semi-religious outfits came into being organising dialogues. India being a perennial scene of communal riots and religious violence, inter-faith dialogue has attained some added importance. And clerics of all faiths in the multi-religious society have certainly a role to play in confidence building measures.

A few weeks back a high-level inter-faith dialogue took place in Mumbai though media didn't show much enthusiasm in highlighting the outcome of the dialogue. It was attended by top clergy from hindu and christian religions. In the West such dialogues are taking place between the representatives of christian and islamic faiths, with wide media coverage.

The hard reality is that faith is being increasingly misused by vested interests. It remains to be seen whether inter-faith dialogue can mitigate religious extremism and communal violence. The Mumbai meet came to the understanding that there should be no violence against minorities, there should be no conversions and that religious organisations will pool together their resources for charity. There is nothing new in the declaration. No political outfit, not even the saffron brigade, preaches minority-bashing openly. Nor does the minority community feel secure with pious words. All condemn violence, religious or otherwise, against the minority community people. And yet the majority-minority divide on religious issues worsens with every passing day. The legacy of bitter history refuses to die. Nobody really quarrels over charity. But conversion is certainly a super-charged issue, and it has added a new dimension to the Mumbai inter-faith conclave, particularly after repeated violent attacks against tribal christians in Orissa in recent months.

Globally how America misuses faith for political goals by resorting to nursing religion-based terror groups is now an open secret. It created al-Qaida and Taliban, the most dreaded jihadi outfits that now challenge the very authority and domination of America by liberally misusing the jihad and kafir syndrome in an insane manner to launch their 'revenge' offensive ostensibly for the glory of their faith. Terror begets terror. Violence begets violence. And faith-based terror begets faith-based terror. No doubt the adverse effect of al-Qaida and Taliban-inspired violence is compounding the problem of religious animosity in India and elsewhere—it tempts others to misuse faith.

At another level with Ram Rath Yatra, as it was riding on the chariot of faith and leaving behind the trail of blood, the misuse of faith for divisive politics was undisputed.

The efforts of clerics in the direction of restoring peace is laudable. True, the problem stemming from clash of faiths is not their making—politicians do the dirty tricks—but a large section of civic society looks up to them for guidance. Today when democracy is struggling to be the norm, clergy may play their part. The forces of religion are not necessarily aligned with powers that be. Progressives see a new ray of hope in the meeting of Archbishops and Shankaracharyas. Maybe, Imams will soon join the fray. With such dialogues gaining currency and popular support, the architects of violence in the name of religion may lose their legitimacy.

But clerics put too much faith on spirituality. The Mumbai inter-faith dialogue was no exception. While cardinal Gracious talked of India's spiritual tradition, Sri Saraswati went a step further to demand that India should be declared as a spiritual state. A state being declared spiritual will create more problems instead of solving them. In modern times even religion which has visible aspects in the form of identity markers cannot be state matter. In a crisis situation like this it is better to understand each other than to shun from looking at the 'other' in a humiliating way.

If inter-faith dialogue means another business as usual exercise in escapism it won't serve any purpose. If it remains superficial it may become a part of the problem rather than solution. In India it is political interests of a section of hindus and muslims or christians which clash and, it is often projected as clash of faiths. □□□