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MEDIA AND THE CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN INDIA

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Abstract:

The Indian subcontinent has a long history of multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-philosophical traditions. Hence, it could well be stated that India's destiny lies in its religio-cultural pluralism. The Founding Fathers of our nation have rightly adopted a Constitution with freedom of religion as one of its fundamental rights (secular democracy). It underlines the principle of 'unity in diversity'. India has come a long way proving to the world the idea of a successful functional democracy. Still, more needs to be done to make India a strong, prosperous and secular democracy. All stakeholders such as the state, religious communities, the civil society and the media need to work in tandem to evolve values that are required for the creation of such an enlightened polity.

1.INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE AND INTER-FAITH COLLABORATION

India has seen several communal conflicts in its soil in the past. One of Kerala's popular poet and lyricist Vayalar Rama Verma's songs which goes as follows, "God created man, man created religion and in the name of religion man divided gods and men, and men kill each other". Most of the post independence communal conflicts happened in the urban areas, often instigated by rumours and vested interests; and sometimes with the connivance of the state machinery. In rural India different communities live in close collaboration and inter-dependence and so there is less chance of communal flare-ups. Even in cases of such conflicts, the differences are amicably settled by elders and the panchayat members at the beginning of a communal conflict, and they do not allow it to go out of hand.

According to Justice Markandey Katju, until the British policy of 'divide and rule' in India, there were no serious communal problem in India. Hindus and Muslims have been living together in India for more than a thousand years. The earliest Muslims came to India as traders in Kerala and enjoyed peaceful relations with local Hindus and spread Islam using peaceful means. However, their place was taken over by the invading Muslim armies in the North so that the relationship between Muslims and Hindus was rapidly transformed into that of conquerors and the conquered. The Mughal period, particularly the reign of Akbar was perhaps a more enlightened one in terms of peaceful interaction between Hindus and Muslims. The development of Bhakti and Sufi movements in India clearly show a remarkable degree of cultural synthesis between Hindus and Muslims. "Hindu-Muslim syncretism in India has deep cultural roots which has survived political and social upheavals. There are numerous syncretic shrines across the country which even today continue to attract people of both faiths…The Sufi and bhakti movements blurred the differences between the two religions so much that it was very common till very recently to have a sadguru or pir having a common following of Hindus and Muslims. And no pir or sadguru ever forced a Hindu or Muslim to give up his religion for any other". The freedom movement was fought jointly. But the India-Pakistan partition violence and the successive communal conflicts have aggravated the mutual distrust.

In earlier times, people lived in isolation without contact with other human communities and developed their own religious faith and practices. Modernity and communication technologies have brought them closer to one another. Yet, it is well within their rights of people to profess, practice and find fulfillment in their own unique faiths. Remaining in one's own faith and yet being respectful of other faiths is beneficial and important for a plural society. It is better expressed in the words of Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama, "I generally say that whether it is Christian's religion, Muslim's religion, Jew's religion,

Hindu's religion, Parsee's religion, whatever religion it is, they are all beneficial to many people. I feel wonderstruck about the fact that these different religions have been beneficial for millions of people for many thousand years". It is a fact that all the religions are facilitating salvation. All the religious traditions are different manifestations of one Supreme God. And so, there cannot be one superior or inferior religion. Pradip Ninan suggests the following minimum rules required for a sharing of common values among the faiths in India. Shared respect for the diversity of faith expressions in our country. India is not only the birthplace of Hindu tradition but also Buddha, Mahavira, Sikh Gurus and multifarious 'little' traditions of popular Hinduism and indigenous 'tribal' faith expressions. Add to it the presence of a tiny Jewish tradition, and Christianity for nearly 2000 years, the presence of Islam and Zoroastrianism over 1000 years, and the continuing presence of Sufi traditions along with newer faith expressions and what we have is the most religiously diverse country in the world. In the words of many right-thinking people, such affirmations of faith need to be seen as the heritage of the country. This should be seen as a blessing and a gift, the wonder of India. India's strength is its secular character. India's secularism guarantees equal freedom of worship and practice for all religious followers.

We need to go further beyond the inter-religious dialogue and appreciation to inter-religious collaboration. The common ventures should not be limited to discourses of common religious values but move from there to religious collaboration, into concrete actions of common welfare, paying more attention to the weaker sections. The basic human amenities have not reached every citizen even today. De-humanizing poverty, health conditions, illiteracy, skewed sex ratio, etc. are still stifling a good part of India's population. Corruption and inequality is rampant. It should be the moral duty of every religious organizations to extend their contribution to alleviate these evils from the Indian society irrespective of their caste or communal affiliations.

Common celebration of each others' festivals must be promoted. India is a country where religion and religious leaders are respected. Their voices have an influence on the masses. The initiatives for inter-religious dialogue should be taken by the leaders of various religious communities. The state can only encourage these inter-faith initiatives. Meera Nanda proposes her views on greater inter-religious collaboration,

There is no bigger challenge for India today than to create meaningful secular spaces and secular public culture. We have to create more spaces where Hindus, and Muslims and everyone else can live as co-workers, neighbours, and friends. We have to create secular and inclusive explanations for India's achievements and flaws. We have to provide greater existential security to the poor and struggling masses so that they are not left at the mercy of gods and god-men alone.

It won't be right to place the blame for the religious disharmony in the past on any one community. What rather needs to be done is to own up the past mistakes collectively and learning from it draw up common plans for the harmonious future. Political interference of majority and minority appeasement must stop. Despite the occasional occurrences of communal divide in the past, the people of India have maintained communal harmony and amity largely on the whole, and have been greatly accommodative and supportive of one another. India has a tradition of sharing the religious festivals of one another. The August 2012 case of communal amity during the Eid celebrations re-emphasizes this original national culture. It was reported in almost all the national dailies. According to the version of the Times of India on 22 August, 2012, the Sikhs of Joshimath, a small town in the state of Uttarakhand, have set an example by allowing the Muslim community to offer namaaz at their Gurdwara on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr. Every year, Muslims congregate at the Gandhi Maidan in the town but this time it was raining heavily and the ground was consequently slushy. Hence, Sardar Buta Singh who is the Gurdwara's prabandhak informed that its main hall can be used by the Muslims to offer prayers. Accepting the large-hearted invitation, many of the town's Muslim residents entered the Gurdwara at 9.30 a.m and participated in the Eid namaaz. Subsequently the Sikhs and the Muslims embraced each other. Some Hindus too joined in the Eid celebrations there. Afterwards, Sardar Buta Singh said that he had invited the Muslims to the Gurdwara since they were not able to offer worship in the open due to the downpour. Hailing the Gurdwara committee's exemplary humanity, Maulvi Asif thanked it for the solving the problem which the Muslims had been facing. He added that the committee had shown everyone how to respect all religions. A similar incident happened in the wake of the hate-SMSs against the northeast people doing the rounds, forcing them to leave Bangalore en masse. "When the Muslims of Bangalore came to know of this mischief, they organized a feast for the northeast Indians and told them that someone had had played mischief, and that Muslims are not against the people from the northeast". These incidents amply demonstrate that with a little of goodwill and feelings of 'give and take' among the religious leaders and the public, India will be a better place for all communities to live in harmony and peace.

Remaining in one's faith and yet being open and respectful of other faiths and readiness to collaborate with even those with opposing views is also equally important for a healthy pluralist

atmosphere. The statement of the 34th general congregation of the Jesuits is relevant in this connection, "to be religious today is to be inter-religious in the sense that a positive relationship with believers of other faiths is requirement in a world of religious pluralism" (GC.34 No.130). Mark Tully, BBC's senior journalist in India for the last 40 years echoes similar sentiments:

However, I do believe that we should all listen to each other and learn from each other – and that includes those who do not adhere to any religion. In my opinion, no single religion has a monopoly on the truth or is without blemish, nor can any religious tradition survive if it remains static. Those who reject all criticism and are not open to developing their doctrines do a disservice to their own traditions, often ending up defending indefensible practices or outdated prohibitions.

2.NEED FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

There has been a proliferation of several 24 hour religious television channels of every religion in the country due to people's increased interest towards them. Equally, religious publishing, religious web sites and online publishing too have flourished, amounting to an unhealthy competition. But, unfortunately hardly there is any common ventures in the area of religious publishing and not even one in the religious broadcast media. The national television Doordarshan service should have taken an inclusive approach but has failed and does only a token service in this regard. There is a need for accentuating common religious values in the mind of the public. And this can be done by the religious media. Media products affect the consciousness, what we think and how we assign value to ideas and ways of behaviour, etc. There is a need to establish multi-faith broadcasting services in India run by representatives from faith communities.

In the media, on the one hand, the images are those of a secular and all-encompassing fabric of unity which allows several centuries of melting influences between Hinduism and Islam. And on the other hand, there is a schism which reinforces the inherently distinct identity of the two religions and juxtaposes Islam as the "outsider's faith". In the wake of the Babri Masjid episode, the entire nation was seized with communally sensitive portrayal of Islam as the invader's religion. Subsequently, the mass psyche was assaulted with an array of anti-Islam projections which stirred up the hysteria against and even for Islam. Often the voice of the hardliners and Jihadi groups get highlighted in the media than the moderate ulema. This brings to the fore the requirement for the Muslim and other secular media to allot sufficient space to the voice of the moderate and conciliatory Muslims to disseminate their stand on Islam as well.

Let the Indian media continue to explore the functional facet of Islam whose religious representation is perhaps more practical than its ideological interpretation. This is assuring, as India will have to live with its many faiths co-existing together and the media will play a very crucial role in interpreting Islam as a binding force rather than a divisive one. The Indian mass-media will have to cross this mirage of fragmentation to create a country of cultural confluence through its sensitive representation of Islam every time and this alone will help secularism survive the long battle against communal schism.

The rising religious fundamentalism and the decline of Nehruvian secularism is fuelling the inter-faith tensions. Various factors have contributed to the decline of common values in India. The Indian sub-continent being one of the oldest cradles of civilization boasts of amazing ethnic, cultural, and communal diversity. Indian history should be defined in the consolidations of not a single community rather the celebration and fulfilment of its many communities. There must be ways to ease this tension through positive communication of the wealth of India's religious traditions. Pradip N. Thomas has the following suggestions:

All religious communities in India need to communicate their faith responsibly, without, in that process, attacking or undermining other faiths. Second, in the light of the deteriorating quality of faith reporting, religious councils in India could be jointly involved in drawing up an inter-faith media charter. These councils need to make an attempt to jointly work towards the creation of an ombudsman that would have the power to take action on those who violate this charter. Further, inter-faith efforts may be encouraged to set up a multi-faith cable channel Vision TV. The objective of such network will be to broadcast objective interpretations of faiths, religious traditions and spiritualities from and to the subcontinent. Such a service is needed to counter the present form- the token space given to religion by state broadcasting and programmes that merely strengthens stereotypical perceptions of the religious other. At the least, such an initiative will create a shared space for imagining a different India. And last, it is necessary that religious institutions take seriously the challenge posed by inter-faith dialogue. In pluralistic societies like India, where the issue of religion has become emotive and divisive, these institutions need to be called to create the basis for reconciliation and understanding.

There is a lot that can be gained from an inclusive approach to religious broadcasting- from a large appreciation of different religious traditions to a greater understanding of one's own religion in the context of other faiths. Canada has set an example in this regard. The Canada based Vision TV launched in 1988 in

Toronto showcases the diverse religious and spiritual heritages. Seventy five faith groups from seven religious communities, including Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity regularly feature on Vision TV. It has demonstrated that faith communities can share a common broadcasting space and platform.

3.COMPLEMENTARINESS OF FAITH AND REASON

Albert Einstein said, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind". Religion needs to be accompanied by reason to make it more authentic. Religion needs to welcome criticism from within and outside and should allow itself to be questioned so as to remove the false assumptions and preserve itself from being contaminated by superstition. Most religions, some time in history have undergone reformation. In the West, Martin Luther, Calvin and others initiated the reform movements in Christianity from 16th century A.D. In India, religious poet and social reformer Sant Kabir worked towards removing the conservative practices from Hinduism and Islam in the 14th century. His efforts also bore fruit in the form of unity among the warring Hindus and Muslims. Later on, in 18th and 19th centuries, Hindu renaissance began under the guidance of reformists; prominent among them are Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Maharishi Dayanand Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda. They worked towards removing the social evils endorsed by religion, such as the practice of Sati, untouchability, polygamy, child marriage, idolatry, caste system, etc. All these reform movements were possible because the reformists could look critically at religion and religious practices and dared to challenge them.

Recent studies have shown that there is a surge in religiosity and religious communication in India, particularly among the urban population in the last two decades. This is seen in the rising number of pilgrimages, religious gatherings, ritual fasting, temple/gurudwara/church/mosque worshippers, festivities, emergence of charismatic TV gurus, online supply of religious goods and services, etc. The present religious communication is more inclined to promoting popular religiosity, devoid of a deeper, sober and philosophical religiosity which was prevalent until two decades ago. Scholars like Meera Nanda have found that this growth in popular religiosity has undermined the neo-Vedantic philosophy, scientific temper and Nehruvian socialism of the earlier period. Meera considers the present trend quite unhealthy. "The newly prosperous middle classes are turning away from the more philosophical, neo-Vedantic form of religiosity and embracing a more ritualistic and superstitious form of popular Hinduism centred on temples, pilgrimages and popular saints or god-men/women. Economic reforms and rising wealth of the middle classes have increased both the demand and supply of, religious services" (Meera Nanda 2009: 5). We need a healthy combination of both philosophical understanding and the practice of religion.

Another growing trend is the commercialization of the religious media. Many religious media products tend to be for the sale of religious goods and services. A lot of mixing of religion with business and finance is happening in the current religious media. They unwittingly turn religion and spirituality into a commodity in today's globalized economy by projecting it as something to be sold rather than anything of a transformative force to be experienced and as something that constantly beckons the humans to think beyond the immediate and the transient. There are many occult practices, witchcraft, unscientific spiritual cures, etc. administered on the public by religious practitioners, due to lack of proper religious awareness and education. Fake god-men/gurus misguiding and manipulating the gullible masses is also seen often. The right knowledge about one's faith can be imparted by the religious media. It can also correct the audience if there are false assumptions about their faith. Media should help expose any mal-practices done in the name of religion. A majority of the respondents in the current study have affirmed that blind faith leads people to religious intolerance and fundamentalism (No.3 of table 52). The unreasonable religious acts cannot be justified in the name of faith. There is also an unhealthy competition of religious communication by various religious groups. All these aberrations can be controlled if faith practices are accompanied by reason.

It is to be affirmed that faith and reason are complementary, not contradictory ways of seeking the truth. "We must test any content of faith. For a content of faith that does not fulfil the human dimension, i.e. to make the believer more human, cannot be good faith". Thus it becomes essential that each faith community makes its intra-religious dialogue so that each tradition can address this need for an internal reform in tandem with inter-religious dialogue and inter-religious collaboration. A mature religious practitioner who is convinced of his faith will welcome questions about his/her faith and not get hurt by the questions and doubts. Religious belief, cult and morality should be subjected to internal reflection periodically so that it remains free from contamination of superstition and blind practices.

4.CONCLUSION

Indians are fundamentally religious. The development of science and technology has not in any

way led him/her astray from the spiritual path. India has come a long way off, evolving a composite culture of many religious traditions, values and philosophies. And its destiny is in its pluralistic context. If everyone of her citizens is imbued with this pluralistic spirit, India can be a model of 'unity in diversity' to the rest of the world. It can be summed-up in one sentence that India's religious pluralism is a boon and not a bane.

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