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Religious Practices and Democratic Values in India: A Search for Interreligious Dialogue

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Abstract

India has a long, rich, and diverse tradition of philosophical thoughts, spanning some two and a half millennia and encompassing several major religious traditions. India's democracy can be said to rest on the foundation of religious practice due to the practice of multi-religions and different sects in its continent. Religious practices ties among citizens that generate positive and democratic political outcomes if we see it from the ideals of any religious doctrine as per their written scripture. But in society religious practices (not religious doctrine) do not show equality and usually go against their own religious doctrine as preached in their religious places. It is also evident that religious denomination (Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh etc.) comes as a barrier when we practice democratic ideals in society and make social situation worst. How these religious practices contribute for a society where we can discuss the ideals of freedom, equality and brotherhood for a Just Society and become mean of interreligious dialogue in multi-religious society? This is a big question to think. The objective of this paper is to study the dimensions of religious practices in Indian society and how these practices can contribute in interreligious dialogue to make atmosphere of peace, understanding and harmony in the society.

Key-Words: Religion, Indian Society, Social Justice, Social Inclusion and Indian Constitution

Religion is a strong faith in some supernatural Spirit or God. Religion and reason cannot go together. The postulates of religious experience cannot be established by means of any investigation. They can accept as a matter of faith. Every religion has its own ideals. For example, Hinduism believes in *moksha*. Some say that where reason ends, there faith begins. This line purely applies on the religions of Indian continent. Indian society witnessed a huge social change and religious movements in Indian continent in various periods of history. Every religion has its basic ideology, slightly different from another religion but a major difference in its outer appearance or practices. We can say that, "Religion might be a powerful force in one society; less powerful in another and in some societies might have a negligible influence. The differential role of religion in different societies and epochs arguably does not eliminate in its entirety the influence of religion on identity development and evolution over time." Every religion has its different political character, which may be different from their age-old ideals of life. (1)

Scholars have struggled and argued for many years about how to define religion. Some emphasize the ideas that religion is concerned primarily with conceptions of God, divinity, and the meaning and other human existence. Others have tended to emphasize the way religion serves to draw distinctions between sacred forms of space and beliefs and more mundane, or profane, domains of 'wordily' human endeavor. (2) No generally accepted definition of religion taken into account the nature of the discipline, diversity of religions, diversity of religious experiences, and diversity of religious origins, among others. A person's religious identity is the name of the religion that they identify themselves with. In this society people want to know, "What religion are you?" Generally they expect a one-word answer with the name of a religion that expresses their religious identity. A person might say they are a Buddhist - or a Christian - or a Jew - or a Muslim - or a Hindu. These are examples of religious identities. Recent developments in the field of social sciences in general and sociology in particular suggest a gradual tendency towards revival of

interest on the issue of religion and identity. It is plausible that religion and identity may be positively correlated. The link between religion and identity can be contextualized through the exploration of the self. Religion might serve, as a powerful influence on an individual identity assuming that the person involved is deeply religious or significantly committed to his/her religion. The influence of religion on identity formation may also work through parental influence. Children whose parents are significantly religious are more likely to be significantly religious themselves. The commitment to religion and consequent influence on identity formation works through parental influence in this particular case. (3) "The link between religion and identity will be reviewed with reference to youth's search for identity formation. Youths are more likely to struggle with identity cohesion, as they continually search for a sense of self. Basically, youths undergone this psychological journey so as to solidify and understand their experience of self as well as identifying and associating themselves with the familial, vocational and societal roles (Damon, 1983). (4) Thus we can say that Religion is more likely to play significant role in identity formation in a culture where youth confront a continually fluctuating social and political milieu. Religion can potentially provide ultimate answers and viewpoints about elusive issues of life that might be more intriguing and pertinent for a youth (see, Erikson, 1964)." (5)

What role Religion played in Indian Society can be seen in these lines, "In India, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism are some of the major religions practised by the people. Numerically the Hindus are considered to be the majority, which inspires many Hindu loyalist groups like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh) or the Siva Sena and political parties like the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) or the Hindu Mahasabha to claim that India is a Hindu State. These claims generate homogenising myths about India and its history. These claims are countered by other religious groups who foresee the possibility of losing autonomy of practise of their religious and cultural life under such homogenising claims. This initiates contestations that have often resulted in communal riots. The generally accepted myths that process the identity divide on religious lines centre on the 'appeasement theory', 'forcible religious conversions', general 'anti-Hindu' and thus 'anti-India' attitude of the minority religious groups, the 'hegemonic aspirations' of majority groups and 'denial of a socio-cultural space' to minority groups." (6) So, we can see that religious politics affected the socio-political structure of the society at large. Religion is a deriving force for social change in India since ancient times. Although we boast about ancient Indian ideals of social stratification, which made a long lasting discrimination within society, and most of the times we do not do any justice to social-political life of a billion peoples. The study of the relation between religion and politics showed that this relation always made a problematic situation for the indigenous people and always benefitted invaders. The idea of the interface or mixing of religion and politics being problematic and potentially dangerous is a byproduct of the rise of secularism, often regarded as one of the hallmarks of modern society.

When we discuss about interreligious dialogue we have to consider that we will be not successful till when we leave all religious identity and adopt a uniform value system. "Interreligious dialogue, also referred to as interfaith dialogue, is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. The term refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, (i.e. "faiths") at both the individual and institutional level. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practice their faith freely. Interfaith dialogue is not just words or talk. It includes human interaction and relationships. It can take place between individuals and communities and on many levels. Interreligious Dialogue is defined as "All positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of a faith which are directed at mutual understanding an enrichment, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom." (7) For this we need to think on the present day social issues as the clashes between religions mostly the product of political ill-will and it disharmonizes our society. In present days, for interreligious harmony "the concept of social justice" is more important as it shows us the real intension of Indian Constitution and its proposed society.

The concept of social justice is an important concept for the social-political harmony in present times. Social justice denotes the equal treatment of all citizens without any social distinction based on caste, colour, race, religion, sex and so on. It means absence of privileges being extended to any particular section of the society, and improvement in the conditions of backward classes (SCs, STs, and OBCs) and women. Social justice is a public and collective good that involves an equitable sharing of the earth's power, resources and opportunities to enable people individually and collectively to develop their talents to the fullest. Its realisation requires social relations embedded in trust, acceptance, mutuality, reciprocity and solidarity. Under Indian Constitution the use of social justice is accepted in wider sense, which includes social and economical justice both. Ancient social structure allows us to see the discrimination made to indigenous people with reference to their socio-political life. These evils not only effects Hindu social order rather it also haunts the social structure of newly established religions in Indian continent. The concept of social justice has been enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The fathers of the Indian Constitution had the dream of a new social, economic and political order, the soul of which was social justice. Ambedkar was the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. He was fully aware of the pattern and problems of the society and their conflicting interests. The Constitution is a monumental example of social engineering. Social justice is not defined in the Indian Constitution but it is relative concept taking in its wings the time and circumstances, the people their backwardness, blood, sweat and tears. (8)

The concept of 'Social justice' in India is the product of social injustice prevailed in our socio-political system of our country. Caste system and social structure is the fountainhead for social injustice. It is unfortunate that even sixty years after independence social justice is still a distant dream not with in the reach of the masses. "The Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women under the traditional Hindu Caste hierarchy had suffered for centuries without education and opportunities for advancement in life. Social justice is compensatory justice to off set the accumulated disabilities suffered by these historically disadvantaged sections of society and absorb them educationally and occupationally in the mainstream of national life. If opportunities are not given to develop their neglected talents there will be social imbalance and tension resulting in anarchy and disobedience to the rule of law." (9) Indian society is undergoing a see change and there is a tremendous socioeconomic transformation-taking place within it, but it has also given rise to a kind of mechanism which discriminate its people on the basis of identity, accepts oppression and exploitation of certain sections of society. Hence, caste and caste based discrimination continues to be a reality. The doctrine of inequality is the core and heart of the caste system. Supported by philosophical elements, it constructs the moral, social and legal foundations of Hindu society.

The Supreme Court has explained the concept of social justice i.e. "the Constitution commands justice, liberty, equality and fraternity as supreme values to usher in the egalitarian social, economic and political democracy". Social justice, equality and dignity of persons are corner stones of social democracy. The concept of "social justice" which the Constitution of India engrafted consists of diverse principles essential for the orderly growth and development personality of every citizen. Social justice is thus an integral part of justice in the generic sense. Justice is a genus of which social justice is one of its species. Social justice is a dynamic device to mitigate the suffering of the poor, weak, dalits, Tribes and deprived sections of the society. (10)

The questions, which are against the social justice:

- ◆ Liberation from Hunger
- ◆ Liberation from Poverty
- ◆ Liberation from Riots
- ◆ Liberation from Sangh Ideology
- ◆ Liberation from Feudalism

- ◆ Liberation from Capitalism
- ◆ Liberation from Casteism
- ◆ Liberation from Communalism
- ◆ Liberation from Brahminism
- ◆ Liberation from Manu's ideology (11)

We experienced the "root of social injustice" in our society has a root in social and political system. Here is the evidence, "Advancements in social justice, except in extraordinary situations and circumstances such as the gaining of political independence, the aftermath of a long war or the depths of an economic depression, require pressure from organized political forces. Brief and sporadic protests against injustices, even if vehement, usually have a limited effect. The problem is that few political regimes have institutions or processes to promote the orderly and effective expression of grievances and demands by those who are not benefiting or are hurt by existing economic and social arrangements. Political parties are often reduced to administrative machines focused on winning elections. Trade unions are declining in both number and influence. Democracy is seemingly gaining ground but is being vitiated by the "moneytization" of social relations and social institutions at many levels. The concept of reform, so often invoked in recent years to facilitate economic deregulation and privatization, could be constructively applied by liberal democracies and other regimes inspired by liberal principles to identify the requirements of social justice and implement appropriate policies." (12)

Under Indian Constitution the use of social justice is accepted in wider sense, which includes social and economical justice both. It is unfortunate that even sixty nine years after independence social justice is still a distant dream not within the reach of the masses. The Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women under the traditional Hindu Caste hierarchy had suffered for centuries without education and opportunities for advancement in life. "Social justice requires strong and coherent policies in a multitude of areas. Fiscal, monetary and other economic policies, as well as social policies, incorporate specific objectives but must all be geared towards the overall social goal of promoting the welfare of a country's citizens and increasingly, in this age of global interdependence, the citizens of the world. The well-being of citizens requires broad-based and sustainable economic growth, economic justice, the provision of employment opportunities, and more generally the existence of conditions for the optimal development of people as individuals and social beings.⁵ Social justice may be broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth." (13)

The Constitution of India brings a renaissance in the concept of social justice when it weaves a trinity of it in the preamble, the fundamental rights, and the directive principles of state policies and this trinity is the "the core of the commitments to the social revolution. This is the conscience of the Constitution. (14) Social justice is not yet reaches to the Scheduled Caste people in India even today who are subjected to recurrence of killing, burning and gang rape of their women folk. Many people question, why do Scheduled Castes not fight against such atrocities done to them? How can they fight with empty stomach against feudal-land lords who are rich and resourceful, police and courts are also hand in glove with them, therefore, the social justice still beyond their reach even after 69 years of independence. The globalization is no way to help to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. (15) So, Social justice is a public and collective good that involves an equitable sharing of the earth's power, resources and opportunities to enable people individually and collectively to develop their talents to the fullest. Its realisation requires social relations embedded in trust, acceptance, mutuality, reciprocity and solidarity.

Conclusively, we can say that any single religious consciousness cannot be effective in making interreligious dialogue as all religious system become intentionally political biased. We need mutual understanding and good relations and identify the causes of tension, which are often economic, social or political rather than religious. We have to build an understanding and confidence in our constitutional system to

overcome or prevent tensions. Because democratic ideals help us to break down the barriers and stereotypes, which lead to distrust, suspicion and bigotry. Interreligious dialogue takes many forms, but is essentially a conscious attempt to build bridges of understanding, respect, harmony, and friendship among religious communities. Those involved in dialogue tend to focus on common social ground rather than that which divides them to overcome stereotypes and historical grievances. For this we must aware of present day problems of the society and work, think and mould our religious system accordingly. Otherwise religious systems will be a taboo for the society in coming years as they will lose their own religious nature due to negative effect of socio-political causes.

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