

Building Relationship with
Religious Neighbours:
Interreligious Dialogue in India –
Shades and Shores

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與宗教鄰舍建立關係：
宗教交談在印度 – 陰影與支柱

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[ABSTRACT] The universal search for the Spirit and the self has taken many distinctive forms in India's rich religious history. In India today interreligious relations are complex and varied, in some contexts conflicted and in others cordial; "communal shades" keep people in darkness while "positive shores" invite people to harmony and understanding based on the ancient principle of oneness within diversity. Despite historical efforts to building strong interreligious relationships, there are many bitter conflicts involving religion in India today. While today the Hindu nationalist movement is in strong conflict with minority religious groups over issues of such as minority rights and conversion, there are also multiple efforts to build strong interreligious neighborhoods that can resist

antagonistic pressures. Both legal and communitarian means provide invaluable resources for respecting religious freedom and shaping healthy interreligious communities.

Indian Religious Ethos

Spirituality springs from within. It gains its distinct flavor in meaning and practice in the way humans are placed and engaged in their natural environment. For instance, both Buddha and Mahavira, founders of the Buddhist and Jain religions in India in the sixth century BCE, gave shape to their spiritual discovery in a context of ethnic rivalry, class oppression and state violence. And hence there was a reason to promote compassion and non-violence, a sense of respect for congregational living, and equitable sharing. Truly, the context shaped their socio-spiritual discourse.

Spirituality in India is primarily a *search*: a search for direction and meaning of life and death, sorrow and joy, engagement and retirement, relationship and solitude, and so on. It is a search for the foundation(s) of all of these. The founders of Indian spiritual organizations¹ were primarily *seekers* and *pathfinders*.

India generally recognizes *diversity* as its basic attitude. The pathfinders of Indian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism based their reflections on personal and social experience and discovered the *self* as the centering place and the focal point, yet reaching out to *others*. But ultimately their search for meaning brought them closer to their very self. It was primarily an inward quest and an interior journey, often contrasted with the material,

¹ Such as the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Theosophical Society, and persons like Sri Aurobindo, Sri Ramana, Sri Narayana Guru and a host of others, the so-called saints and sages of India.

physical, and the external. Hence to discover the self or oneself, according to the Wise in India, is like the search for the fine pearls or the field (*Gospel according to St. Matthew 13:44-46*), which contained life-treasures. It was, to the pathfinders, a passage into and a discovery of the *sacred!*

These sages also found that by discovering oneself one should be able to discover the other, as illustrated in the *Golden Rule* mentioned in almost all religions, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (*Gospel according to St. Luke 6:30-32*) To be personal (open to the self) is to be trans-personal (an entry into the mysterious, the *difficult* other). One needs to understand the other, the *customer*, in business terminology. It sounds paradoxical to say that self-knowledge leads one to self-transcendence!

With this background, let me briefly reflect upon a few areas that make interreligious dialogue difficult and yet significant. Or, in other words, let me answer the question “What could dialogue mean in India?” The following pages will describe the communal shades that keep the people in the *dark valley of sorrow and anxiety* and the positive shores ahead which assure confidence and hope of living together.

Diversity and Oneness

Religion in India is a “lived” reality (not an abstract concept). For instance, *religion* is a column mentioned in educational certificates and other documents. It is a *socially* situated reality, with majority Hindus (nearly 900 million), who are again hierarchically placed in the society, which affects their status and condition, rights and benefits, opportunities and availabilities. Muslims are the second majority (nearly 200 million), who share the *minority* status along

with the Christians (nearly 25 million), as well as the Jains and the Buddhists, who each number less than 10 million. There are Sikhs concentrated in the state of Punjab in the Northwest of India. A sizable number of people in India belong to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, comprising nearly 250 million. They are given special status like those treated with 'affirmative action' in the U.S., and they have special benefits from both the public as well as private sectors.

Unfortunately, there is a large gap between the poor and the rich, illiterate and the educated, with the poor experiencing powerlessness, unemployment, segregation, discrimination, and unequal treatment. Christians and Muslims enjoy *minority rights and benefits*, and this policy has been an eyesore for the Right Wing Hindu forces from the very beginning of India's independence from the British colonial rule in 1947. Minority concerns and other issues like *conversion* have been topping the list for understanding and dialogue between Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Hindu fundamentalists and the Right Wing political parties have brought these issues to the critical forefront making dialogue difficult. In addition to these concerns, there are Right and Left wing party affiliations, where people, though diverse in their religious and cultural practices, merge into party voice and discipline.

Ordinarily, India as the largest democracy in the world has been a peace-loving country over the centuries. The ancient Hindu religious and philosophical texts endorse *oneness within diversity* as a life-dictum and life-attitude. The one and the only reality is the existence of a metaphysical, ultimate Being (the Hindu philosophy names it as *Brahman*), who/which reflects into the world of humans and the material world as manifestations. Hence, all reality is inter-dependent and inter-connected. A vision like this has led India for centuries in the path of harmony amidst multiculturalism.

Religious Unification: Historical Attempts

Understanding and learning from the other started long ago in Indian history, in the third century BCE during the rule of Emperor Ashoka, who initiated a change in governance. On account of his conversion to Buddhism, he promulgated through his many edicts² the Buddhist values of compassion, moderation, tolerance and respect for all life – a policy of peaceful co-existence. He saw the protection of all religions and fostering harmony among them as duties of the state. It even seems that something like a Department of Religious Affairs was established with officers called *Dhamma Mahamatras* whose job it was to look after the affairs of various religious bodies and to encourage the practice of religion. (I shall reserve many quotes to the footnotes.)³

² Ashoka's edicts are to be found scattered in more than thirty places throughout India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. These edicts, inscribed on rocks and pillars, proclaim Ashoka's reforms and policies and promulgate his advice to his subjects. They are mainly concerned with the reforms he instituted and the moral principles he recommended in his attempt to create a just and humane society. It is also very clear that Ashoka saw the reforms he instituted as being a part of his duties as a Buddhist. But, while he was an enthusiastic Buddhist, he was not partisan towards his own religion or intolerant of other religions.

<<http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html>>

³ To give a few examples: “Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, has caused this Dhamma edict to be written. Here (in my domain) no living beings are to be slaughtered or offered in sacrifice... Formerly, in the kitchen of Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, hundreds of thousands of animals were killed every day to make curry. But now with the writing of this Dhamma edict only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer are killed, and the deer not always. And in time, not even these three creatures will be killed.” (Edict 1) “Everywhere has Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, made provision for two types of medical treatment: medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals...” (Edict 2) “In King Piyadasi's Dhamma practice, the sound of the drum has been replaced by the sound of the Dhamma... King Piyadasi promotes restraint in the killing and harming of living beings, proper behavior towards relatives, Brahmins and ascetics, and respect for mother, father and elders, such sightings have increased.” (Edict 4) “Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all religions should reside everywhere, for all of them desire self-control and purity of heart...” (Edict 7) “Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and

In the year 1582 CE, the Muslim ruler Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar (Akbar the Great) composed and promulgated the Dīn-i Ilāhī (Divine Faith) or Tauhid-i-Ilahi, a syncretic religious doctrine merging “the best elements of the religions of his empire, and thereby reconcil[ing] the differences that divided his subjects. The elements were primarily drawn from Islam and Hinduism, but some others were also taken from Christianity, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism.”⁴ Dīn-i Ilāhī was, according to George Bruce Malleson, an English Officer retired with a rank of colonel in 1877, “an earnest and intense endeavour in search of a formula which would satisfy all but hurt none and contained all that was good and true and beautiful in the great faiths of the world.”⁵ Akbar patronized and continued to have discussions with religious leaders of all faiths and summoned two Jesuit missionaries from Goa.

India has other great political and religious leaders such as M.K. Gandhi⁶ and Swami Vivekananda⁷ who gave a similar slant in

honors as much as he values this – that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honor other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought “Let me glorify my own religion,” only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions.” (Edict 12)

⁴ <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Din-i-Ilahi>>

⁵ <<http://www.preservearticles.com/2012041030166/get-complete-information-on-din-i-ilahi.html>>

⁶ M.K. Gandhi too holds that all great religions spring from the same source and the fundamentals are common to them all. M.K. Gandhi, *The Way to Communal Harmony*, compiled and edited by U.R. Rao (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1963), pp. 54-55. He said: “I believe in absolute oneness of God and, therefore, also of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source.” Ibid. p. 359.

⁷ Swami Vivekananda asserted that unity was the object of all religions. His analysis of

thinking and living, in understanding and harmony with religious neighbours. But we cannot deny the fact that a country that holds more than 6000 ethnic communities with over 300 languages and dialects has been experiencing communal rivalries and religious wars in history. One cannot easily stipulate reasons for these conflicts. They are complex, and some events of mass violence were designed by political operatives. Such repeated experiences of hatred and violence continue even now to create a prejudicial mind-set between believers, difficult to erase quickly.

Communal History in Recent Decades

I shall limit myself to quoting two or three events of such a sad story. While browsing through the recent decades of India's political and religious history, one comes across the blatant animosity between two factions of Indian communities, the Right Wing Hindus and the Right Wing Muslims. The partition of Bengal (Bangladesh) in 1905 and the partition of Pakistan on 14th August, 1947, took place on the basis of *religious* demography. These events involved violence and bloodshed across the country, particularly across the borders.

At the time of independence, there were heated discussions and debates in the constituent assembly between Hindus, Muslims, and Christians on several matters related to religion and the status of religious communities and their rights to freedom. Fortunately, contemporary visionaries objectively and genuinely saw the problems among religious communities, scheduled castes and tribes, and drew

religion showed that humans did not travel from fallacy to truth but from a lower truth to a higher one. *The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda* (hereafter CW-SV), 13th impression, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), Vol. VII, p. 425. Each of us was moving towards Him (the Centre) along one of the radii and where all radii met, all differences ceased but until then the differences had to be. *Ibid.* pp. 384-85.

up the charters on Fundamental Rights⁸ and Minority Rights,⁹ which are still contested by the Hindu nationalist parties and cultural organizations.

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, one of the chief protagonists, spoke in terms of defining 'Who is a Hindu?'¹⁰ According to him, India or

⁸ Article 25 of the Indian Constitution assures to all persons the freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion, subject to public order, morality and health. Article 26 similarly guarantees religious denominations and their sections a right, subject to public order, morality and health, to establish and maintain religious and charitable institutions, to manage their religious affairs, to own and to acquire property and to administer it according to law. Article 27 prohibits the state from compelling any person "to pay taxes, the proceeds of which are specifically appropriated in payment of expenses for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religious denomination." The Freedom of Speech (Article 19, Clause b and c) allows citizens to assemble peaceably and without arms and to form associations or unions. But in order to avert controversies in classrooms over religion and its beliefs, the State prohibits imparting religious education in state-maintained educational institutions (government-run public schools) (Article 28.1). But Clause 2 of the same permits imparting religious instruction in an endowed educational institution administered by the state and Clause 3 permits voluntary religious instruction in an aided or recognized educational institution. There cannot be any compulsion on attendance. Articles 25 and 26 are similar to the American Free Exercise Clause and Articles 27 and 28 are counter-part to the no-Establishment Clause. Vincent Sekhar SJ, *Building Strong Neighbourhoods – Religion and Politics in Secular India* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2008), pp. 148-149; see also Durga Das, *Introduction to the Constitution of India*, 19th edition (New Delhi: Wadhwa and Company Law Publishers, 2002).

⁹ Minority rights are seen as a means of ensuring equal treatment by overcoming structured patterns of discrimination, for protecting their interests, and also for enhancing cultural diversity. The Framers of the Constitution wanted to dismantle the structure of social discrimination perpetuated by the caste system and also the possibility of religious discrimination in independent India. Hence the Constitution envisaged a system of protection of smaller communities. It provided reservations and special rights to minority communities. It guarantees equality before law and equal protection of the laws within its territory (Article 14). It prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth (Article 15) and advances special protection for women and children, and for those that are socially and educationally backward classes of citizens, for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In separate Articles, the interests of minorities are protected (Article 29, Clause 1), such as the right to conserve their language, script and culture. No citizen can be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the state or receiving aid out of State funds on grounds only of religion, race, caste, language or any of them. (Clause 2) They have their right to establish and to administer educational institutions and the State cannot discriminate against any of them in granting aid on the ground that it is under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language (Article 30, Clauses 1 & 2). Sekhar, *ibid*, pp. 149-150.

¹⁰ As the President of the Hindu Great Assembly, Savarkar addressed the gathering in

the Hindu Nation was a *Race* connected by a common blood (of ancestors) and common culture. This affective dimension of *Hindutva* (hindu-ness) is very alive in contemporary Hindu nationalism. Hedgewar was the founding father of a powerful Hindu cultural organization called the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) providing the youth with a highly disciplined psycho-spiritual program of “character building” and “man-moulding” necessary to realize the original intent of being a Hindu.¹¹ M.S. Golwalkar said that race was the body of the nation and “all those not belonging to the national i. e. Hindu race, religion, Culture and Language, naturally fall out of the pale of real ‘National’ life ... unless they [the others] abandon their differences, and completely merge themselves in the National Race.”¹² Naturally, Muslims and Christians stood outside the pale.

Ever since the 1960s, communal violence¹³ has been vibrant especially against the Muslim and the Christian minority

1937, “the Hindus ... possess a common country, a common language the Sanskrit from which all their current languages are derived or are nourished and which forms even today the common language of their Scriptures and literature and which is held in esteem as the sacred reservoir of ancient scriptures and the tongue of their forefathers... Their ancient and modern history is common. They have friends and enemies common. They have faced common dangers and won victories in common.... Hindus are welded together during aeons of a common life and a common habitat. Above all, the Hindus are bound together by the dearest, most sacred and most enduring bonds of a common Fatherland and a common Holy Land, and these two being identified with one and the same country our Bharathbhumi, our India, the National oneness and homogeneity of the Hindus have been doubly sure. ...the Hindus must be entitled to be recognized as a ‘nation’ par excellence. ...All tests whatsoever of a common country, race, religion and language that go to entitle a people to form a nation, entitle the Hindus with greater emphasis to that claim.” (A. Appadorai, Documents on Political Thought in Modern India, Vol. I [London: Oxford University Press, 1973], 501-502)

¹¹ W.K. Anderson & S. D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron – The Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (New Delhi: Vistaar 1987), p. 34.

¹² M.S. Golwalkar, *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (1st ed. 1939; 2nd ed. Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1944), pp. 45-46.

¹³ Achin Vanaik, *The Furies of Indian Communalism – Religion, Modernity, and Secularization* (London: Verso, 1997). Chapter 2, “Reflections on Communalism and Nationalism in India,” describes how politics and religion go hand-in-hand.

communities. Madhu Kishwar synthesizes the grievances of the Hindu revivalists against the Muslims: they are 'unruly' and 'all too demanding.'¹⁴ There were other reasons for the reactive communal tone in the 1980s. One such was a large-scale conversion of the "untouchables" (a class of people known as the Dalits) to Islam in 1981 in a South Indian village *Meenakshipuram* in Tamil Nadu State. This activated the Hindu organizations' campaign against conversions to Islam (also to Christianity), and the Hindu opposition to conversion is still strong in a few States.¹⁵

On another occasion in 1990, the communal Hindu forces protested against the economic designs proposed by the *Mandal Commission*, which supported an increase in reservations for the Backward Classes. These forces were powerful enough to topple the

¹⁴ The Muslims are "those who severed both the arms of Mother India ... for those hypocrites there is no place here. This Hindustan is not theirs"; "Muslims should be driven out of India because they are not loyal to this country and harbor pro-Pakistan sentiments"; "refusal of Muslims to accept a common civil code"; "Muslims do not allow even reasonable criticism of Islam"; "Muslims in India are willing pawns in the games played by Pakistani rulers"; "Muslims make unreasonable and anti-national demands"; "Muslims behave like a virtual nation within a nation"; "Muslims are a people who assert their right to be above the law of the land"; "Muslims continue to honour even those rulers who persecuted Hindus"; "Special status given to Jammu and Kashmir with separate provisions in the Constitution"; "Large-scale inflow of Muslim Bangladeshi immigrants into India is jeopardizing the security of India"; "The mullas do not allow Muslims to accept birth-control measures"; "Muslim leaders try to dictate on foreign policy matters to the Indian government"; "India is surrounded by hostile and troublesome Muslim nations" and so on. But Kishwar says that a large number of these charges are based on half-truths, outright lies and paranoid fantasies. (Madhu Kishwar, *Religion at the Service of Nationalism and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 255-256. Yoginder Sikhand in another article summarizes the painful reality of Anti-Muslim discrimination in its various forms and at various levels, being the real cause for the plight of the Muslim community. "Behind their plight", *Frontline* 23/24 (2-15 December 2006).

¹⁵ The State of Orissa enacted the *Orissa Freedom of Religion Act* in 1967, the first of its kind. A similar Act came up in Madhya Pradesh Legislature in 1968, and the third was passed by the Arunachal Pradesh in 1978. Tamilnadu State imposed a ban on forcible conversion on October 5, 2002, and owing to the continued protest by the minorities the ordinance was repealed by the same Chief Minister in May 2004. In September 2006, the Gujarat State government cleared the proposal for an amendment to the *Freedom of Religion Act, 2003*, which made forced conversion from one religion to another illegal.

Government at the center. In 1992, a huge mobilization of Hindus took place to destroy a mosque and rebuild a Hindu temple that supposedly had been destroyed earlier by a Muslim ruler. The details related to this event are a good example of how politics and religion could come together.

Since mid-1997, there have been widespread and continuous attacks on Christians and their missionaries by the Hindu militant forces, especially in the States ruled by the Hindu nationalist parties. John Dayal, President of the United Christian Forum of India, blamed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party)-governed state of Gujarat for shielding the wrong-doers and in his report he revealed that there were more than 120 cases of anti-Christian violence in 1998.¹⁶ In many of the fact-finding investigations,¹⁷ one witnesses the strange but *silent* watch of the political and governmental powers, who pampered the militant forces. This story unfortunately continues.

Christian groups did hold talks with Hindu nationalist groups on the activities of Christian missionaries.¹⁸ At first, the top leaders in both the Catholic Church and the Hindu group came together in a private meeting at the headquarters of the Catholic Bishops

¹⁶ Dayal reports that 30 churches were attacked in Gujarat state since December 1998. In summer, 400 Bibles were burnt in Rajkot City, 10 churches were destroyed or damaged and more than 30 churches were attacked in Dangs District of Gujarat state. Total population of Dangs District is 146,000, and among them there were 7000 Christians according to 1991 census and mostly Tribals. He indicates that there were refusals to register complaints made by the Christian victims and also threats to withdraw the complaints and FIR reports.

¹⁷ The noted daily *Indian Express* (1 October 1998) carries the report of the 3-member team of Nishant Natya Manch and Progressive Organization of Women (POW), which visited several areas of Gujarat from August 23-30. The National Minority Commission (NMC) sent a team to tour Gujarat from August 10-12. Dr. James Massey led the team. "Report on Gujarat" by V. Venkatesan in *Frontline* 15/21 (10-23 October 1998) brings out the report of their findings, listing the communal outrages.

¹⁸ *Indian Express*, 6 January 1999, "Christian groups ready for talks with VHP."

Conference of India in New Delhi on August 21, 1998, to clear up misconceptions, suspicion and mistrust and to discuss the modalities for starting a dialogue. Later, on December 18, a four-hour meeting took place; the details were not released to the Press except for a brief joint statement, which said: "The meeting covered a wide range of issues, including the current violence in several parts of the country against the Christian community. The discussions were frank and participants expressed their perceptions and apprehensions." It was only a preliminary meeting. Many of the issues required further discussions and deliberations. But dialogue came to a dead-end by the end of December 1998, as violence against the Christians escalated, especially in the Dang district of Gujarat state.

Perhaps the most gruesome attacks began when a Muslim mob set on fire a train called the *Sabarmathi Express* carrying Hindu devotees in a place called Godhra in Gujarat State on February 27, 2002; the atrocity took a toll of 59 people. But in the aftermath there was widespread violence against Muslims and Hindus, continuing until the end of May 2002.¹⁹ There were, according to reports, almost 150,000 people who ran away from their homes and were living in miserable conditions in more than 100 relief camps.²⁰ The pogrom was useful to achieve two objectives. The first was to ensure that the State's Muslim population remained confined to its ghettos, and the second to ensure that the authority of the Hindu Right remained stamped forever on Gujarat's political landscape.²¹

¹⁹ "Gujarat Revisited" by Dionne Bunsha, *Frontline*, 20/05 (1-14 March 2003) gives a picture of the horrific tragedy of people, the difficulties in facing their day-to-day challenges.

²⁰ "The crisis of the camps" by Dionne Bunsha & "Testimonies of terror" by T. K. Rajalakshmi, *Frontline* 19/08 (13-16 April 2002).

²¹ It is worth noting that Narendra Modi, Gujarat's Chief Minister and a great supporter of the Right Wing Hindu forces, has been elected now three times consecutively.

On the other hand, Islamic terrorism may violate Islamic ideals and ethics, but it also enjoys support from many quarters among its followers. Extreme acts include hijacking airlines, kidnapping and beheading people, suicide bombing, as well as terrorist threats including death threats and *fatwas*. These are done mostly by well known organizations like the Lashkar-e-Toiba, which has been vibrant in the Kashmiri independence movement, killing civilian Hindus, especially the Kashmiri Pandits. These groups widely engage in suicide bombing, killing soldiers and government officials, and civilians; the bombers have been hailed as *Jihadi* martyrs for the cause of Islam.

India has witnessed several terrorist attacks by the *Jihadi* militants in the last two decades.²² Islamic extremists defend their position by retaliating against whatever persons they see as anti-Muslim; they also seek to gain territorial land. In the above mentioned case, the primary objective for Islamic (especially the youth) terrorist operations was to annex Jammu and Kashmir (for “liberating” J&K) and, secondly, to keep Indian forces in jeopardy and preoccupied with security. Dionne Bunsha²³ points out that in India, the fear and anxiety among the Muslims and their terror attacks

²² To cite a few examples: August 25, 2007 Hyderabad Blasts: Two explosions rocked central Hyderabad, one at Lumbini amusement park and another at Koti busy area, leaving 40 people dead and 54 injured; March 7, 2006 Varanasi Bombings: It was a series of attacks in the Sankath Mochan Hanuman temple and Cantonment Railway Station in the Hindu holy city of Varanasi, an attack by Lashkar-e-Toiba in which over 28 were killed and over 100 injured; Killing of Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu and Kashmir; December 28, 2005 attack on the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore; October 29, 2005 Delhi Bombings; August 25, 2003 Mumbai Bombings: At least 48 people were killed and 150 injured in two blasts in south Mumbai; September 24, 2002 attack on Akshardham Temple in Gandhi Nagar, Ahmedabad: Thirty people were killed and another 100 were seriously injured; December 13, 2001 Suicide attack on India’s Parliament in New Delhi; February 14, 1998 Coimbatore Blasts: According to reports, nineteen bomb explosions sunned the city of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu on February 14, killing 58 persons and injuring about 250.

²³ “A State of Fear” by Dionne Bunsha, *Frontline* 23/01 (14 – 27 January 2006).

may have been the leading reason for consolidating Muslim presence and engagement as a community politically. It can also be a defense mechanism to protect the Muslim community in India against the Hindu fundamentalists and the Hindutva onslaught. But the vast majority of the Indian Muslims are patriotic; far from associating themselves with anti-national groups, most positively favor community living and life-property-rights protection.

Dialogue in Practice: 1. Through *Constitutional* or *Legal* Means

Speaking about religious dialogue in such mass conflicts, backed by the right wing political parties and religious organizations, one can think of a solution through *Constitutional* or *Legal* means. A nation's Constitution is its pride because it envisions the hope of its citizens. It takes into consideration the cultural and social milieu of its inhabitants and ensures the best for them as a whole. And wherever there is possible disagreement on certain vital issues related to the daily living of different religious or racial groups, based on their traditions, the Constitution provides them the necessary safeguard to live according to their traditions. Most 'personal' laws are the effect of such a process. Amendments are made to the Constitution after considerable national debate on such issues.

For example, the Indian Constitution Section 123 of the *Representation of People's Act*, 1951 offers a way out of *unfair and corrupt electoral* practices.²⁴ It forbids all direct appeals because one

²⁴ "[It is] the appeal by a candidate or his agent or by any other person with the consent of a candidate or his election agent to vote or refrain from voting for any reason on the ground of his religion, race, caste, community or language or the use of, or appeal to religious symbols, or the use of, or appeal to, national symbols, such as the national flag or national emblem, for the furtherance of the prospects of the election of

is a Hindu or a Christian, etc.²⁵ The Constitution prohibits derogatory references to other religions during election propaganda as they promote feelings of enmity and hatred among classes. Thus the Constitution provides a model to all political parties to have faith in and to adhere to the vision enshrined in them. At all cost, the political parties need to cherish and foster the Constitutional framework and what it can offer.

But in practice, the complex political structure of India provides opportunities and access points to religious groups that want to influence public life. The Supreme Court has ensured that religious denominations and institutions are not excluded from or disadvantaged in the public realm. They have been allowed to exercise the same privileges as all other groups and associations in society. Freedom of religion and politics in India supplement each other. Thus religious organizations pursue political goals through various means such as statutes, administrative procedures, and court cases. They can influence state officials, persuade NGOs, become involved in various levels in the policy-making process, influence the content of policies, and even monitor their implementation. Now-a-days religious groups and organizations involve themselves in direct lobbying and even intrude in public/government affairs and in public action.

that candidate or for prejudicially affecting the election of any candidate: Provided that no symbol allotted under this Act to a candidate shall be deemed to be a religious symbol or a national symbol for the purpose of the clause (3A). The promotion of, or attempt to promote feelings of enmity or hatred between different classes of citizens of India on grounds of religion, race, caste, community or language, by a candidate or his election agent for the furtherance of the prospects of the election of that candidate or for prejudicially affecting the election of any candidate. Gurpreet Mahajan, *Identities & Rights – Aspects of Liberal Democracy in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 66.

²⁵ K. Singh v. Mukhitar Singh, SCR 1964: 790; Ziaddin B. Bukhari v. Brijmohan Ramdass Mehra and Others, SCR 1975 [supp] 281; Mahajan, Gurpreet: Op. Cit. p. 67.

In principle, the legal system has the power to resolve conflicts and deliver justice, but in practice communal frenzy and mass murder remain more powerful to shut the gates of justice. In other words, the Constitutional means of dialogue are slow to deliver justice in a timely fashion. The 1984 anti-Sikh riots, with an official record of over 3000 deaths, are a good example. The system of justice virtually failed in the case of the 1984 Delhi riots. Kuldip Nayar, a noted jurist, sadly remarks that "the saga of commissions and committees set up to determine the causes, consequences, deaths, prosecutions, compensation and disciplinary action relating to the 1984 carnage began that year and continues to this day..."²⁶ The Sikh victims are looking for justice even after 29 years!²⁷

Dialogue in Practice: 2. Through Communitarian Means

While this is the experience in almost all the events of mass violence, there is the other side of the story regarding people who engage in acts of peace-building in their neighborhood. L. C. Jain describes such an experience in the state of Andhra Pradesh: "Recently, after the Gujarat upheaval, TV channels showed that some *panchayats* (village governance) in Andhra Pradesh had formed joint peace committees comprising of representatives of all communities. This indeed should be the order of the day - each one of the 250,000 *panchayats* should be encouraged to foster harmony and non-violence in their respective areas. These people's peace committees will activate themselves in an instant, unlike the State

²⁶ Kuldip Nayar: "Establishing the Truth," *The Hindu*, 20 April 2002.

²⁷ <<http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/1984-anti-sikh-riot-victims-seek-justice-from-pm-288051>>

officials and police who wait for directions from their political bosses.”²⁸

Had the *panchayats* of Gujarat been properly instructed in a similar way to guard the state village by village at the time of communal violence, the scene would have been different. “Imagine, how many lives could have been saved,” L.C. Jain continues, “if within minutes of communal violence surfacing in Gujarat local elected representatives in *panchayats* and *nagarपालikas* (city governance) had been summoned to mind peace and harmony in their respective locality. It could have helped the law-abiding officials and the police to accomplish more and it would have put the brakes on the black sheep in the administration.... It is our mindset which needs a change.”²⁹

The *panchayats* and *nagarपालikas*, symbols of *self-governance*, suggest the idea of a *community* where people in their neighbourhood love to live in close association with one another, respect and protect each other, tackle problems together, and grow in maturity together. They do not wait for instruction until an incidence of violence, death, and destruction occurs. It is a pro-active community of believers and non-believers, transcending the narrow sense of “me” and “mine,” who reach out to others with a *communitarian* sense.³⁰

Such a paradigm of a *Communitarian* means of dialogue and inter-action has been practiced all along in India, but unofficially and without a formal structure. Though difficult to achieve, it is deemed effective in diffusing communal tensions on the one hand and promoting mutual trust, cooperation and harmony on the other. This

²⁸ L.C. Jain, “Change the Mindset,” *The Hindu*, 18 April 2002.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Janaki N. Iyer, “From ‘me’ to ‘us’,” *The Hindu*, 29 April 2003.

is possible regardless of any religious affiliation. The ethics implied in the *Golden Rule* is common to all: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (The Bible, Book of Leviticus 19.18)³¹ The Constitutional Model of dialogue is only one way of dealing with the problems and issues arising out of an unholy mix of State politics and religion, religious resurgence, and fundamentalism. But the Court cannot function diligently if the servants of law (lawyers and judges) are selfish in their motives or led by caste or family or religious feelings.

Dialogue in Practice

India has been engaged in promoting inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue among diverse groups of people not merely to dispel prejudices but, more positively, to promote understanding and collaboration for achieving common objectives, based on values.³² There are any number of state-level, national, and international seminars organized to discuss critical issues pertaining to India's religious diversity and life together, such as secularism, minority rights, conversion, terrorism, discrimination and inequality, multi-religious education in school/college curriculum, Dalit/tribal rights and their denial, the dangerous mix of politics and religion, etc.

³¹ We have similar texts in other religions: "One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself. This is the essence of morality. All other activities are due to selfish desire." (The Hindu text Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva 113.8) "Comparing oneself to others in such terms as 'Just as I am so are they, just as they are so am I,' he should neither kill nor cause others to kill." (The Buddhist text Sutta Nipata 705) "A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated." (The Jain text Sutrakritanga 1.11.33)

³² For details, see the author's full article "Give away Violence, Preserve Life: Call of the Sramana Religions," *Journal of Dharma* 25/2 (April-June 2000), pp. 161-192

Most interreligious and cultural seminars suggest in praxis *peace education* in school/college curriculum, multi-religious *immersion* experiences for the youth, engaging the youth and the NGOs in activities of neighbourhood building, formation of multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ideological youth forums for awareness and training, and for achieving peace and harmony.

These activities happen in many educational institutions with interreligious prayer meetings, organized religious tours, as well as through observing *Harmony Week* and the like. Many of the youth address the problem of religious diversity and the subsequent attitudes and mind-set they need to develop to eradicate prejudice. Ross Feehan, a research student of Stanford University, USA, and a co-facilitator of one such program in the *Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions* (IDCR),³³ Chennai, summarized the experiences of the student-participants in their own words: “I have become a more informed and responsible individual;” “It has changed my views about other religions;” “It has honestly changed the way I think about other religions;” the program “helped me in understanding people better;” “We learnt to respect each other for what we are;” “We have become more accepting;” The program has “made me turn to my religion as a support system;” the program “broke that wall in me of maintaining distance” from religious people.

More positively, the youth are engaged in arts for peace, through poetry, painting, music, and stage competitions, newspapers and journals/video clippings. Such exercises impart a great deal of interreligious awareness and a sense of responsibility as citizens and students in creating and nurturing an atmosphere of cordiality.

³³ IDCR Newsletter, October 2012; <<http://www.idcrdialogue.com/>>

There are a few interreligious institutions in the country like IDCR in Chennai, *Henry Martin Institute*³⁴ in Hyderabad, and a number of pro-*interreligious* Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu associations, foundations, and organizations, all engaged in promoting understanding and peace. Interreligious prayer and meditation are important to heal the hurts of the past and to mourn with the families of victims of violence, and to ensure through prayers and charity future hope and wellbeing for those in crisis, disaster, famine, and draught. Such public gatherings are totally voluntary and successful.

Religious relationship is like a life-mate in India. One has to live with others. The general atmosphere is conducive and the mind-set tolerant and accepting. Dialogue of life and exchange are vibrant among people of all faiths – in personal, community, and family relationships, exchange of goods, expertise, business transactions; many have friends across cultures and religions; our schools are mixed in colors and creeds; and friendship is cultivated across boundaries. Anyone coming from outside India cannot miss this diversity and intermingling.

There are many popular religious shrines, syncretic in nature, and people from diverse faiths frequent these shrines for their popularity, healing potential, and hospitality.³⁵ Devotion and religious consciousness are hallmarks of the Indian people, and there abound any number of big and small temples and shrines with frequent festivals, worships, religious discourses, and celebrations. People feed one another on special occasions, especially on temple/church feasts.

³⁴ <<http://www.hmiindia.org/>>

³⁵ The Catholic Basilica at Vailankanni and Santhome, Nagore Muslim Darga, the Hindu temples at Madurai, Rameshwaram, Tirupathy are good examples in the South and Hindu temples at Kasi (Varanasi), Buddhist temple at Bodh Gaya, Jain temples in Mount Abu and in Bihar state, the Sikh Golden temple in Amritsar... to name a few.

Two decades ago, pictures, wall-paintings, and stickers with multi-religious symbols were hardly seen in public. But now, they abound in public places, shops, public transports, government and private offices, educational and other institutions. People generally have become aware of religious conflicts and the need for peace processes and dialogue. Newspapers and their supplements carry sacred texts and symbols, myths and stories of different religions. Public meetings with an interreligious thrust are held on national feasts, and TV channels offer special programs on religious and festive occasions. *Deepavali* (festival of lights), *Pongal* (harvest feast), Christmas (birth of Christ) and Birthdays of Gods and great leaders, New Year, and other National days are celebrated commonly with public holidays. People take part in local religious feasts and festivals for socializing and community building, and these days are declared holidays for educational and other institutions.

The four-fold dialogue of life, of action, of spiritual experience, and theological exchange take place as and when occasions suit. The dialogue of life is a common experience of believers. This form of dialogue becomes more vibrant because of interreligious marriages. The dialogue of action is seen when religious neighbors stand together to safeguard life amidst calamities, natural and otherwise. They sheltered people and property in times of war-like violence. The religious youth specially engage in social activities to subvert human rights violations and injustices. People irrespective of creed share the devotion of the public on festive occasions. They happily contribute donations for the celebration of big events and festivals related to temples, mosques, and churches.

The theological (concerning doctrines and dogmas) fundamentalism found among the Christians and the Muslims does not easily give space to theological exchanges or to alter convictions.

In this, Christianity and Islam stand apart from the majority Hindus, whose plural outlook remains a big challenge to Christians and Muslims. Prejudices of theological nature are still rampant, naming the Hindus as “idol” worshipers, their religious and spiritual aspirations as “incomplete,” and their means of salvation “dubious” and “doubtful.” Despite these difficulties, dialogue efforts continue among multiple religions and also between two religions, such as Hindu-Christian, Buddhist-Christian, Jain-Christian³⁶ dialogue. The Holy See of the Catholic Church encourages all forms of dialogue with all people of good-will. This has been the experience of the author in the last two decades of his ministry of interreligious dialogue. The dark *shades* of violence have always been there and they are still obvious; but the bright *shores* of peace loving and peace building are great assets to India.

For Further Reading

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³⁶ Jain-Christian dialogue is a recent phenomenon in the Catholic Church and the author, because of his qualification and expertise, was invited by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to present a paper on the common grounds for dialogue between Christians and the Jains. For the full paper:

<http://www.dimmid.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B495510C2-8BE7-4B3C-A746-4247E069D6B2%7D> This meeting of Christian-Jain dialogue was organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the Delhi Catholic Archdiocese, and the World Fellowship of Religions in Delhi on 13 November 2011 at Acharya Sushil Kumar Muni Jain ashram <<http://cbci.in/FullNews.aspx?Id=209>>.

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[摘要] 在印度豐富宗教傳統中，尋找聖神和自我亦是多樣性。今日的印度，宗教間的關係錯綜複雜，有衝突的時候，也有友好的時候。「種族的陰影」威脅宗教對話，但「正面的支柱」亦同時存在並以求同存異的精神歡迎人與人間的和諧與相互理解。儘管在歷史上，前人曾努力爭取宗教間的和諧，但今日印度仍有不少宗教衝突。印度教中的民族主義運動派別與少數宗教群體在保障少數群體權益、傳教與改宗等方面有著嚴重的衝突，但亦有不少努力建立宗教間和諧鄰舍的關係，以抗衡敵意的壓力。法律和團體的途徑成為尊重宗教自由和塑造良好的宗教群體關係的寶貴的方法。