

Interfaith dialogue in India: Its need and challenges

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Abstract - India has been the land of diverse cultures and religions over a long period of time. The adherents to different religions have been coexisting peacefully and sharing both the glories and the downfalls together. Though there is a long and well-established tradition of religious engagement and debate in India, the process of religious dialogue, particularly Hindu-Muslim dialogue, has yet to find a cohesive expression and a stable foundation on which to stand. Who isn't aware about the riots, violence and killings on the name of religion in the history of India? The hatred and the disbelief against Muslims have dealt a huge blow for the unity and diversity of India. However, there is still hope for religious dialogue in India, as the country has been a pluralist culture for centuries and the people have lived through religious tolerance and coexistence. The only solution to this would be an interfaith dialogue which is mandatory if not dynamic for everyone to have the understanding of different religions or belief systems. In this article, I would start with a brief introduction about interfaith dialogue, its history in India and then discuss in detail the need, importance and contemporary challenges of interfaith dialogue in India. This would help in understanding the dialogue between Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs, as well as to eliminate prejudices and misunderstandings regarding each other's faiths. It would also assist in the achievement of common goals such as the establishment of justice and world peace, the protection of human rights, and the promotion of moral values.

Keywords: interfaith harmony, Dīn-i-Ilāhī, bhakti movement, secularism, unity in diversity.

I. INTRODUCTION

What is a dialogue? A discussion between persons in which opinions are exchanged is referred to as dialogue. According to the Cambridge dictionary (As-Suyūti, 1881), dialogue is 'a serious exchange of opinion, especially among people or groups that disagree'. It is not designed to be a debate, but rather a discussion in which the interlocutors search honestly and without bias, the best solution to a controversial subject (Perelman & Olbrechts, 1969). Interfaith dialogue is a theoretical discourse in which religious leaders communicate their religion's ideas in order to enable people and leaders to have a better understanding of various religions. Interfaith discussion, also known as interreligious dialogue, is the process of individuals of various religions coming to a mutual understanding and respect for one another that allows them to live and work together despite their differences. The most striking aspect of interfaith dialogue is that each party maintains their own beliefs while respecting the other's right to freely practise their faith (Andrabi, 2020). At both the individual and institutional level, interfaith conversation refers to cooperative, constructive, and positive interaction between persons of different religious.¹ The most popular conception of the model of interfaith conversation is one in which similarity in terms of the liberal and positive messages that the various religions and religious scriptures have, is extensively discussed. The virtues of each faith are emphasised, as well as the scriptural resources, as a foundation for creating peaceful relationships with different religious communities are highlighted (CSSS, 2018). To be authentic, interreligious dialogue must comprise dialogical partners who are dedicated to their own religion and to the cause of discussion.

The abolishment of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 C.E (Shaw & Shaw, 1977) brought about radical changes (Lewis, 1980). In the aftermath of this abolishment, Muslims got fragmented and had to face the new power structure which needed accommodation to new societies and their cultures. In the same way in India, with the 1857 C.E mutiny (David, 2002), Muslims became a soft target for the British to avenge the mutiny. On the one hand, several developments were happening at the same time, resulting in increase in the number of Muslims living as minorities, as a result of shifting political, economic, and social realities. On the other hand, Muslims are debating what it means to live in a country where Islam is not the dominant religion. They do it by separating themselves from Islam's shared community and culture (Smith, 25) or by accepting and assimilating into the new multicultural society, which has been a new reality in the multicultural societies like that of Britain (Madood, 2011). This led to opening of an arena of discussions and debates with the adherents of other religions in order to live with them in harmony. This is where the renewed demand for interfaith dialogue emerged.

1.1 Need and Importance of Interfaith Dialogue in India

Many prominent religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, as well as many tribal societies, some of which follow pantheistic traditions, have their origins in India. Other religions, such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism (Parsis in India), Christianity, and Islam, have found a home in India during the course of its history. People of various faiths coexisted harmoniously in ancient India under their local rulers, however intermittent conflicts between Buddhists and Brahmin Hindus, as well as between different castes of Hindus, occasionally erupted into riots (Varkey, 2017). Buddhism and Jainism arose in the sixth and seventh centuries B.C. as a reaction against the caste system, idolatry and superstition, violence, and other aspects of Indian society at the time. Islam arrived in India in the eighth century during the reign of the Umayyad ruler, Al-Walid bin Abdul Malik (Suyūti, 1881) commonly known as Al-Walid I (705-715 C.E). Although Islam had already extended into the south by the 7th century, more regular religious disputes began with the introduction of Islam in north India in the 12th century and during the course of history, it became mingled with the country's social structure. For almost six centuries, India from 13th to 19th century was governed largely by the Mughals, although the majority of the masses were non-Muslims particularly Hindus. This could not have been possible

¹What does INTERFAITH DIALOGUE mean? (definitions.net).

without the peaceful and inclusive approach of the rulers and the interfaith harmony of the masses. As Islam aspires to make the world a peaceful place to live not only for people of one faith, but also for people of all faiths and cultures, in order to foster peace, harmony, and interreligious coexistence for the greater good of society (Hasan, 2009). The role of religious preachers can't be undermined, in fact, they played a great role through their spiritual ideas and practices. Sufis like Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Chisti and Bhakti preachers like Ramanuja and Kabir played their part in bringing awareness in the masses of the need and importance of interfaith harmony and unity by preaching the ideals of peace and spirituality.

The Vedas, Upanishads, Dhammapada, and Bhagavad-Gita are sacred works that preach tolerance, and India has produced many renowned persons, including the Buddha, Emperor Ashoka, Guru Nanak, Emperor Akbar, Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Narayana Guru, and others (Varkey, 2017). After converting to Buddhism in the 4th century BC (Allen, 2012), Emperor Ashoka showed religious tolerance and encouraged his subjects to do the same. Swami Vivekananda's landmark address at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 constituted a watershed moment in the history of inter-religious communication. "I am proud to belong to a faith that has given the world both tolerance and universal acceptance," he said, referring to the ethos of tolerance entrenched in Indian religions (Arrielle, 2015).

Emperor Akbar (1542-1605 A.D) preached *Dīn-e-Ilāhī*² (God's Religion), a syncretic religion, out of a great yearning for peace and harmony, with whom the tradition of religious conversation reached a new high in mediaeval India. He not only advocated but also institutionalised religious understanding by convening meetings among leaders of various faiths in order to reach a common basis of togetherness. The most noteworthy aspect of Akbar's work was that he converted religious conversation into a public campaign (Chakraborty, 2017). Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh carried on his grandfather's heritage by turning religious concord into a personal experience, which he articulated in his many creative works and Hindu text translations. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of Aligarh's famous M.A.O. College and a father figure of Muslim renaissance, made significant contributions to interfaith understanding in the nineteenth century. He produced an introduction to the Bible (Andrabi, 2020), translated parts of it into Urdu, establishing himself as a pioneer of Muslim-Christian interaction in India.

However, the country's comparatively tranquil history changed in 1947, when it was partitioned into India and Pakistan, with an estimated one to two million people dying (The New Yorker, 2015). Since the partition, religious intolerance has grown in India, and religious minorities and castes, particularly Muslims and Christians, have faced systematic persecution (Andrabi, 2020). All of these religions strove for cultural hegemony and political dominance among themselves, yet they were able to coexist and carve out their own niches in Indian culture. It is debatable whether there had been any kind of dialogue in true sense ever? In contemporary times, Religious and spiritual leaders like Maulāna Wahīdudīn Khan, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (Gurudev) and Dr. Zakir Naik have worked in the field of interfaith dialogue. According to Gurudev³, education – a multicultural education that supports diversity – is the key to interfaith unity and eliminating terrorism. "Right education generates a reverence for nature's diversity and a sense of belonging to the entire world," Gurudev explains.

The recent Padam Vibhushan awardee⁴, Maulāna Wahīdudīn Khan has established the Centre for Peace and Spirituality located in New Delhi (Dalrymple, 2015). He has been engaged in the promotion of peace and interfaith harmony since 1950s (Seedat, 2006). Apart from this endeavour, no substantial measures to encourage dialogue across religions had been taken until recently, despite the fact that peaceful coexistence of all religions was assumed. While keeping the history of interfaith dialogue in India in mind, it is necessary to reflect upon the need of the

²*Dīn-i-Ilāhī*, a syncretic creed originating from Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity, was promulgated by Akbar. It was a basic, monotheistic, tolerant worship that centered on Akbar as a prophet, for which the ulema and orthodox Muslims chastised him.

³ <https://www.artofliving.org/in-en/projects/peace/interfaith-harmony>

⁴ <https://www.google.com/amp/s/frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/padma-vibhushan-for-eminent-islamic-scholar-maulana-wahiduddin-khan/article33667569.ece/amp/>

same in contemporary times. The Constitution recognises India's sovereignty, secularism, democracy, and republican system of government as fundamental features (Gritsch, 1996). These features of the Indian Constitution safeguard religious and other cultural diversities in India. This 'Unity in Diversity' (Hashmi, 2008) feature of the Indian Constitution needs to be strengthened and the interfaith dialogue could be a possible alternative for ensuring peace, harmony and stability in these testing times.

1.2 Challenges to Interfaith Dialogue in India

The road to interfaith dialogue was not always a wide highway that everyone eagerly followed⁵. Interreligious dialogue barriers could be recognised both inside and outside the religious structure (Samartha, 2015). Other religious traditions oppose discussion because it is perceived as a form of indirect proselytism. The motivation for dialogue is questioned, and the oblique missionary style, with "Hidden Intentions" for conversion. Hence, interfaith dialogue found until the recent years a very few willing and genuine partners especially from other religious traditions in India (Samartha, 2015). The fear of the unknown, as well as prejudices against other religious traditions, are the most significant barriers to interfaith interaction today. Digital and social media have democratised the knowledge process, but they also serve as a source of false propaganda and "hate speeches" in order to foster a death culture. Though economic and cultural globalisation has generated a sense of being part of "a global village" and connected via the internet and other communication channels, there is an overpowering sense of being lost as a nameless and formless creature. As a result, the need for identity and a sense of belonging leads to tribal mentality, which leads to subversive acts in order to defend one's clan from the global monstrous. Religious fundamentalism is on the rise, resulting in communal violence and the oppression of society's weaker members. Everyone recognises the importance of interfaith conversation in such a precarious circumstance, but the search for meaningful and fruitful dialogue continues.

The issue with this dialogue is that the motivation behind it is unknown. Is it a conversation in order to gain a better knowledge of one another and avoid conflict in social interactions? Is this a discourse aimed at changing the participant's mind and beliefs, as well as mentally preparing the person to reconcile and give up opposition without using physical force? To be a true Muslim, or a sincere Christian, one has no choice but to invite others to their beliefs. The Christian believes that he is preparing the world for the Savior's Second Coming (Kavi, 2015). The Muslim believes that he is acting in accordance with Allah's commands (Al-Quran) (Karam, 2021). Non-believers are considered infidels by Muslims and heathens by Christians. All others in the world are non-believers, according to both Muslim and Christian definitions of belief. They must take action if they detect the presence of a nonbeliever in order to avert sin and its repercussions. In the same way, The Gharwapsi (Lewis, 1980) campaign of the Rashtriya Swamsayak Sang (RSS) and Hindutva Ideology (Madood, 2011). Savarkar (1969) was calling for Hindu-Rashtra are not only being openly preached but also politically backed, giving a sense of insecurity and fear among the minorities particularly Muslims.

Indian politics is shifting to the right, and hatred toward minorities, particularly Muslims, is spreading throughout India (Shaban, 2018). According to the National Catholic Reporter (May 29, 2015), within 300 days of RSS backed BJP Governance, over 600 cases of violence against religious minorities had been reported, with 43 individuals dead (149 attacking Christians and the remainder targeting Muslims). According to the BBC (April 22, 2011), around 1,000 people were killed in Gujarat rioting in 2002, and the majority of the casualties were Muslims. According to Fox News (March 14, 2016), 26 incidences of religiously motivated violence against Christians have occurred since January 1, 2016, and Hindu radicals have enjoyed "near perfect impunity for their crimes" despite the spread of violence (Fox News March 14, 2016).

⁵Lazer, Roy. 'Challenges and Prospects of Interfaith Dialogue in a Postmodern Multi-religious Context' University of Madras.
https://www.academia.edu/17813319/Challenges_and_Prospects_of_Interfaith_Dialogue

Religious minority, particularly Muslims and Christians, who make up only 15.17 percent (Majumder, 2011) of the population, now are living in constant fear, with their institutions frequently attacked, nuns raped, and villages set ablaze by Hindu zealots (The Huffington post, May 27, 2015). It is a challenge in these situations, to hold any religious dialogue, as for any dialogue to be successful, it is prerequisite to have mutual trust and respect and to have an atmosphere of peace, which in itself is a challenge right now.

Secularism is extremely essential in India because of its religious diversity. India must embrace pluralism in order to maintain its integration. Secularism as an ideology aims to keep the country unified on non-religious issues such as economic development, education, and so on. Individuals' attention is drawn away from religion and onto other vital issues that have the potential to transform the present into a better and brighter future. The emergence of Hindutva as a key counter-ideology in recent years has served as a catalyst for the escalation of India's secularism debate. Hindutva ideology, often known as religious nationalism or Hindu nationalism, is a nationalist ideology that criticises the Indian Constitution's secular philosophy (Perelman, 1969). Interfaith marriages in India are also becoming a challenging for the seekers of interfaith harmony. Interfaith marriages in India are registered under the Special Marriage Act (Pannikar, 1978), which mandates a 30-day notice period. But couples live in fear of reprisals throughout this time and even more so now, with a new proposed law called "*Love Jihad*" that targets such marriages. This new anti-conversion law not only remove agency from women, but also put a target on the backs of innocent Muslim men and boys reports Aljazeera (Savarkar, 1969).

The topic of erecting a temple to Lord Ram on the disputed site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, which was demolished in 1992, although it was a matter of myth and faith rather than fact (Udayakumar, 1997), has recently sparked heated controversy. In reality, the temple's building is hailed as an item of faith and a litmus test for demonstrating respect for 'Hindu' values. Although agreeing that Muslims wronged (Shaw & Shaw, 1977) in 1992, The Supreme Court has allowed to build Ram Mandir on the site of Babri Masjid, when there is strong mobilisation to intimidate democratic institutions such as the courts, as well as communities viewed as 'others,' this demand becomes even more dangerous. As a result of this threat, some Muslim families in Ayodhya have fled their homes in terror. This is only one of many examples of religious manipulations and contestations in India in the name of religion, which are putting a strain on the country's peaceful and harmonious intercommunal ties.

II. CONCLUSION

Regardless of our claim that India is the world's largest democracy (Seedat, 2006), a secular democracy, such interventions are critical given the intense polarisation that is occurring in Indian society. In this context, one of the answers proposed is the establishment of interfaith dialogue and the knowledge of other religions through this dialogue. As a result, knowing religions, their symbols, messages, and liberal discourses within each faith becomes critical, and it has the potential to be a cultural resource for developing compassion and peace. However, it would be mistaken optimism, if not outright foolishness, to expect that discussing the positive aspects of our own religions in a closed conference room can result in any meaningful discourse, let alone an understanding of religion's essence. Any genuine attempt at interfaith conversation will necessitate a thorough examination of our own religion, its power structures, inequalities it institutionalises, and the injustices it may reinforce. We can surely be good at our own religion, while living in harmony with others, striving for the common good while not compromising at our own. The observation of Pannikar (Smith, 2007) is significant in this regard, 'I left Europe (for India) as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be a Christian' (Pannikar, 1978).

However, some – perhaps many, if the global resurgence of religious fundamentalisms is any indication – see dialogical involvement as a danger to their religion's core or as a possible disruptor of a stable religious identity. The contextual paradigms that apply to understanding the nature of religious variety as such, I would say, provide the conditions for interreligious

engagement, notably interreligious discourse. As a result, the nature and scope of interreligious engagement as a lived reality are governed by these factors. It is necessary to realise that fundamentalism occurs in every religion, and that there is a scope and amount to which changes are required in each faith customs if not fundamentals. This acknowledgement will lead to increased awareness and contemplation on one's own religion and the principles it promotes. This insight may then exhibit itself in everyday behaviour and societal order. Instead of focusing on other religions, the critical eye should be directed inward. Like Kabir (Tagore, 1948) very rightly pointed out about self-reflection in his *doha*: '*Bura jo dekhani main chala, bura na milaya koi, Jo man Khoja apna, toh mujhsa bura na koikoi*'. (I started searching for the devil but could not find anyone. When I searched inside me, realized, no one is more devilish than me)

In essence, we approach interfaith dialogue in the same way we approach human rights, recognising each human being's fundamental right to live in, with, and for dignity which is duly recognised in Islam⁶. Interfaith discussion is open to all, yet not everyone can work to benefit the faiths of others (Karam, 2021). The famous Christian theologian, Hans Küng while emphasising the importance of Interfaith dialogue, equates the peace among the nations to the peace among the religions, and for achieving peace among the religions, it is necessary to have dialogue between religions.

"No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.
No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions." (Gritsch, 1996)

For any interfaith dialogue to happen initially and to be successful afterwards, Tolerance for public expression of various faiths is required in a plural society like that of India. This suggests that the followers of any religion will not only have to tolerate but respect the religious ideals of his fellow countrymen. The bipolar discourse on tolerance is partly founded on a mythical vision of a tolerant Hinduism that assesses patriotism by reverence of Bharat Mata, the Hindu identity symbol for Bharat (Hashmi, 2008). The famous political phrase 'Terror and Talks can't go hand in hand' (Shaban, 2018) also holds true with regard to Interfaith dialogue in India, so expecting a fruitful interfaith dialogue in such hateful and fearful atmosphere is nothing but a dream which shatters in no time.

There are three categories of people as far as approach to interfaith dialogue and understanding is concerned, those who are eager to learn and understand other religions, those who have an innate hate and prejudice towards other religions and those who have fixed opinions about other religions and fall prey to misconceptions and misunderstandings very quickly. The challenge for those working in India to promote interfaith dialogue is to engage all three groups of people and reach out to them with a message of humanity and peaceful coexistence. It is critical for the sake of future generations. The interfaith dialogue between Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs will aid in the removal of prejudices and misperceptions about one another. assisting one another in achieving mutual goals such as, the establishment of universal peace and justice, promotion of moral principles and the protection of human rights (Andrabi, 2018). Interfaith discussion can aid in the removal of fear from the minds of oppressed minorities, allowing them to collaborate with the majority group in the development and prosperity of the nation.

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⁶Al-Quran, (Al-Isra:70) 'We have honoured the sons Of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; Given them for sustenance things Good and pure; and conferred on them special favours, Above a great part Of Our Creation'.

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