



Religious Tolerance, Politics and Society in India: Examining the Role of Religious Leaders

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Abstract

Religion and politics heavily interact with each other in contemporary India, resulting in significant socio-political repercussions. The marginalization of minorities using politics as an instrument remains a serious issue to tackle with. Protecting the interests of minorities and empowering them is vital for national integrity. After 75 years of freedom from colonial rule, the people of India generally believe that their country has lived up to its post-independence ideals: a society where followers of many religions can co-exist and practice their religion freely.¹ Historical evidence also corroborates this fact. People of different faiths share a common sense of belonging and have contributed to the country's development. However, with the rise of Hindu nationalism, identity politics, religious polarization and marginalization of minorities, religious tolerance and freedom² face many challenges in India's current socio-political landscape. Pluralism and co-existence have been the hallmarks of Indian democracy, yet these values seem to deteriorate in the current scenario. Therefore, there is a need for healthy discourse and dialogical engagements. The dialogue that promotes understanding and accepts differences. With the emergence of challenging religio-political situations, the role of religious leaders becomes

crucial in fostering mutual understanding, promoting religious tolerance and encouraging people to respect each other's beliefs. The paper explores the dynamics of religious tolerance and the socio-political atmosphere in India. It highlights the role of religious leaders as active stakeholders in initiating peace-building measures and ensuring religious tolerance. The paper employs a qualitative research methodology based on an analytical, descriptive and explanatory framework.

Keywords: *Religious leaders, Diversity, Co-Existence, Inter-Faith Dialogue, and Pluralism.*

I. Introduction

The global world order is confronted with many challenges today. With the changing times and the evolution of new social and political realities, the debate around concepts like religious harmony, inter-faith dialogue, pluralism, and co-existence are acquiring new dimensions. The world today requires a sustained and thoughtful dialogue on these ideas. A society is more likely to advance and prosper when its members have mutual respect, trust, cooperation, and a sense of belonging to each other. In contrast, a society governed by communal hatred, discrimination, religious intolerance, and otherization of individuals disrupts society's social and political order.

Religion forms a significant aspect of identity politics globally. Hence, it is hard to avoid the question of religious tolerance³ and religious freedom in the modern era. Religious tolerance and freedom are based on the belief that all human beings possess inherent dignity to explore their conscience and pursue the truth. To guarantee inter-

¹<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation>

Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan think tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world. They conduct public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research. They do not take policy positions.

²Article 25 to 28 of Indian constitution makes freedom of religion as a fundamental right in India and prohibits the state from any religious discrimination.

³Religious tolerance and religious freedom share an interdependent relationship, the one is the prerequisite for the other. Religious freedom paves a way towards an optimistic understanding regarding inter-religious relationships.



religious tolerance, the concept of secularism⁴ evolved. "Though religion remains important in India and still exists in the public sphere, secularism became ideal in religious India due to communalism because the former was understood as an answer to the latter."⁵ The concepts of religious tolerance and religious freedom are intricately linked with political affairs and, hence, inseparable from it. One has to share a complementary relationship with the other to build functional and stable societies.

India, which claims a unique position for being the symbol of the largest democracy in the world, manifested in its diversity and rich pluralism, is also confronting new challenges in its socio-religious and political context. These challenges, if not acknowledged and addressed on time, can compromise the democratic and constitutional values of India. The emergence of a disturbed political atmosphere, particularly since the last decade, raises many questions regarding the democratic stability and secular values of the country. In the current political equation of India, the harsh and extreme interpretations to which the religion of Hinduism has been subjected are quite contrary to the historical and political traditions of the country. These harsh interpretations are unfolding in political matters and are acquiring the shape of an extreme ideology. The roots of these extreme interpretations of Hinduism date back to figures like V.D Savarkar and M.S Golwalkar, who are the forefathers of the ideology of Hindutva. However, this ideology betrays the essence of Hinduism's fundamental values and ethics.

The principle of secularism maintaining political and cultural pluralism is being challenged by Hindu chauvinism and sectarianism, leading to a

shift in Indian society from pluralism to polarization.⁶

Religious tolerance in India has maintained its significance in the public sphere in historical and cultural dimensions, enabling the country to develop and prosper. The constitution makers of India declared the country to be secular and religiously impartial. This principle has guided the policies of India since its independence.

Indian constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the right of all individuals to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion; mandates a secular state; requires the state to treat all religions impartially; and prohibits discrimination based on religion.⁷

The Indian constitution upholds that democracy, diversity, and development go hand in hand. However, the ground situations should reflect the same reality so that every citizen, irrespective of religion, race, caste and gender, becomes a stakeholder in this development. Historically, India has been an enduring example of religious diversity. This religious diversity has contributed to its social and political progress and helped to maintain its plural character. The diversity of religions in India has always been seen as a strength for the country, even in its past. It is pertinent to analyze the historical perspectives of religious tolerance in India and how it impacts the current Indian society. How has the debate of religious tolerance evolved over the years, and does the current religious tolerance share any similarity or relationship with the past?

Historical and Current Perspectives on Religious Tolerance in India

Religious tolerance in India has a long history. India witnessed the rule of the Maurya Empire, which endorsed Buddhism and Jainism as their religions, Delhi Sultans and Mughal Dynasty were Muslims, Rajputs and Marathas were Hindus. All these different historical epochs, with their peculiar socio-political, religious, and cultural factors, have significantly impacted the intellectual history of India. Religious tolerance is critical for a country with different religious denominations. The

⁴ The understanding of secularism in Eastern world differs from its understanding in Western world. Western concept of secularism stands for complete isolation of religion from politics. Eastern secularism acknowledges the importance of religion in public sphere; however, it seeks a "principled distance" between religion and politics.

⁵ Faizan Mustafa and Jagteshwar Singh Sohi, *Freedom of Religion in India: Current Issues and Supreme Court Acting as Clergy*, BYU Law Review Issue 4 Article 9 (2018), 918.

⁶ Yang Yishuang, "Challenges Facing India's Pluralistic Society" *Annual Report on Development of Indian Ocean Region*, Springer Singapore, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-4693-3_5, (June 2017):1-2.

⁷ Report on International Religious Freedom: India by US State Department (2022).



pragmatic aspect of this reality was well understood by the rulers who ruled India in the past. Even religious scholars like Khawaja Ajmer Chisti, Baba Fareed, Guru Nanak, Nizam Din Awliya and poets like Amir Kharasau, Kabir, and Ravi Das have consistently focussed on inter-religious harmony. "Indeed, interreligious tolerance was a persistent theme in the poetry of Kabir, Dadu, Ravidas, Sena and others, a circle which also included several distinguished scholars, such as Khawaja Ajmer Chisti, Baba Fareed, Guru Nanak and Nizam Din Awliya."⁸ India's historical role as a shared home for a wide spectrum of religious communities—including Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsees and Sikhs—reflects an implicit tradition of religious tolerance. This co-existence across centuries highlights the country's capacity to accommodate diverse belief systems within its socio-cultural fabric, contributing to a pluralistic and multifaceted religious landscape. Two great rulers who left their indelible marks on Indian history are Akbar and Ashoka. Both rulers exemplified the qualities of religious tolerance and were serious in its social, political and economic application. Ashoka is quoted as saying, "A person must not do reverence to his own sect or disparage the beliefs of another without reason, for he who does reverence to his own sect while disparaging the sects of others wholly from attachment to his own sect, in reality, inflicts, by such conduct, the severest injury on his own sect."⁹ Similarly, Akbar's policies were very inclusive for all religious groups in India. He strengthened his rule because of his ability to unite people of different religions.

Religious tolerance received a tremendous boost from Akbar's policies and his insistence that the state should be completely impartial between different religions. Akbar's political decisions also reflected his pluralist commitments, exemplified by his emphasis on filling his court with non-Muslim intellectuals and artists (including the great Hindu musician Tansen) and, rather remarkably, by his trusting a Hindu former king (Raja Man Singh), who had been defeated earlier by Akbar, to serve as the general commander of his armed forces.¹⁰

⁸ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative India, Writing on Indian History Culture and Identity* (New York: Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 19.

⁹ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative India, Writing on Indian History Culture and Identity*, 18.

¹⁰ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative India, Writing on Indian History Culture and Identity*, 19.

The toleration of religious diversity received ample support throughout Indian history, even in Sanskrit works, which criticized and ridiculed religiously narrow-minded people. The poems of Kalidāsa, the great Sanskrit poet, celebrate the religious diversity of India. Similarly, religious movements in Hindus like Bhakti and Muslims like Sufism have positively contributed towards religious tolerance and mutual regard among different communities. The traditions of early Buddhists and Jain rulers also emphasized the importance of religious tolerance. Much of the documented history of such periods by authors like Ramchandra Guha, Romila Thapar and Irfan Habib reveals an intense interest of the rulers in cultivating an environment of religious tolerance.

Similarly, the medieval period of Indian history, which began with the establishment of Muslim rule, reflected a rich culture of religious tolerance and inclusivity. This religious tolerance reached its peak during the rule of Akbar and Jahangir. Even the period of Aurangzeb, a seemingly misunderstood and misinterpreted figure in Indian history, witnessed an era of tolerance and peace towards non-Muslim subjects, mainly Hindus. "It is interesting to note that Aurangzeb's court was marked by many Hindu scholars and poets and these rose to important positions."¹¹ Modern historical evidences reveal that Aurangzeb rebuilt many Hindu temples during his rule and provided temples with grants. "Aurangzeb is credited for funding a number of temples, Shrines, and Gurudwaras, despite the fact that the king's duty to his subjects was to construct mosques."¹² The tremendous resource growth and economic development during the Mughal period in India is a testament to the policy of religious tolerance that the rulers implemented. The development of arts, architecture, poetry and paintings would not have been possible without a stable religious policy.¹³ "During Mughal rule, India was the world's richest country, accounting for 27% of Global GDP; at Independence, India was the

¹¹ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative India, Writing on Indian History Culture and Identity* (New York: Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 61.

¹² Rather Aqib, "A Note on Conception of Aurangzeb's Alamgir Religious Policy" *Journal of Image Processing and Intelligent Remote Sensing*, Vol. 8 No. 4 (July 2022), 31.

¹³ Further reading on this subject is *Medieval History of India* by Satish Chandra and *Makers of Modern India* by Ramachandra Guha.



poorest country, accounting for just 3% of Global GDP.”¹⁴ These facts are very well elaborated by prolific Indian author Shashi Tharoor in his book *An Era of Darkness*.

There was a significant paradigm shift in the policy of religious tolerance during the advent of the Dutch and British occupation of India. The years-old traditions of religious tolerance and mutual co-existence were subjected to political and economic exploitation during British colonialism of India. British rulers were mainly concerned about their intense monopoly over the country's resources. They were least bothered about cultivating an atmosphere of religious harmony unless their political and economic goals were concerned. Their implicit policy of divide and rule served their vested interest by cementing their hold on the country.

The British ruler's policy towards the Indian people meant an emphasis on differences in religion and caste in order to prevent any attack against colonizers. It was realized that the existence side by side of the hostile creeds is one of the strongest points in the British political position.”¹⁵

The authors who emerged during British colonialism downplayed the history and culture of the Indian sub-continent to serve the interests of their colonial masters. One such author was James Mill, who divided the history of India into Muslim and Hindu periods to create a division of perceptions about each other. These authors saw the people of India as always divided on religious lines. “British colonialism viewed the Indian people as always divided on the basis of ‘primordial identities’ of religion and caste.”¹⁶ Severe repercussions of these views was the emergence of the ideology of RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. The perception of an existent and inherent hostility between Muslims and Hindus became deeply embedded in this ideology. These extreme ideologies proved to be detrimental to Indian politics even in the past, so much so that India's first home

minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, banned RSS in 1948 on their alleged murder of M.K Gandhi. The roots of this perception can be traced back to colonial views and their policy of divide and rule. Otherwise, Muslims and Hindus, including other religions, have been living in peace and harmony for years, as depicted by their united fight against British colonialism during the freedom struggle movement of India.

The role of RSS and Hindu Mahasabha during the anticolonial struggle showed a distinct propensity to adjust with and oblige the British colonial rulers but never to accommodate or ally with Hindus and Muslims. However, in the pre-colonial period, there was no incidence of violence between Hindus and Muslims and both communities lived peacefully.¹⁷

The political vision and policies of thinkers like Jawahar Lal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi were diametrically opposite to the extreme and right-wing ideologies propping in India. They stood against these ideologies, and their attitude was highly accommodating to all sections of society. A consistent emphasis on democratic values, political and civil liberties and equality of opportunity framed Nehru's political philosophy. The historical phase of Nehru and Gandhi was marked by institutional separation in religion and politics, which was afterwards enshrined in the Indian constitution. This was a development opposite to the period of Akbar and Ashoka. Nehru and Gandhi's political acumen was broad enough to strive and aspire for an inclusive India, clearly manifested in their concern for Minorities and Muslims in particular.

In the aftermath of Partition, Nehru was deeply concerned with the state and place of Muslims in independent India. The creation of Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims and the subsequent flight of Hindus and Sikhs from that country had led to a rise of intolerance among certain sections of the Hindus. Nehru, however, insisted that Muslims be treated as equal citizens in a secular state and that they be made to feel safe and secure by the administration of the provinces they lived in.¹⁸

¹⁴Kalim Siddiqui, “British Imperialism, Religion, & Politics of Divide and Rule in Indian Sub-continent”, *The World Financial Review*, Vol. 1 (Jan-Feb 2002), 99.

¹⁵Kalim Siddiqui, “British Imperialism, Religion, & Politics of Divide and Rule in Indian Sub-continent”, *The World Financial Review*, Vol. 1 (Jan-Feb 2002), 100.

¹⁶Kalim Siddiqui, “British Imperialism, Religion, & Politics of Divide and Rule in Indian Sub-continent”, 98.

¹⁷Kalim Siddiqui, “British Imperialism, Religion, & Politics of Divide and Rule in Indian Sub-continent”, 98-99.

¹⁸Ramachandra Guha, *Makers of the Modern India* (India: Penguin, 2010), 357.



In India, the leading cause of political and social division since the late nineteenth century has been the fundamental issue of national identity. “The divide between secular and Hindu nationalist visions of national identity forms the central axis of polarization in India today.”¹⁹The two competing conceptions of the “idea of India” that arose during the colonial era are what gave rise to the current wave of polarization. One school of thought saw India as a secular country where citizenship was determined by birthplace rather than religion. The two prominent leaders of the Indian independence struggle, Mahatma Gandhi and J L Nehru, were the principal proponents of this viewpoint. “Under Nehru, there were major achievements, which included a democratic constitution based upon universal suffrage and incorporating secular and egalitarian principles.”²⁰In sharp contrast to Gandhi and Nehru’s vision, Hindu nationalists maintained that Hindu culture determined Indian identity and that minorities had to assimilate by accepting the majority culture. In his book published in 1923, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* The word Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, was coined by the conservative leader V. D. Savarkar to refute Gandhi and Nehru’s secular interpretation of Indian nationalism. The followers of Hindutva used religion in their politics to push religious revivalism in the domain of politics, regardless of its implications on religious minorities. Polarization in India is more toxic today than it has been in decades, and it shows no signs of abating. This idea completely undermines the belief that, in a diverse society like India, religious harmony is a necessary prerequisite.

Pro-Hindutva political activists turned Savarkar’s idea into a mass movement in 1925 by founding the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary volunteer organization dedicated to promoting Hindu nationalism. The RSS, which became the fountainhead of the Hindu nationalist movement, rallied support from a network of sister organizations known as the Sangh Parivar. The tension between these competing conceptions of

Indian nationhood continues to drive polarization in postcolonial India. The common misconception about Hindutva revolves around the fact that it is often mixed with Hinduism. Both are opposite to one another as far as their natures are concerned. Hinduism is a religious philosophy, whereas Hindutva is a political philosophy pursued by a particular section of society to achieve their social and political objectives.²¹

The greatest opposition to the Gandhian idea of India, which had inspired Nehru, came from Hindu nationalists. The former envisioned a secular and democratic concept of India. The latter perceived Hinduism as the central element of national identity and defined national consciousness and national spirit around this identity. In clear opposition to secular nationalist ideas, Hindu nationalists sought to define “Hindu – ness” and the centrality of Hinduism as the primary aspects of the Indian nation.²²

It is noteworthy that the majority of India does not subscribe to such extreme ideologies, which shows that the foundation of Indian secularism is strong enough to guide the attitude of the majority towards the minority in the right sense and direction. Hindus and Muslims maintain their peaceful relations in India until political propagandaworks oppositeto this unity.

In its current manifestation, religious tolerance is witnessing a downward trend in India. With the revival and re-emergence of extreme ideological positions, a culture of hostility is mounting in Indian society. What is more concerning is that such ideological factions are gaining control over the political and power structures of the country. Among the minorities, Muslims have been the worst sufferers of this political tragedy that is arising in India. The rise of mob lynching cases against minorities, especially Muslims. Social, political, and economic marginalization and disempowerment of minorities. Suppression of the voices of dissent, frequent cuts in the educational budget of minorities. Negligible political representation of minorities in proportion to

¹⁹Nirajan Sahoo, Chapter 1 Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India, *Political polarization in South and South-East Asia*, Edited by Thomas Carothers and Andrew, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2020),9.

²⁰ Burton Stein & David Arnold, *A History of India*, 2nd edition (USA: Willey Blackwell Publication,2010),396.

²¹Nirajan Sahoo, Chapter 1 Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India, *Political polarization in South and South-East Asia*, Edited by Thomas Carothers and Andrew, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2020),10.

²² Burton Stein & David Arnold, *A History of India*, 2nd edition (USA: Willey Blackwell Publication,2010), 409



their population. All of this has profoundly undermined the spirit of religious tolerance in India. "In past years, vigilante groups²³ and majoritarian mobs have increasingly attacked minorities, activists, and human rights defenders, often with impunity. Notably, the number of hate crimes against Muslims related to the issue of cow slaughter has risen sharply."²⁴ In its November 2022 report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom said, "Religious tolerance conditions in India remained poor."²⁵

Measures of Religious Tolerance

Religious tolerance is measured by equal rights and opportunities granted to a religious community and the non-occurrence of discrimination. These equal opportunities must manifest themselves in the domains of political representation, social security, educational funding, economy, public and private sector employment. Cultural autonomy and the protection of religious identity are also important measures of religious tolerance. Religious tolerance entails giving freedom to a community to express its cultural practices and refraining from any political encroachment in these practices. Similarly, the frequency of social interactions among religious communities also depicts the attitude of tolerance in society. Unfortunately, if we look at the current Indian society from the prism of these measures of religious tolerance, we find disequilibrium and dissatisfaction as far as religious tolerance goes. With policies aiming at the economic and political disempowerment of minorities, particularly Muslims, religious tolerance finds itself at a backslide.²⁶ India is a participatory democracy and

its constitution encourages the representation of all sections of the society. In contradistinction to this, Muslims, being the largest minority in the country, are finding a shrinking space in the political sphere and the subcontinent is experiencing episodes of tension and conflict.

Amidst such fluctuating political climate, Religious leaders can become channels of hope and inspire different faiths to explore and practice common values, such as kindness, justice, and compassion, in public life. There is a need for religious leaders to take an active role in building bridges of understanding and harmony between different communities. The positive role that religious leaders ought to play can change hostile political narratives. The current study will focus on the role religious leaders can undertake to influence their communities positively and achieve the goals of tolerance, peace, reconciliation, and the spirit of co-existence. It places the whole discourse within the context of political and social challenges in the country, which were contextualized in the above discourse.

Role of Religious Leaders

Religious leaders refer to the group of leaders holding high positions in their religions, be it Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and others. Generally, this group has the "potential to influence policy and lawmakers, such as the government, as well as the people in the broader context and function as mediators for conflict resolution."²⁷ Every religion calls for goodness, kindness, empathy, love, respect, and understanding. The religious leaders in India should embody the same sentiments in themselves and the communities they represent. Similarly, every religion shun hate, prejudice, extremism, fanaticism, and discrimination. Religious leaders in India must take a firm stand against such divisive tendencies and combat them in letter and spirit. The religious leaders "possess strong credibility in the community because they are considered capable, highly knowledgeable, noble in character, and have expertise in the field of

²³ Gaw Rakshak (Cow Vigilante).

²⁴ Nirajan Sahoo, Chapter 1 Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India, *Political polarization in South and South-East Asia*, Edited by Thomas Carothers and Andrew, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2020), 16.

²⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom: Country Update India, *Religious Freedom Condition in India* November 2022.

²⁶ Take, for instance, the findings of the Sachar Committee Report, a committee formed during the govt of Congress in 2006. The findings concluded that the conditions of Muslims in India are below the level of Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes, with Muslims having the highest dropout rates and

least graduates in higher education compared to other communities.

²⁷ Khairul Nazim Karim, "Role of Religious Leader in Interfaith Dialogue towards Conflict Resolution: An Islamic Perspective," *International Journal of Education and Research*, Vol. 2 No. 6 (June 2014):77-88.



religion, which can be seen as role models by the community.”²⁸ The need of the hour is to craft a well-thought-out approach from religious leaders by harnessing inherent human values, which can be daunting in an environment of competing religious and ideological undercurrents. Following are some of the steps towards this process:

1. Standing Against Social and Religious Polarization

In the atmosphere of ideological rifts between secular nationalism and Hindu nationalism, religious leaders have a crucial role to play by striving for a healthy and harmonious society, which requires taking a strong stand against divisive, hostile, and provocative narratives. Any religion, in its true and virtuous form, constructs bridges of solidarity between people. No religion on earth endorses demeaning or insulting other human beings for mere political interests. Instead, the universal values of love, respect, and care stand at the core of every faith. This realization must be brought about by religious leaders among the people. Religion and politics in contemporary India are deeply intertwined. The secular character of Indian polity overlaps with religious politics, which essentially emerge from a predominantly religious society in India. Religion has and continues to play a prominent part in Indian political affairs. In the context of Indian secularism, it is not possible to keep politics and religion apart. Religion. Nevertheless, what is concerning in contemporary India is religion being used as a tool by politicians for their vested interests. “Most people in India are still politically uneducated, and they tend to be unaware of the tactics of these clever politicians.”²⁹ This results in a substantial departure from upholding secular values, giving rise to religious fundamentalism, and provides a ground for the upsurge of right-wing political ideologies.

The task of religious leaders to counter these extreme ideological developments becomes significant. It requires a coordinated, intellectual, and principle-based response. A response that goes

deep to the roots of such developments and exposes their harms. Increasing religious politics in India or the involvement of extreme religious ideologies in social and political spheres has the potential to challenge the secular credentials of the country, threatening its minorities and eroding its democratic standards. Religious leaders need to adopt civil discourse, where individuals with diverse viewpoints can express themselves without fear of hatred, reprisal, or discord. This will help close ideological divisions and develop understanding. What gives rise to ideological divisions and religious extremism? It is the outcome of distorting historical realities to favour a particular narrative and making history vulnerable to inaccurate interpretations. Adherence to truth, properly contextualized interpretation, and correct representation are the striking features of history. Any compromise through power politics alters historical facts to suit a particular political narrative.

When Hindu nationalist (or Sangh Parivar) organizations in India came to power at the national level in 1998, one of the first things they did was to establish a National Curriculum Framework (NCF) to change textbook content. These historical alterations attempted to manufacture a majoritarian view of society in which the cultural and political space for minorities progressively shrinks. These actions were challenged by academics and progressive, secular, liberal, and left groups who decried the Sangh Parivar’s ideological efforts to recast history.³⁰

Opposing the distortions of history, which can be used to justify majoritarian politics (by using history as propaganda), is necessary and needs the utmost attention from religious leaders. In this context, it becomes imperative to counter misinformation, actively disapprove it, and combat the spread of conspiracy theories.

Another incidence of polarization and religious extremism is the rise of inflammatory and provocative public speeches. Religious leaders need to emphasize that public figures and leaders giving reactionary speeches are held accountable legally. Hate speeches from elected political leaders widen social gaps and must be brought under accountability. Politics and society are adversely

²⁸ Munif Muhammad Zuhri & et al, “Community Development: The Role of Religious Leaders in Community Empowerment,” *Journal of humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 26 No. 11 (November 2021): 37-41.

²⁹ Burton Stein & David Arnold, *A History of India*, 2nd edition (USA: Willey Blackwell Publication, 2010), 409-410.

³⁰ Visweswaran, Kamala, Michael Witzel, Nandini Manjrenkar, Dipta Bhog, and Uma Chakravarti, The Hindutva view of history: rewriting textbooks in India and the United States, *Journal of International Affairs* Harvard 10(1) (2009): 101-112.



impacted by polarization, which weakens social cohesion. Any stable social order will collapse under the constant pressure of polarization. Hence, religious leaders must “sensitize people about the harms of polarization on the social, political, and religious order and its negative implications on democratic principles.”³¹

inflammatory speeches have negative consequences for society, leading to hate, social unrest and political instability. These speeches result in communal discords and inter-faith tensions. This rise in social and political polarization can create a democratic crisis.

The adverse effects of India’s deepening polarization have been extensive and varied, touching almost every aspect of the nation’s political and social life. Destructive political discourse in India, in which leaders frequently demonize their opponents and minority groups, has led to a disturbing rise in intolerance and violence.³²

Religious leaders, communities, and governments must work together to counter these trends and promote a more inclusive and harmonious society by taking appropriate and timely steps and preparing a policy recommendation for the government to restrict or ban harmful and violent speeches in public gatherings.

2. Promoting Religious Tolerance

Religious leaders are instrumental in promoting religious tolerance in India because of their positions and moral authority. Religious teachings act as an important source of tolerance, peace and unity. Religion provides meaning to an individual’s life and helps one derive purpose from the world. The nature of human beings shaped by religious teachings is incompatible with intolerance towards fellow human beings.

Promoting religious tolerance at a time when people are divided against each other in the name of religion and ideology assumes great significance. However, it is essential to remember that these initiatives are successful only when they

are inclusive and involve collaboration between religious leaders from various backgrounds, civil society organizations, governmental organizations, and people who have a similar interest in promoting religious harmony. Religious leaders can engage with government representatives and policymakers to advocate for policies that preserve religious liberty and the rights of minorities. They can also offer valuable insights about the needs and concerns of their communities. India, as a country, can thrive and prosper in all spheres of development only when people show unity and a deep sense of respect and commitment to the principles of religious tolerance and pluralism. Religious leaders substantially impact the beliefs, values, and practices of their followers. Hence, their role in educating their communities becomes noteworthy.

Differences are bound to exist in a diverse country like India, but these differences must be respected and not exploited. Frequent and increasing examples of inflammatory speeches targeting minorities across India are appalling. This exposes the hateful politics that has taken root in the social framework of India. The deeply ingrained prejudices held by some misguided people using religion as a tool must be refuted through effective campaigns for religious tolerance and communal harmony. Engaging with state institutions and stakeholders, such as the judiciary, bar associations, and civil society, is necessary to promote religious tolerance.

Indians consider religious tolerance a central component of their identity as a country. “The majority (84%) of people in all main religions agree that respecting all religions is very important to be considered truly Indian. Tolerance is a religious and civic value: Indians are united in the view that respecting other religions is an essential part of what it means to be a member of their religious community.”³³ The collective consciousness of the people of India still believes in maintaining and practising religious tolerance as a

³¹ Anindita Borah, & Sanasam Ranbir Singh, “Investigating political polarization in India through the lens of Twitter,” *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, Springer (July 2022): 1-26.

³² Nirajan Sahoo, Chapter 1 Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India, *Political polarization in South and South-East Asia*, Edited by Thomas Carothers and Andrew, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2020), 16.

³³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation/05/09/2023>

(Survey Conducted by Pew Research Center on 19/06/2021 in India). Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan think tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world. they conduct public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research. They do not take policy positions.



virtue. Religious leaders are responsible for enriching and building the discourse around such positive sentiments that people affirm.

Religious leaders can act as the values-based glue that binds communities together. The research conducted by a group of scholars at faculty publications finds that “religion acts as a profound source of tolerance and acceptance. Religion can promote tolerance through teaching tolerance-based virtues, encouraging individuals to be examples, and providing role models of tolerance.”³⁴ The same research also finds that “Inter-faith interactions promote tolerance by allowing participants to proactively learn about other faiths, identify commonalities, accept differences, and unite against anti-religious sentiments.”³⁵ Religious leaders need to showcase that the religious teachings effectively endorse the virtues of religious tolerance.

3.Reducing Communication Gaps by Encouraging Inter-Faith Dialogues

Communication gaps between religious communities lead to misunderstandings, wrong judgments, and prejudice. The first responsibility religious leaders can perform is to reduce these communication gaps and ensure an ongoing healthy discourse across the communities. Through these dialogues and discourses, religious leaders can encourage empathy between different faiths and humanize circumstances that might have become dehumanized due to conflict. Religious leaders can become a medium for reconciliation and enlightenment. However, they must be well-informed, visionary, knowledgeable, bold, courageous, and inspiring to achieve this.

Through interfaith dialogue, the positions of religions on important issues are to be discussed. It is, therefore, imperative that the dialogue partners and participants be among those who are competent, knowledgeable, and committed to their religions. This is to avoid misrepresenting the religions, which

will be a disadvantage to both the religions and the dialogue audience.³⁶

It is necessary to give respect and honour to people regardless of their religion, colour, and race. Religious leaders should make people understand that the purpose behind religious differences is to know each other better. There should be a focus on maintaining affinity and concern for each other rather than creating distance and harbouring negativity. The communication vacuum that exists between various religious communities is under constant attack from religious and political fanatics who want to fill it with hate and hostility. Hence, these spaces must be reclaimed for desirable purposes.

Equally essential is to create consciousness among people that all faiths in India have existed and survived together with the richness of thought, culture, and practice, enriching one another with timely changes and adjustments, which, in reality, constitute India’s historical strength. Religious leaders should emphasize on avoiding misinterpretations, misquotations and ignorance about each other’s religion. Shallow, self-serving and selective views about religion distort the actual context of religious belief and breed a disrespectful attitude towards these beliefs and traditions. Combating such views and narratives becomes extremely important. “Communitarianism feelings are increasing day by day in the hearts of the followers of different religions. The only solution would be interfaith dialogues so that everyone can understand other religions or belief systems in the proper context without bias.”³⁷

There can be no meaningful social relationships if the conflicts are not resolved through mutual agreements, interfaith dialogue, and bridging communication gaps.

4. Spreading Media Literacy

Journalism is considered a fourth pillar of democracy. When journalism fails to do justice by reporting fairly and holding the government

³⁴Quinn Galbraith, Alexandra Carlisle & Ben White, “Religion as a Source of Tolerance and Intolerance: Exploring the Dichotomy,” *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, Faculty Publication Vol. 10 No. 2, (June 2020): 90-104.

³⁵Quinn Galbraith, Alexandra Carlisle & Ben White, “Religion as a Source of Tolerance and Intolerance: Exploring the Dichotomy,” 90-104.

³⁶Khairul Nazim Karim, “Role of Religious Leader in Interfaith Dialogue towards Conflict Resolution: An Islamic Perspective,” *International Journal of Education and Research*, Vol. 2 No. 6 (June 2014): 77-88.

³⁷Abroo Aman Andrabi, “Interfaith dialogue: its need, importance and merits in the contemporary world,” *International Journal of Advanced Academic Studies*, Vol 2 No.3 (June 2020): 264-271.



accountable, it becomes a tool in the hands of the ruling party and big corporate houses. The media and journalism are supposed to strengthen democracy by raising relevant issues of public concern like corruption, education, public health, communal harmony, and religious tolerance. Unfortunately, this is not happening in India. The rise of lapdog media (popularly known as “god media”) has tarnished the image of journalism and compromised journalistic integrity in India. The spread of disinformation and twisted narratives by media outlets is becoming increasingly disruptive and affecting all Indians alike, particularly Muslims.

God Media (the media sitting on the lap) is a hard-hitting term meaning “lapdog media.” It describes the sections of media that have become obedient lapdogs of the ruling government instead of fulfilling their expected role as society’s astute watchdogs of the government and other powerful institutions.³⁸

With the rapid rise in the consumption of digital media information, mainly through social and electronic media, religious leaders must promote media literacy and assist people in critically evaluating information sources. “Social media platforms have proved to be fertile ground for inflammatory political misinformation. Fake news and other forms of dubious or false information that are biased and misleading is highly concerning.”³⁹ People ought to be able to distinguish between accurate reporting and sensationalized or biased content, which can potentially lead to societal disunion. Religious leaders need to understand that media news, whether social media or electronic media, significantly impacts public psychology. Hence, active monitoring of such media practices becomes very necessary.

Media literacy initiatives should aim to inform individuals about how to become more informed and responsible consumers of media content and information. Research indicates, “Equipping individuals with the knowledge of media literacy acts as a shield against harmful content, fake

news, and misinformation.”⁴⁰ Religious leaders should educate people on media literacy so that incidents of crime and violence are curbed. Media literacy initiatives should frequently focus on training people to evaluate media messages, identify biases, and distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources. Religious leaders can play a vital role in promoting media literacy in a diverse and culturally heterogeneous country like India. They can use their influence and platforms to raise awareness about the importance of media literacy and help people develop essential skills needed to navigate the modern media landscape.

5. Building Trust Measures Across Communities

Striving collectively for a common good requires mutual trust and conviction between the communities. If this trust is lacking, no effort for collective betterment can take place. “Investigation into the relationship between religion and trust has steadily grown, filling a significant gap in our thinking about the role of religion in knitting together civil society.”⁴¹ Religious leaders need to create trust measures between the communities by engaging them in activities that will bring collective good. This will construct the bonds of unity and affection, the essential needs of humanity. “Trust is essential for healthy, reciprocal relationships and creating safe environments; engaging in transparent interactions and honouring differences.”⁴²

A proper understanding of rights and duties towards each other must be inculcated into the community each religious leader is representing. The elements that foster trust are:

- 1) Developing relationships and engagements (e.g., by interacting with people “where they are at” and establishing safe spaces).
- 2) Upholding the fundamental principles of reliability (e.g., by being open and benevolent).
- 3) Sharing decision-making, promoting individual freedom, and addressing barriers to trust.

The gentler side of trust is caring. Religious leaders should build caring trust by performing sincere

³⁸ <https://www.differenttruths.com/technology/democracy-under-siege-the-godi-media-phenomenon-in-india>

³⁹ Andrew Guess, Micheal Leaner & et al, “A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India,” *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, Cambridge (June 2020): 1-10.

⁴⁰ <https://what-role-does-media-literacy-play-in-evaluating-the-credibility-of-news/>

⁴¹ Benjamin & Paul, “Religion and The Extension of Trust,” *Journal of Political Behaviour*, Springer, Vol 41 No. 3, (September 2019): 609-631.

⁴² Amy E. Lansing, et al, “Building trust: Leadership reflections on community empowerment and engagement,” <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/> (June 2023): 1-25.



deeds and saying things that show compassion rather than hate. An act with care and respect for others fosters mutual love. Trust is a reciprocal thing, and it increases step by step. Trust boosts cooperation, brings people with different social backgrounds closer, and limits conflicts. Religious leaders must preach practices that encourage the formation of social trust, which can eventually help build political trust.

6. Peace Conferences Initiatives

Religious leaders from all faiths should actively organize conferences to address problems, encourage reconciliation, and underline the value of peaceful co-existence. Religious tolerance and compassion should be the frequently discussed topics at these conferences. Peace conferences act as places where conflicts can be addressed and settled amicably, lowering the likelihood of violence and disturbance. They stress that India's strength resides in its diversity and that no religion should dominate or mistreat others.

Since the influence of religion permeates our daily lives, religious leaders should organize and facilitate events and conferences with other community members, giving meaning to social interactions, shaping social values, and encouraging responsible behaviours that respect the well-being, dignity, and value of all people.⁴³

Peace conferences organized by religious leaders can also help prevent radicalization. Religious peace conferences can act as a counter-narrative to extremist ideas in a time when radicalization poses a threat. They advocate for a peaceful co-existence in opposition to extremist and divisive ideologies. India's commitment to religious peace and harmony is noticed internationally. Initiatives like religious peace conferences help to promote India's reputation as a diverse and inclusive nation, attracting tourists, investment, and goodwill from around the world.

7. Religious Education Initiative

Religious leaders have a crucial part to play in community education through moral and ethical instructions. Religious leaders act as moral and ethical role models for the people they represent. They impart moral precepts based on their religious beliefs, which can aid in forming the community's moral compass. So, the behaviour of religious

⁴³UNICEF, Engagement with Religious Leaders in South-Asia, (January, 2020), 4.

leaders must be one of a kind, gentle, knowledgeable, humble, and love of humanity to pass these traits on to the communities they represent. Educating the community is a "conscious and planned effort to create a learning atmosphere and learning process so that the individuals can actively develop their potential to have spiritual strength, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble character, and the skills needed by themselves, society and nation."⁴⁴ Through education, religious leaders can teach their community members about the importance of conflict resolution, promoting social cohesion and unity, and encouraging tolerance, inclusivity, and respect for diversity. Religious leaders should inculcate the spirit of protecting humanity from all forms of oppression and injustice in their community members. "One of the most essential functions of religious teachings is that it helps students understand the place of various religions in our society. It helps them resolve the important questions of their inner self, and this understanding contributes to a more just and cohesive society."⁴⁵ Educational initiatives by religious leaders should emphasize the moral and ethical principles inherent in religious traditions and work to shape individual behaviour in the proper manner.

To grow the personalities of students in accordance with the needs of society and the country, religious education and training must be at par with modern education. Preparing healthy individuals for society should be the foremost concern of religious institutions, and religious leaders must ensure that education for students is imparted in a manner that helps the cause of society. Religious seminaries must encourage their students to participate in community service, charitable activities, and humanitarian initiatives by instilling a sense of social responsibility in them. This will help to promote societal welfare and address social challenges.

II. Discussion and Conclusion

The words of Nehru, quoted by Ramachandra Guha, best depict the essence of religious tolerance that the country of India

⁴⁴Haji Dollah & Farida Ulfah, "Contribution of Religious Leaders in Behavioural Education in Adolescents," *Journal Focus*, Vol.4, No. 1, (2023): 1-12.

⁴⁵<https://targetstudy.com/articles/importance-of-religious-teachings-in-education.html>



manifested. However, the present political atmosphere reflects a sense of betrayal of this vision, which unfolds in communal tensions and marginalization of minorities, especially Muslims.

It is very well for us to say that we shall not pay any attention to communal considerations. I am no lover of communalism and its works. We have to realize that in a vast and mixed country like India, we must produce a sense of balance and assurance of a square deal and future prospects in all parts of the country and all communities of India. We have to always remember India as a composite country, composite in many ways, in religion, customs, languages and other ways of life. An attempt by the majority group to impose itself on others can only lead to inner conflicts, which are as bad as outer conflicts.⁴⁶

India is a secular state, as stated in its constitution, which has kept politics and religion apart. Despite these features, the country is finding itself in the throes of religious nationalism following seventy years of experimentation with secular politics. The emergence of Hindu nationalism directly contradicts the secular politics of India. The unprecedented rise of political and religious polarization along with the politics of marginalization, distortion of history, negative portrayal of minorities, and the loss of journalistic ethics are some of the biggest challenges arising from political orientation towards religious nationalism in India. These issues are further manipulated for political gains and securing electoral victories. "The politics of polarization can keep India in a permanent state of turmoil, inflaming societal divisions and straining democratic institutions."⁴⁷

As active stakeholders in society and public spaces, religious leaders in India bear a significant responsibility in promoting solidarity, denouncing prejudice and communal hatred, and fostering healthy communication and understanding about each other. They should direct their efforts towards the development of more dignified, flexible and peaceful communities. It is a massive task that necessitates unified and collaborative

actions from all sections of society, particularly religious leaders who have more access to their communities and can become channels of hope for healing a politically and religiously fragmented society. Religious leaders can engage with democratic institutions, political leadership, social activities, civil societies and media persons to assert their claims. "Both political institutions and the higher judiciary are key actors resisting India's turn toward majoritarianism."⁴⁸

The present study explored different dimensions of religious tolerance, religious freedom, identity politics, political majoritarianism, growing social and political polarization in India. The intricate relationships between these in framing Indian democracy and keeping its structure intact. The study underscores the role of religious leaders in promoting religious and communal harmony through various means like interfaith dialogue, advancing religious tolerance, educating communities, spreading media literacy, and working for common issues. Religious leaders can strike a positive change in the social and political aspects as representatives of different communities. Raise awareness about the rights of minorities in an increasingly majoritarian political trend. The scope of the study is vast and cannot be encapsulated in one research paper. Future discussions and discourse need to evolve so that the multifaceted nature of such issues can be explored.

The paper strongly recommends that religious leaders must unite together to defeat the politics of hate, discrimination, and dehumanization. They should create spaces for a healthy discourse whereby religions interact in an integrative model against a conflictual and competitive model. Speaking against the shrinking space of political representation and economic opportunities for minorities is vital. Minorities are an integral part of Indian society and have as much claim on the country as anyone else.

⁴⁶Ramachandra Guha, *Makers of the Modern India* (India: Penguin, 2010), 361.

⁴⁷Nirajan Sahoo, Chapter 1 Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India, *Political polarization in South and South-East Asia*, Edited by Thomas Carothers and Andrew, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2020), 20.

⁴⁸Nirajan Sahoo, Chapter 1 Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India, *Political polarization in South and South-East Asia*, 18.