Thinking faith
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India: Religion in a Land of Contrasts

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On Indian Independence Day, Dr Walter Fernandes SJ and Dr Alphonsus D'Souza SJ reflect on the social and political history of the country, and examine how religion has played both a unifying and a divisive role in India.

On 15th August 2008, India celebrates the 61st anniversary of its independence. It is an occasion to celebrate the achievements of the past and also to introspect and have a look at the weaknesses and failures of the last six decades. An issue that stands out during these years is the role that religion plays in the political, social and economic life of the country. This year's Independence Day itself is celebrated under the shadow of a conflict in the border state of Jammu and Kashmir over the offer of 100 acres of land to a Hindu pilgrim centre and its withdrawal later. Since Muslims are a majority in this border state, the dispute over land has been turned into a religious conflict.


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This shows the ease with which religion can be used as a political tool, as it has been many times in the past. The Partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan in 1947 was itself based on religion: Hindus form the majority in India and Muslims are a majority in Pakistan. India has around 150 million (13%) Muslims and 30 million (2.3%) Christians, 20 million of those Catholics. Religion is alive but the history of the last sixty years, particularly regional conflicts in India as well as in Pakistan show that religion alone cannot bind people together. However, religion continues to be used as a political tool and the fundamentalist forces make an effort to use it as a binding force. History also shows that the British divide-and-rule policy was not the only cause of this division. The colonial regime exploited to its own benefit the divisions that existed already in the sub-continent and intensified them further. India and Pakistan are yet to recover from the Partition.

A Land of Contrasts

This situation also shows that India is a country of paradoxes, contrasts, even contradictions. India is the seventh largest country in the world, by geographical area, and is bigger than the whole of Western Europe. Not surprisingly, it is made up of distinct geographical and cultural regions. India is the second most populous country in the world with a population of about 1.3 billion people but among its demographic features are an adverse sex ratio (933 females for every 1,000 males) and high levels of infant mortality and illiteracy, particularly among the poor and the "low castes", especially women among them. India is the biggest democracy in the world, but its democratic institutions and processes are marred by violence and corruption.

India has the world's twelfth largest economy at market exchange rates, and the fourth largest in terms of purchasing power. Yet the benefits of economic development do not reach a large proportion of its people – this is true more so of the last two decades of globalisation (economic liberalisation) than of the time prior to it. India has some of the richest persons in the world but according to official sources, 22 per cent of its population, which equates to more than 300 million people, live below the poverty line. Unofficial sources like researchers put the proportion of families below the poverty line close to 40 per cent - around 500 million persons. The poverty line is defined so that those below it are families that spend 80 per cent or more of their income on food alone, and yet men do not get 2,400 calories per day and women do not get 2,200 calories. More than a quarter of the population is

thus undernourished but the country still exports food grains.

India is a deeply religious country. Four major world religions, namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism have their origins in India, while Christianity and Islam arrived in the country soon after they were founded. Anyone who visits India can see that religion is alive in the country. One finds small and big temples, mosques, gurdwaras (Sikh temples) and churches all across the country; the churches are full on Sundays. All of these religions uphold values of peace and unity, but India has witnessed innumerable instances of intolerance and violence based on religious differences.

These are some of the easily noticeable contrasts, many of which are interrelated. Many more can be listed but in order to explain the contrasts rather than merely identifying them, one needs to take a broad historical perspective. While India is relatively young as a modern nation state, it has a civilisation that goes back five millennia. Its history has to be understood.

Today, many of the contrasts have become sources of conflicts but traditionally they also ensured unity in diversity in the Indian social system. Diversities in race, language, religion, culture and social status were noticed, but the underlying unity based on shared values, institutions and social structures was a reality. Some of the values, such as mutual acceptance, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, contributed to social harmony. The well-known caste system, that has become more unjust and exploitative today than in the past, was also a mode of maintaining harmony and unity amid diversity. Every new group that came to the country could be accommodated by assigning it a place in the caste hierarchy.

Such institutionalised power relations ensured stability and continuity but the system on which they were based was exploitative in character. Like the three estates of the West, the hierarchy of the nobility, clergy and the common folk that was legitimised in the name of Christianity, the caste system was justified in the name of Hinduism. However, unlike in the West where modernisation led to secularism, in India it moved towards the strengthening of caste and religion and eventually towards fundamentalism. To a great extent, the current climate is a result of the interaction of the traditional system with the colonial inputs.

The Role of Colonialism

Though legitimised in the name of "civilising education", colonialism was essentially an economic enterprise, aimed at turning the colony into firstly a supplier of raw materials and capital to the British industrial revolution, and secondly a captive market for its finished products. In order to achieve this goal the colonial regime had to depend on the dominant religious and caste leaders like the Brahmins, the princely class, and other powerful groups. The religious system could not be touched for fear of alienating the dominant classes. As a result the power of these leaders was strengthened, as was the unjust system that was the foundation of their power. As Sumit Sarkar, a scholar of colonial history, says: in order to build capitalism in the metropolitan country, colonialism had to strengthen feudalism in the colony.

The freedom movement, the fight for Indian independence, intensified this process. The first fight was the revolt of 1857 against the East India Company, which came to India in 1699 as a British trading company. It opened "factories" or bases for trade in the present day Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata) and Madras (Chennai), and spread to other regions of India. It slowly got involved in local politics and by using division between Indian rulers, conquered most of the country. The revolt against it began in the army barracks of Meerut in Northwest India and spread to most of North India. It was quashed after about a year and the British Crown took over the administration of India from the East India Company. At this stage, questions were asked in Britain itself about the rationale of colonising a foreign country. The justification provided by the British Government was that India was divided by the religion, caste and languages of its people, and that only a foreign power could keep it united.

Eventually the colonial rulers were themselves convinced of what they said in justification of colonialism and used this conviction when the next phase of the freedom movement began, with Lord Alexander Hume, a British bureaucrat, founding the All India Congress on 27th December 1889. He felt

that his Indian friends were dissatisfied with British rule and that this posed a problem to the colonial order. So he founded the Congress that could bring the British and the Indian upper classes together to discuss their problems and allow Indians to have a share in British power. This group slowly grew into the Indian National Congress. Some of those involved took to violence, some others used religion as a tool to inspire people to fight for Indian independence. Mahatma Gandhi who took control of the movement in the 1920s demanded adherence to peaceful methods and *satyagraha* (search for truth) in order to attain the objective of independence. In an effort to counter the fundamentalist religious forces, he tried to combine social reforms with religious reforms. He led the country to independence in 1947, with Jawaharlal Nehru as the first prime minister.

The colonial regime had ignored the Muslims after the 1857 revolt because they perceived it as Muslim-inspired, though in reality Hindus as well as Muslims were involved in it. When it saw the Congress growing, the regime began to empower the Muslim leaders as a counterweight to the predominantly Hindu leaders of the freedom struggle. Simultaneously, there was also a demand for social reforms and that was a threat to the dominant caste Hindu leaders. They also felt that the missionaries and the colonialists were belittling their culture and religion. Many of them fell on the defensive and went back to their religious past as the answer to all modern problems. Some of them claimed that though the West had made material progress, India was superior to the West because it had spiritual values. All these events strengthened Hindu as well as Muslim religious forces and resulted in fundamentalism. That would be intensified further after India attained political independence and the sub-continent was partitioned in 1947 on a purely religious basis. That divide has continued to intensify and has resulted in a fundamentalist revival among all of the religious groups.

The political system also moved towards a similar divide. At independence, India accepted the Westminster style of parliamentary democracy based on universal adult franchise. India also launched development plans in order to overcome two centuries of underdevelopment of the country, without which the British industrial revolution would not have survived. Problems arose very quickly from the fact that the leaders of independent India opted for technology-intensive modernisation without changing the unequal social system. That strengthened the already dominant classes and castes. However, since democracy depended on universal franchise, the leaders had to get the cooperation of all the classes if they wanted to remain in power. That demanded the creation of "vote banks": a caste, religious group, class or other social group that is used as a supporter of a political party or a candidate. The said party or candidate does them small favours without really solving their major problems. For example, slum lords do favours to the slum dwellers, keep them under their control and deliver their votes to a given party or candidate. (The present agitation in Kashmir in the name of Hinduism is an effort to create a Hindu vote bank for the state level elections that are due in October and the national elections that are due in early 2009.)

These processes resulted in competition between various regional, linguistic, caste and religious groups. Promises made during the political elections raised the aspirations of the groups that were excluded from the fruits of development. The attention of these groups was diverted by trying to create single Hindu, Muslim and other religious identities. Every religious leader accused other religious groups of taking the benefits of development away from their own community. The poor among the Hindus, for example, were told that Muslims were taking the resources away from them by having four wives and a large family, or that Muslims were pro-Pakistani, so they should be united against the Muslims. Division within their own religious group was secondary to this need to unite. The use of religion for political purposes was facilitated also by the ongoing tension between India and Pakistan around Kashmir, and other issues. Any protest by the poor could be presented as Pakistan-inspired in India and as India-inspired in Pakistan, and could thus be labelled as anti-national.

For a brief time, there was a close link between religion and nationalism. This became strengthened with the onset of globalisation, from which the middle class has benefited, but at the cost of the poor. Poverty has increased but the middle class, on whose consumerism the profit of the producers depends, has to be shielded from the discontent of the poor. So globalisation is presented as nationalism and those opposed to it as anti-national. For example, when the

compartment of a train caught fire on 28th February 2002 at Godhra in the West Indian state of Gujarat, killing more than 50 workers of a Hindu fundamentalist outfit, rumours were spread that Muslims had poured petrol in the compartment and set fire to it. Forensic tests showed later that the doors of the compartment were locked and it was impossible throw petrol in the compartment from outside, but immediately the rumour was accepted as a fact and anti-Muslim riots were organised, allegedly by the ruling party of that state. Thousands of Muslims were killed in the riots. During the election and other speeches, the chief minister and the ruling party diverted attention from the atrocities associated with it by presenting development as integral to Gujarati pride and Muslims as its opponents and friends of Pakistan.

Intensifying Class and Caste

One does not claim that religious fervour alone has been strengthened or that its impact has been only negative. Religion is integral to Indian identity and spirituality and it has also played a positive unifying role. What the colonial and post-independence processes have done is to focus on exclusive identities such as caste and religion and thus go against diversity. The fact that every Indian has multiple identities such as caste, class, religion and region is ignored, and an effort is made by these processes to focus solely on religious identity and to identify nationalism with it, or to focus just on caste or just on regional identity. These processes encourage fundamentalist revival which also has a psychological basis, and that too belongs to the dominant castes and classes that were on the defensive at independence. They felt that their culture and religion were devalued by the missionary and the colonialist. So they are trying to re-assert their identify by glorifying their past. They are able to get the support of the masses by using the emotive issue of religion.

The common understanding of Indian society is that it is divided into castes that are arranged in an immutable hierarchy with the Brahmins at the top. In reality, caste is a complex system that includes the traders, cultivators, labourers and peasants arranged in different hierarchies in each region. We need not go into its details. We only need to realise that today caste groups are slowly but definitely turning into classes. The traditionally powerful groups are retaining their power through this process. Because elections depend on mass support, some subordinate caste and class leaders gain political power. But economic power remains in the hands of the traditionally powerful classes and castes. For instance, the poverty line is drawn on the basis of per capita consumption expenditure, which was taken in 2005 as Rs. 356.35 (five pounds) for rural areas and Rs. 538.60 (nine pounds) for urban areas. It is extremely low but even according to official figures, 90 percent of families living below the poverty line are from the low castes or from the indigenous tribal communities, who together form 23 per cent of the population. From the point of view of those in power, attention has to be diverted from these inequalities and religious fundamentalism provides legitimacy to this unequal society.

Thus, we have come full circle from the past when religion legitimised social division. Today a new form of the same religious divisions legitimises the new incarnation of the caste system that is moving towards class inequality. Inequalities are justified in the name of Hinduism or Islam or Sikhism. To understand it, one has to remember that the new social classes cut across rural and urban areas, different languages and cultures, and to some extent even the former caste divisions. But the caste system has not ceased to be functional. It continues to operate in a new form, at times as a class and is even gaining strength in the political sphere and has become part of the new economic classes. Amid these changes, religion is supposed to function as a uniting factor.

A way out of this system has to be found. What is required is a change in the value system that views religion, caste or one's region as the answer to all problems. The old patron-client relationships between the dominant and subordinate castes have to be changed. Religion has to be revived in a new form, not as one's exclusive domain in competition with other religious groups, but as inspiration for social change in favour of every citizen. A change is needed in the cultural norms. That demands a persistent, long, drawn-out effort.

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