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MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS AND THE IDEALS OF DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

Religious democracy *is a form of government where the values of a particular religion affect laws and rules. The term applies to all countries in which religion is incorporated into the form of government. Democracies are characterized as secular or religious.The definition of democracy is disputed and interpreted differently amongst politicians and scholars. It could be argued if only liberal democracy is true democracy, if religion can be incorporated into democracy, or if religion is a necessity for democracy. The religiosity of political leaders can also have an effect on the practice of democracy. India is perhaps the largest and most plural society in the world where people speak an array of languages and use a wide range of scripts. All the major religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism - have an enormous number of followers in India. India is the world's most complex and comprehensively pluralistic society, home to a vast variety of castes, tribes, communities, religions, languages, customs and living styles. The People of India project of the Anthropological Survey of India estimated there are nearly 4,599 separate communities in India with as many as 325 languages and dialects in 12 distinct language families and some 24 scripts. Few Indians are not immigrants, most people have come to a particular part from another part, may be from a neighbouring district, state, more occasionally from distant parts of India. Just to illustrate the complexity of culture, most households in India speak two to three languages. The mosaic of identities that constitute the meaning of Indianness is on display on Republic Day every year. The National Anthem emphasizes diversity in a similar manner. The first verse is a series of names of different geographic regions, ethnicities and cultures. India is hailed as Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, Maratha, Dravida, Utkala, Banga in the same verse. The Indian subject is thus someone who is at once some other thing at the same time.*

Keywords Multiculturalism, Muslim, Hindu, Democracy, Diversity, India, Plurality

Introduction

Religion has historically influenced Indian society on a political, cultural and economic level. There is a sense of pride associated with the country's rich religious history as the traditions of

Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism all emerged out of India. Moreover, while a majority of people in India identify as Hindu (79.8%), the medley of religions that exist within the country continually impact contemporary society.In India, religion is more publicly visible than it is in most English-speaking Western countries. This becomes evident when considering the numerous spaces that are thought to be sacred and holy. Examples include '*ashrams*' (monasteries or congregation sites) consisting of large communities of scholars or monastics, temples (*mandir*), shrines and specific landscapes such as the Ganges river. There is a rich religious history visible in architecture, and it is not uncommon to find various places of worship, such as a Hindu temple, Muslim mosque and Christian church, all next to each other.The 2011 Indian census indicated that 79.8% of Indians identified as Hindu, 14.2% identified as Muslim and 2.3% identified as Christian. A further 1.7% of the population identified as Sikh, 0.7% identified as Buddhist and 0.37% identified as Jain. Due to the massive population size of India, religious minorities still represent a significant number of people. For example, although only 0.37% of India may identify with Jainism, that still equates to over 4 million people. While not all religions in India can be discussed in detail, the following provides an overview of the major religions in the country as well as sizable religions that originated in India.

Social Structure

One influential component of Hinduism impacting India is the large-scale caste system, known as the 'varna' system. The varna caste system represented the Hindu ideal of how society ought to be structured. This form of organisation classified society into four ideal categories: brahmin (priestly caste), kshatriya (warrior, royalty or nobility caste), vaishya (commoner or merchant caste) and shudra (artisan or labourer caste).

It is a hereditary system in that people are believed to be born into a family of a specific caste. Each caste has specific duties (sometimes known as '*dharma*') they are expected to uphold as part of their social standing. For instance, a member of the Brahmin caste may be expected to attend to religious affairs (such as learning religious texts and performing rituals) while avoiding duties outside of their caste, such as cleaning. In contemporary times, Brahmin men who have been trained as priests often tend to temples and perform ritual activities on behalf of other members of Hindu society.

Islam in India

Islam is the second most followed religion in India, influencing the country's society, culture, architecture and artistry. The partition of the subcontinent in 1947 led to mass emigration of roughly 10 million Muslims to Pakistan and nearly as many Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan into

India. This event changed the demographics of both countries significantly and is continually felt throughout India.

Nonetheless, the Islamic community in India continues to play a considerable role in the development of the country. For example, the Muslim community in India has contributed to theological research and the establishment of religious facilities, institutes and universities. The mystical strain of Islam (Sufism) is also popular, with people gathering to watch Sufi dance performances. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, but there are also influential Shi'ite minorities in Gujarat. Most Sunnis reside in Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Kerala as well as major cities.

Sikhism in India

Originating in India, Sikhism is a monotheistic religion that promotes devotion to a formless God. The religion is centred on a tenet of service, humility and equality, encouraging its followers to seek to help those less fortunate or in need. For example, it is common for Sikhs to offer food to those visiting a gurdwara (the primary place of worship for Sikhs). One of the most recognised symbols of the Sikh community is a Sikh turban (known as a 'dastar' or a 'dumalla') worn by many men and some women. Since the partition of India and Pakistan, most Sikhs in India have resided in the Punjab region.

Buddhism in India

Buddhism originated as a countermovement to early Hinduism by presenting a universal ethic rather than basing ethical codes on an individual's caste. The core doctrine of Buddhism, known as the 'Four Noble Truths', teaches that one can be liberated from the suffering that underpins the cycle of death and rebirth by practising the 'Noble Eightfold Path'. Buddhism has become more widely practised in India over the last 30 years. This is partially due to the increased migration of exiled Buddhist monks from Tibet. However, its popularity has also increased as many from the 'untouchables' caste view it as a viable alternative to Hinduism in contemporary Indian society. Many Buddhists reside in the states of Maharashtra, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir.

Jainism in India

Jainism also originated as a countermovement that opposed some of the teachings and doctrines of early Hinduism. In modern-day India, layperson Jains usually uphold the ethical principle of 'ahimsa' ('non-harm' or 'non-violence'). As such, Jains tend to promote vegetarianism and animal welfare. Another common practice in the Jain lay community is samayika, a meditative ritual intended to strengthen one's spiritual discipline. Samayika is often practised in a religious

setting, such as a temple, before a monk, or in one's home. Most Jains reside in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan.

Christianity in India

Christianity is the third most followed religion in India, mostly concentrated in the far south and Mumbai. The most prominent denomination of Christianity in India is Roman Catholicism, but there are also localised Christian churches (such as the Church of North India and the Church of South India). Converts to Christianity have come mainly from traditionally disadvantaged minorities such as lower castes and tribal groups.

Family

The family is an important institution that plays a central role in the lives of most Indians. As a collectivistic society, Indians often emphasise loyalty and interdependence. The interests of the family usually take priority over those of the individual, and decisions affecting one's personal life – such as marriage and career paths – are generally made in consultation with one's family. People tend to act in the best interest of their family's reputation, as the act of an individual may impact the perception of the entire family by their community.
Although most family members are within geographical proximity or part of the same occupational groups, the growth of urbanisation and migration has seen younger generations challenging these perceptions of family. Today, many people have extensive family networks that are spread across many different regions and hold different occupations. The links an Indian person maintains with their extended family overseas are often much closer than those of most people in English-speaking Western societies. Indians living abroad also maintain close connections to their family remaining in India through regular phone calls, sending remittances or visiting if circumstances allow.

Household Structure

The concept of family extends beyond the typical nuclear unit to encompass the wider family circle. These large multigenerational families can also be essential to providing economic security to an individual. They often provide a source of work in a family agricultural business or lead to opportunities in cities where kinship ties and third-party introductions are crucial for employment.
People may be encouraged to have relationships with their aunts and uncles that are just as strong as parental relationships. In many parts of India, it is common to find three or four generations living together. The father (or eldest son, if the father is not present) is usually the patriarch while his wife may supervise any daughters or daughters-in-law that have moved into the household. Extended families tend to defer to the elderly and observe a clear hierarchy among

family members. In more urban areas, people will usually live in smaller nuclear families yet maintain strong ties to their extended family.

Gender Roles

The inequality between the status of men and women is quite pronounced in India. There are varying customs surrounding a practice known as 'pardah' that calls for the seclusion of women in certain situations. It is practised mostly in northern India and among conservative Hindu or Muslim families. In accordance with pardah, females are generally expected to leave the domestic realm only when veiled and accompanied by a man. Nuances in the custom vary between ethnicities, religions and social backgrounds. For example, married Hindu women in particular parts of northern India may wear a 'ghoonghat' (a specific kind of veil or headscarf) in the presence of older male relatives on their husband's side.

The degree to which gender inequalities persist is undergoing continuous change. For example, a brother and sister in India are now likely to receive equal schooling and treatment in the educational system. Although still bound by many constraining societal expectations, educated women in society are becoming more empowered through employment opportunities and political representation. There are also affirmative action programs for women to help address structural inequalities.

Relationships and Marriage

Arranged marriages are common throughout India, though expectations and practices of marital arrangements vary depending on the region and religion. Marriages are typically arranged through a matchmaker, the couple's parents or some other trusted third party. Unlike in the past where individuals would not be informed about their future partner, it is now more common for the family to consult the couple for consent before the wedding.

Arranged marriages are nearly always influenced by caste considerations. Therefore, endogamous marriages remain a common practice (limited to members of the same caste or, in some cases, religion). This is in part because arranging marriages is a family activity that is carried out through pre-existing networks of a broader community. Although people will marry within the same caste, families avoid marriage within the same subcaste. The institutions of arranged marriage and caste endogamy enable parents to influence the futures of their children as well as sustain the local and social structure. Intercaste marriages are almost never arranged. Such marriages are known as 'love marriages' and are becoming more common. Regardless of how one finds a spouse, the family is nearly always consulted in the marriage process.

Religious Freedom

India is home to the world's two major religious communities—Hindus (just under 80 percent of the population) and Muslims, 14.2 percent. In addition, Christians represent 2.3 percent; Sikhs, 1.7 percent; Jains, 0.4 percent and Buddhists, 0.8 percent. As students of Indian politics have noted, India's social diversity has created the foundation for pluralism. One reason is that religious communities are distributed throughout the country and form minorities in some places but majorities in others. Sikhs are a majority in the Punjab and Christians are a majority in the northeast states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram. Another reason is that Indians hold a number of identities—ethnic, caste, regional, linguistic, and religious. This has prevented any single identity from becoming pre-eminent and, argues AmartyaSen, is the best antidote to violence. Of course demography alone cannot explain India's democracy. The post-independence government created ethno-linguistic federal states rather than adopting a single national language, let alone religion.

The pre-independence, anti-colonial nationalist movement, under Gandhi's leadership, was deeply committed to Hindu-Muslim unity and to recognizing the unique contributions of every religious community. In the aftermath of the brutal inter-ethnic violence that was associated with the Partition, the Indian state sought to ensure the security of its Muslim population. Muslims in turn supported the Congress government and the secular principles it professed. They remain committed to secular, democratic principles.

India's understanding of secularism involves equal respect for all religious communities, as opposed other forms of secularism that call for the strict separation of religion and state. On the one hand, this led the Indian state to promote religious pluralism, for example, by officially recognizing the major holidays of all religious communities. On the other hand, this understanding of secularism has led the state to intervene in religious affairs, for example, by managing thousands of temples across the country.

The Indian Constitution, which was adopted in 1949 and went into effect the following year, defined India as a sovereign democratic republic, but not a secular one. That only occurred, after much contestation in 1976, as a result of the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution, which described India as both secular and socialist. Although the Indian Constitution supports legal equality of all citizens, regardless of their religion or creed, and prohibits discrimination based on religion, several constitutional provisions and laws privilege the interests of the Hindu majority. For example, Article 25, Subclause B enables the state to provide for the social welfare and reform of Hindu religious institutions. The Constitution also contains a number of directive principles of state policy, including "prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves," a clear affirmation of the preferences of the Hindu majority.

Post-independence governments have upheld anti-conversion laws, that originated during the period of British colonial rule, and only apply to conversion from the "original religion," which

is assumed to be Hindu. So-called freedom of religion laws restrict conversions out of Hinduism and encourage or coerce conversions into it. A long-standing antipathy to Christian conversions, in particular, is reflected in laws and public policy. The Congress government appointed the Niyogi Commission, which issued a report in 1956 recommending the "legal prohibition" of religious conversions that were not "completely voluntary." Although the government did not implement this measure for fear of violating the religious liberty provision in the Indian Constitution, the Commission encouraged state governments to pass anti-conversion legislation. Odisha was the first state to pass a so-called "Odisha Freedom of Religion Act, 1967." It was followed by Madhya Pradesh in 1968. Citing Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, the Supreme Court upheld legal restrictions on conversions in 1977.

This was not the only time the Supreme Court expressed suspicion of Christian conversion activities. It provided a deeply disturbing judgment after Graham Stuart Staines, a Christian missionary, and his two young sons, were brutally murdered by Hindutva activists, in Odisha in January 1999. A trial sessions court sentenced them to death, but the Odisha High Court commuted the sentence to life imprisonment. The Supreme Court upheld the High Court decision and made strong pronouncements against conversion. Although the Supreme Court subsequently expunged some of these statements from the records, it did not change its verdict.

On the face of it, as the term freedom of religion implies, the legislation would seem to prohibit coercion and ensure that individuals freely choose their faith. In fact, its intent and effects are precisely the opposite. It increases the state's propensity to engage in surveillance and punishment, while undermining religious freedom. In some instances, the state has challenged individuals who said they had converted voluntarily. Asma Jahangir, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief from 2004 to 2010, visited India in 2008 and reported that she did not encounter a single case of forced conversion in Odisha. She also commented on legal ambiguities in definitions of force, allurement, inducement, and fraud, all of which increase the discretionary powers of administrative officials.

Laws passed by BJP state governments in Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, and Rajasthan, impose the stiffest penalties for the conversion of Dalits (also known as Untouchables and Scheduled Castes), women and tribals (also known as Scheduled Tribes).[2] Gujarat increased the penalty for conversion by Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), minors or women of up to four years imprisonment and a fine of up to $2,174. In Himachal Pradesh fines were doubled to $1,087 and up to three years imprisonment when the offenses concerned minors, women, and SCs and STs. By heightening scrutiny of Hindus who convert, the law popularizes the notion that Christians and Muslims are ruthless foreigners who take advantage of gullible, passive victims. In fact, many Dalits freely converted out of Hinduism to escape rigid caste stratification. One study, based on extensive interviews with Dalit women from the Bangalore slums, found that

they had freely converted to Christianity and that conversion had increased their sense of dignity and well-being.

The Indian Constitution also makes a problematic distinction between remedial measures to protect and promote the interests of the lowest castes and of religious minorities. It created a system of reservations, akin to but more far-reaching than affirmative action in the US, which reserves seats in legislatures, government jobs, and higher educational institutions for historically disadvantaged castes and tribes (SCs, and STs). Reservations have expanded over the years to include Other Backward Classes (OBCs.) By contrast, the Constitution and various laws define Christians and Muslims as religious minorities who are not entitled to reservations. Paradoxically, the government initially restricted reservations to SCs on grounds that the caste system was peculiar to Hinduism, although it acknowledged that caste discrimination is widespread amongst Indian Muslims and Christians. However, it later extended the SC designation to Sikhs and Buddhists on grounds that these religions were extensions of Hinduism. In a problematic gesture of inclusion, the Constitution states that Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists should be considered Hindu, thereby assimilating these distinctive faiths into Hinduism while excluding Christians and Muslims.

A 2015 Supreme Court judgement held that Dalit Christians and Muslims who "reconverted" to Hinduism would be entitled to reservation benefits, as long as they could prove that their forefathers were SCs. By using the term "reconversion," the Court legitimated conversion to Hinduism on grounds that people were forcibly converted out of it. The Court also provided material incentives, in the form of reservations, for Dalit Muslims and Christians to convert to Hinduism.

The fact that the Constitution, various laws, and dominant understandings of secularism have never adequately protected religious freedom for minorities in India has given political leaders and jurists enormous discretion. State governments (headed by both Congress and the BJP) have enacted laws and policies that prohibit cow slaughter and restrict conversions out of Hinduism. Prospective political candidates often inflame Hindu-Muslim tensions to gain the electoral support of the Hindu majority.

Unlike Indira Gandhi's father, Jawaharlal Nehru, who was India's first prime minister, Gandhi fueled ethnic and religious tensions during her second term as prime minister from 1980 to 1984. Unable to fulfill her promises of poverty alleviation, she engaged in a populist, personalist style of governance and appealed to the Hindu majority for political support. Gandhi also inflamed tensions in Punjab and brought about the growth of Sikh militancy. She was tragically murdered by her Sikh bodyguard. Immediately thereafter, groups of Hindus, including some Congress party members, brutally murdered 3,000 Sikhs in New Delhi and 8,000 Sikhs in other north

Indian cities. In this respect, the pattern resembled the anti-Muslim violence organized by the BJP in the following decade.

The Congress Party-dominated United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments (2004–2009, 2009–2014), under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's leadership, sought to reverse this trend. They created several commissions, most importantly the Sachar Commission, which documented extensive inequities between Hindus and Muslims. These commissions found that programs to increase access to public sector employment, development credit, higher education, and political representation, had benefitted Dalits and tribals but not religious minorities; thus they recommended a range of educational, social, and economic programs to alleviate discrimination. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh initiated a 15 Point Program to improve the conditions of minorities. Congress also supported a 4.5 percent reservation for minorities within the OBC category. However, few of these measures were implemented. The proposal for minority reservations was quashed in the courts and proved so controversial that the UPA government did not revive it.

Clearly constitutional and legal provisions to safeguard Hindu interests reflected elite biases and, in turn, contributed to the Congress government's inconsistent and inadequate approach to minority rights. The BJP was heir to this legacy, and it highlighted the flaws in Congress policies and exacerbated institutional biases. However, the growth of Hindu majoritarianism and distrust of minorities was by no means inevitable. If there are loopholes in the Constitution which can be interpreted to support the Hindu majority at the expense of religious minorities, other Constitutional provisions can be interpreted quite differently. To better understand the growth of religious sectarianism necessitates an exploration of the ideology and organization of Hindu nationalism.

Conclusion

Threats to religious freedom and minority rights are longstanding. India inherited from Great Britain antiquated colonial laws, which deem protest seditious, and a centralized state, armed with repressive powers to supposedly ensure national stability. Although India describes itself as a secular, democratic nation, several constitutional provisions and laws, including anti-conversion and cow protection legislation, fuel anti-minority sentiment.And yet threats to religious freedoms and democratic rights are not simply a continuation of past trends. They are unprecedented. Executive power has expanded and the state has strengthened civil society organizations with which it is affiliated and given them quasi-judicial functions. At the same time, the government threatens and harasses NGOs which are champions of civil rights and liberties, environmental protection, and minority rights. As a result, civil society is less able to hold the state accountable. India was thus among the first major democracies in the world to recognize and provide for the right of cultural collectivities - diverse religious and linguistic

communities living in the country. The Constitution created an institutional structure and principles that would allow diverse people to live together as citizens of India. The Indian state is based on a Constitution whose secular character has been reaffirmed by an amendment to its Preamble. Confronted with an array of demands from various groups, the Constitution articulates a four-fold response to define the constituent elements of secularism. First, the principle of religious freedom, which gives to every citizen the right to freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice and propagate religion. Second, the Constitution does not recognize the special status of any religion. Third, the principle of non-discrimination on grounds of caste, place of birth, residence or religion guarantees equal citizenship. Fourth, these rights must be subject to public interest and public order, which requires religions to yield to regulation in the interests of social welfare and reform.

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