

# COMMUNAL HARMONY AND NATION BUILDING

## A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### 1. India – its characteristic texture and ethos

India is a singular country of pluralistic social texture. Diversity is its characteristic mark. The wide variety of ethnic traits, languages, climatic conditions, ideologies, cultures, religions, social mores, food tastes, dress patterns and the like compose a colloquium of human civilizations. No wonder, India has the greatest scope for the interactive dynamics of human life. Learning from one another, mutual understanding, fellowship and collaboration among different communities is the style of living that is worthy of diversity in day-to-day life. Unity in diversity, beauty in difference and *vasudhaivkutumbakam*<sup>1</sup> are the motivating maxims of the land. No doubt, all these components are capable of making India truly incredible as a nation as well as communally harmonious.

The Constitution of India stands out for its secular credentials. It does full justice to the brilliance of diversity described above. Accordingly, the nation is composed of the vast variety of streams and strands that are present in the country. The state is not entitled to prefer one to another. All traditions are equal before the law of the country. Discrimination of communities to any degree and on any ground is not acceptable. To be secular in India cannot in any way mean detaching oneself from all traditions and being in a no-man-land. Secularism, as per the Constitution of India, is an ‘all-inclusive perspective’<sup>2</sup> that facilitates ‘imbibing the spirit and values of all traditions of faith and ideology’ that are present in India, whether Indic or non-Indic in origin. Evidently, the secular perspective of life underscores the ethos of communal harmony and national solidarity.

### 2. Communal harmony and national solidarity in India -- the present scenario

The Prime Minister of the country in recent times has categorically stated that everyone has the undeniable right to retain or adopt the religion of his or her choice without coercion or undue influence<sup>3</sup>. His government will give equal respect to all religions, ensure that there is complete freedom of faith and will not allow any religious group to incite hatred against others, overtly or covertly<sup>4</sup>. He wouldn't tolerate violence against any religion on any pretext, strongly condemn it and will act strongly in this regard<sup>5</sup>. The religion of his government is ‘India and its welfare, its religious book<sup>6</sup> is ‘Indian Constitution’ and its devotion is ‘*bharat bhakti*’<sup>7</sup>. He also recognized his responsibility not to allow ridiculous comments in the name of religion<sup>8</sup>. Nobody has the right to discriminate the citizens of the country on the basis of religion<sup>9</sup>. All religions should flourish<sup>10</sup>. The pithy motto of his government, ‘*sab ka saath, sab ka vikaas*’,<sup>11</sup> means standing for every Indian, regardless of caste or creed. Perceptibly, these ideas are the candid articulation of the spirit of the Constitution and deserve to be complimented.

All the same, the present scenario of the country, especially over a little more than one year, raises serious concerns as regards communal harmony as well as the unity and integrity of India as a nation. A certain fundamentalist faction of the majority community has been strategically engaged in playing majoritarian politics and appears to be geared towards pushing the minority communities to the margins of the country. On the basis of an exclusive connotation of the word ‘*hindu*’<sup>12</sup>, a divisive political ideology of ‘*hindutva*’<sup>13</sup> is being mooted and propagated, in view of making a ‘*hinduraashtra*’<sup>14</sup>. While on the one hand, the general public is brainwashed to this effect, on the other hand, the constitutional machinery of the government

seems to be won over to its side, in order to harp on this bend of mind. As a result, the minority communities are feeling highly insecure and the tyrannical trend from the majority community as well as from the government seems to upset the social equilibrium of the country. Besides, the esteemed secular ethos of the nation is being acutely threatened. The matter of grave concern here is the loosening of the spirit of harmonious living and the splintering of the fibre of team spirit and solidarity in the citizens of the country as one nation.

### **3. Certain testing indicators of tolerance and inclusion**

The Social Progress Index (SPI) recently presented by Dr Michael Green, economist and executive director of SPI, has placed India at the 128<sup>th</sup> rank, out of the 133 countries with similar resources analysed on the parameter of 'tolerance and inclusion'<sup>15</sup>. According to the annual report of 2015 of the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), India gets the status of a 'two-tier country of concern' (country on watch list) on religious freedom, especially in terms of the programmes of forced conversion (ghar waapsee), attacks on churches and hate campaigns against Muslim minorities<sup>16</sup>. 'India will succeed as long as it is not splintered along religious lines'<sup>17</sup>. This was the crystal clear observation of Mr Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, in his historic address at Sirifort Auditorium, New Delhi, on 27 January 2015. These are a few powerful clarion calls addressed to the government and to the people of India to conduct themselves in line with the secular spirit of the Constitution of India.

Violation of Article 25<sup>18</sup> of the Constitution of the country, which guarantees freedom of religion, is a major blow to the very idea of a nation and national integration. A splintered country is sure to get derailed from the path of development and wellbeing worth the name. There is a lot of ignorance, prejudice, misconceptions, hatred and divisive attitudes in the air of social life in India. Discriminative policies and polarizing approaches are present in the governmental circles, too. In spite of the fact that governmental apparatus has produced lots of sweet-sounding slogans, most of them have not seeped into the grass roots. They also seem to be selectively applied to certain quarters. It also appears that some slogans serve as a sheer mask to cover the ground reality, as well. Without doubt, the exclusive policies and approaches, may they be from the governmental system or from certain interested factions of the people, require to be substituted by inclusive ways, lest the fabric of communal harmony and national consciousness slip into a total mayhem.

It is understandable that in a democratic system governments are formed out of party politics. All the same, once a government is sworn in, democratic logic demands that it stands above party politics as long as it is in power. It has to be a government of the people, by the people and for the people<sup>19</sup>, of all citizens in the country, including those citizens who have not voted it in, for instance 69% in the case of the present government. It is the sacred duty of the government to ensure that no discrimination on any ground is done among political parties as well as communities of diverse affiliations, in terms of caste, creed, ideology, language, region, gender, culture, food tastes, dress habits, and the like. Moreover, majority and minority on any ground is a relative term. The community that is a majority in one area may be minority elsewhere. The reality of migration changes the equation, too. In addition, human relations are between individuals of different affiliations and not between great and small in any way. The inner dignity and the ethical quality of the human person is the decisive factor and not one's belonging to a majority or minority group.

### **4. Some glaring facts from the field that violate communal harmony**

The last year, especially a few months behind from now, has witnessed several cases in point that challenge the secular fabric of the country. There have been several instances of attacking churches<sup>20</sup> and Christian institutions in several parts of the country, including the rape of a 72 year old nun<sup>21</sup>. It is construed by reliable sources that the fringe fanatic elements are behind the atrocities, though may be indirectly. Certain splinter groups of RSS performed forced conversions (ghar vaapsee)<sup>22</sup> on Christians and Muslims, alluring them with an offer of two and five lakhs of rupees, respectively<sup>23</sup>. A certain enthusiast floated also the funny plot of making India free of Muslims and Christians by 2021<sup>24</sup>. A few excited Mps, like Yogi Adityanath<sup>25</sup>, Sakshi Maharaj<sup>26</sup>, Muktar Abbas Naqvi<sup>27</sup> and Sadwi Niranjan Jyoti<sup>28</sup> as well as Sadwi Prachi<sup>29</sup> from VHP repeatedly engaged in controversial statements, as well. Moreover, the RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat, added fuel to the fire by justifying the criminal acts and divisive speeches in these words, 'Hindutva is the identity of India and it has the capacity to swallow other identities. We just need to restore those capacities'<sup>30</sup> and again, 'India is a Hindu state and citizens of Hindustan should be known as Hindus'<sup>31</sup>. I am sure, these glaring facts from the field would certainly make anyone stunned.

The response from the governmental circle to the above-mentioned eccentric state of affairs was that those violations were a matter of law and order. But, this claim doesn't seem to correspond to the ground reality. Suppose, they were so, question arises that why law and order problems occur selectively against certain communities only. Even if they occur selectively, I suppose, it is the duty of the government to decisively and sternly act in favour of the inclusive ethos of the country. In a similar fashion, those responsible for the notorious statements should have been given a show cause notice along with a warning, instead of passively disowning their speeches. To say the least, the aftermath of the entire episode has been negative. It created suspicions and anxieties in the concerned communities and shattered the social and secular framework of the nation. It also increased the distance between the majority and minority communities and violated the spiritual ethos of the nation.

## **5. Certain major challenges to good governance**

Besides, since over a year, there has been a lot of rhetoric about good governance<sup>32</sup> as well as 'achhe din'<sup>33</sup>. But, as a matter of fact, a double standard appears to be in vogue in the governmental circles with regard to different communities. On the one hand, strenuous attempt is in the process, overtly or covertly, for making Bhagavat Gita the national religious Scripture<sup>34</sup>, saffronizing the education system<sup>35</sup>, taking yoga to international ranges<sup>36</sup>, declaring Ganga the national river<sup>37</sup>, positioning cow the national sacred animal<sup>38</sup>, along with an extreme hue and cry and law-making with regard to beef meat<sup>39</sup>, building ayodhya temple<sup>40</sup>, etc. These are clearly strategic ways to impose upon all communities and on the entire country, in some way or other, what is important and beneficial to the majority community in India. Such approaches smack of being geared towards making the so called 'hinduraashtra' and are major violations of the inclusive ethos of the country. Such topsy-turvy of communal harmony definitely is not going to contribute to building a nation with integral development and wellbeing as its inner fibre.

Further, fixing certain goody-goody engagements like celebration of the birthday of Mr Vajpeyee, good governance day<sup>41</sup> and judicial meeting<sup>42</sup> on the national holy days and holidays of Christmas and Good Friday respectively smacks of a deliberate attempt to subvert the importance of the Christian festivals<sup>43</sup>. In addition, the same top officials who greet the citizens of the nation even on Makar Sankranti kept total silence on Christmas and Good Friday<sup>44</sup>. Does it not speak of a discriminative attitude to communities other the majority community? Is not this nation constructed by the collective effort of all communities? Does not this country equally belong to all citizens? What causes great anxiety here is not whether the above issues are a question of life and death, but that the fibre of communal harmony is being shattered, especially at the hands of the stakeholders of the Constitution of the country.

## **6. Revisiting nation and national solidarity**

The word 'nation' derives from the Old French 'nacion',<sup>45</sup> and the Latin 'natio'<sup>46</sup>, meaning 'birth' or coming into being. 'Being born' doesn't mean only on the level of individual persons, institutions or communities, but also on the level of the entire country as a nation. The words of George H W Bush, 'we are a nation of communities'<sup>47</sup> define clearly what a nation is from a collective point of view. Besides, nation is a secular concept. It doesn't quote any particular language, religion, ideology or culture as its own rightful setting. It is basically a united whole in terms of a geographical unit. It involves a land with its climate, sea, land, mountains, valleys, rivers, rivulets, and the like. The spirit of group solidarity is the essence of a nation. The consciousness of coherence as a nation has political, cultural and social overtones. In spite of the fact that the national community is an abstract community, it has lots of shared connections that unite even the strangers into one single whole, as sharing a geographical territory or as a large family of ethnic group.

A nation is its people who are bound to stand united, without which it is doomed to perish. Economy and resources, though are important, are still secondary. In spite of the fact that the forefathers dreamed and struggled for an integrated and free India, the recent times are witnessing very much disorientation that leads to anarchy, chaos and communal break up. The most pressing challenge before the nation today is, in the given state of affairs, whether the senior age-bracket has a worthwhile lesson to teach the up-coming generations of the country at all. No doubt, a major introspection is called for before we think of contributing to the future of our nation. National integration is the awareness of a 'common identity' among the citizens of our country. Though we are affiliated to different castes, religions, regions and languages, we are all one as a nation. That is what is all about the nation.

## **7. Communal harmony and responding to its demands**

Communal Harmony<sup>48</sup> is a principle that underscores the necessity of different communities within a given society that is called to live together peacefully as one large community. Remaining alienated from one another based on differences of caste, creed, class or whatever is sure to cause disharmony. When religious and sub-religious groups try to promote their own interests at the expense of others, friction among communities is bound to emerge. Harmony among communities is the driving force that ushers in national integration. This necessitates transcending the boundaries of religious, linguistic, regional and sectional diversities and maintaining a spirit of brotherhood with all peoples within the nation. Obviously, we have failed in this area, to a great extent. The high percentage of internal exodus in the country since its independence is one of the blatant proofs in support of this fact.

India has been and is one of the most deeply divided societies in the modern world<sup>49</sup>. Caste system was governing the professional and social conduct of almost all areas in a very rigid manner, for thousands of years. Consequently, neither has there been any substantial interaction among caste-based communities nor any notable upward mobility among most castes. Although, there a small percentage of people who show signs of change, the caste-consciousness has perhaps become more subtle, so much so that rising beyond it seems next to impossible. From one angle, the reformist approach of the Jain and Buddhist philosophies rendered the social situation of unity more complex. The advent of Christian, Muslim and Sikh religions aggravated the condition of communal harmony further, due to their considerably different religious and social framework. In course of time, intolerance among diverse groups and sub-groups increased on the basis of varying interests. In fact, the glue that helps communities to stick together is the spirit of communal harmony, which became weaker. Ways and means of interactive, participatory, inclusive and collaborative dynamics for strengthening the spirit of togetherness require to be improvised on urgent basis.

## **8. Independent India and addressing its frailties**

Unfortunately, even after sixty five years after independence, some basic frailties keep the country fettered and constrained. Communal feelings, especially in the name of religion, still exist and riots flare-up in different parts of the country, even for silly reasons. Three basic problems of India that compose the communal mindset are -- one, religion is given too much importance in life; two, religion is given more importance and nation, less importance; three, the religious space is consumed by people with raw emotions. All the three situations are equally troublesome. The positive and creative perspectives are – firstly, religion is only one of the elements of social life. There are also other components of life, like gender, caste, class, language, ideology, culture, social mores, food tastes and dress habits that are likewise important. Secondly, religion is for the human being and not human being for the religion. Religion is not the centre of life, but life has to be the centre of religion. Thirdly, though religion gives a large sense of identity in life, the most inclusive sense of identity has to be based on the idea of the nation. In other words, national identity<sup>50</sup> is fundamental to being a citizen of any country. Therefore, narrow outlook to life, misconceptions, lack of information, wrong information and prejudice regarding other communities within the country need to be eliminated.

Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century India, people of one caste, those too in large numbers, are seen supporting each other and opposing the progress and development of people belonging to other caste-based groups. People also avoid social interaction with other castes. Inter-caste marriages are not only very much resented, murdering one's own son or daughter for false prestige takes place, even today. Job opportunities are often reserved in line with caste considerations. No wonder, such instances threaten the integrity of the nation so badly. In such a predicament, education is supposed to play a major role in transforming the negative mindset in people. But, informal education by the parents by a long way fails to ensure a solid foundation in terms of societal as well as national values. Even formal education at institutions notably falls short of inculcating in the children values for harmonious living. A paradigm shift in our thinking is unavoidable for sticking together as different communities with heads held above communal differences. A nation is known by the value system its people share and not merely by its borders. Building a nation would mean fostering solidarity among the citizens of the nation. Harmonious living among the diverse communities is the touchstone of the strength of the nation, as well.

## **9. Communal harmony and nation building -- Christian perspective**

### **9.1. Concept of God as Father -- a uniting foundation**

The Christian concept of God is grounded in the vision, personal experience and mission of Jesus Christ. Jesus experienced God as father<sup>51</sup>. He addressed God 'abba'<sup>52</sup> in his Aramaic language, as in most Semitic languages. This word is charged with a sense of intimacy, as in the case of children. There is a touch of personal intimacy between son and father, as regards the relation of Jesus with God. This language makes some people slip into biology. But, as a matter of fact, the spirit of the language is more important than the letter. A human being rising up to such a spiritual altitude by experiencing God as one's own father is what is extra-ordinarily meritorious in it. More importantly, whether God is father or not is a secondary matter. Conceiving God as a relational entity and establishing a deep relationship with him as a person is the point of esteem in it. Still further, the result of commonness for all human beings as the children of God is the functional outcome of the idea of God as father. In sum, the Christian idea of God as father is a rock-solid foundation for uniting all human beings, and for that matter, the entire creation, as the children of the same God. This vision presents a substantial foundation for communal harmony and national integration.

## **9.2. The relational dynamics of human life**

Obviously, the idea of God as father and human beings as son or daughter highlights the vertical implications. But, it unearths also a horizontal significance, which is even more important. The horizontal connotation is grounded in the idea of human beings as created in 'the image of God'<sup>53</sup> and as 'the temple of God'<sup>54</sup>. God dwells in human beings, in a special manner. He lives where the humans gather together, like family, community, institution, nation and society, as well. In other words, human beings and human dwelling units are the living abodes of God. The God that is present in human beings and in the community is to be explored. The relationship that is established with God in the vertical sense has to be definitely reflected in the horizontal sense. The logical corollary to such understanding is the relational dynamics among human beings. Considering God as father necessarily follows that one has to accept other human beings as brothers and sisters<sup>55</sup>. The filial relationship with God has to be translated into a fraternal relationship with all human beings. The fraternal fellowship with human beings admits neither gradation and nor borders. It extends to all communities based on caste, creed, class, culture, ideology, and the like. The teaching of Jesus that 'what is done to human beings is what is done God as well'<sup>56</sup> stands out as the core of the divine-human dynamics that contributes to solidarity among communities and harmonious living with one and all.

## **9.3. Preferential commitment to the weaker sections**

If the Christian tradition is worth anything, it is the perspective that one has to support the weaker ones in a preferential manner. Jesus elaborated this point by the story of a good shepherd<sup>57</sup>. There was a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. As they were grazing in the backwoods, one of them got caught up among the thorns. The good shepherd, having left the ninety-nine in the lonesome place, set out on a journey in search of the one that is found missing. Having found it, he lifted it up on his shoulder and brought it back to the fold and made a rare celebration of joy, for the sheep was lost and now it is found. By this story, Jesus was portraying the mind of God the father, who is more on the side of the weak and the lost than on the side of the strong and the well off. Where does one stand in terms of the ninety-nine? In fact, there is no comparison. But, the one is as much important, if not more, for God, as the ninety-nine. God is not satisfied with even the ninety-nine majority; he wants all hundred, he wants all, he wants in full. That is the sense of perfection the idea of divinity stands for. The core of the tradition after the name of Jesus is lovingly service being rendered to one and all, but more so, in a preferential fashion to those that are the voiceless, the weak, the marginalized, the last, the lost and the least. Preferential commitment to the weaker sections is geared towards maintaining the complete balance of the human society, by fostering communal harmony as well as solidarity on a national level.

## **9.4. Christian community by far is a peaceful group**

Christian community by far is known to be a peaceful group in India as well as in the world. Though in earlier times there were major upheavals in Christian countries, most of the Christian countries across the world have not only got settled in favour of peaceful living but turned to be peace-promoting countries, especially towards the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although peace is a difficult term to be defined, it can be understood as negative peace and positive peace. The former would mean not involving in violent conflicts with neighbouring states or suffering internal wars and the latter is when structures and institutions create, maintain and promote peace. The Global Peace Index (GPI) presented by Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), in its world-wide survey in 2014, places Iceland, New Zealand, Austria, Finland, Switzerland, Canada, Costa Rica, Japan, Belgium and Norway as the most peaceful countries in the world<sup>58</sup>. Evidently, except Japan, other countries in the list are prominently Christian countries. The

study is the product of ranking 162 countries, since 2007, in consultation with an international panel of peace experts from peace institutes, think tanks and Nobel peace laureates.

The peaceful mindset of the Christian community in India could very well be observed from ever since its presence in India in the first century. It is a known fact that there have been several atrocities on Christian individuals and institutions, perpetrated by male fide forces. All the same, there have never been any violent reactions from the Christian community. There is hardly any instance when harm to life, destruction of property or public nuisance was caused in retaliation. Besides, the Christian community on the whole is a hardworking and self-dependent community. It is fairly an integrated community that mostly is free of either extremes of poverty and wealth. The Christian community is also known for its patriotic sense and national solidarity<sup>59</sup>. With fairly a high percentage of education and ethical fibre, Christians are appreciated in several offices and neighbourhoods. A highly praiseworthy note with regard to the Christian contribution to the country and the world is that it does not discriminate people based on their backgrounds. Its service is open to all sections and sectors, though especially to the disadvantaged sections. In addition, lots of individuals and institutions are actively engaged in the area of promoting peace in the county and the society in diverse ways. All these things, along with many other points, are supportive of the fact that the Christian community in the world, especially in India, is a qualitative, peaceful and peace-promoting group.

### **9.5. The current wave of interfaith dialogue – a Christian initiative**

Dialogue or interaction is the core social dynamics of human beings. It has been in the world as the creative process of life, ever since human civilization took shape. But, the current wave of inter-faith dialogue has been a Christian initiative. It evolved from the epoch-making Second World Catholic Council held at Vatican in 1962-65, presided over by Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI respectively and attended by over 2500 people from world over<sup>60</sup>. This Council witnessed a grown up Christian and believer emerging. There was in it a substantial change in the way it understood itself and other believers. The transformation in perspective that was initiated in this Council was articulated as 'interfaith or inter-religious dialogue'<sup>61</sup>. Accordingly, all religions, including Christian, are abodes of the powerful revelation of God and are both the gift of the same God and the common cultural heritage of the human society. Therefore, believers of all faiths are co-pilgrims who share their journey to the same God. They need to learn from each other, have to share in the experience of the divine riches in other faiths and have to share with other believers their own experience of God. God is one, though with many faces. The spirit is one, though it has many aspects. Therefore, spirituality is one as well as life is one. Harmony of faiths or harmony among faith-based communities and fellowship coupled with collaboration among communities is what is all about interfaith dialogue. It is auspicious for India and the world that interfaith dialogue and cross cultural studies are spreading across the nations and communities today. A lot of initiatives are seen being taken by all communities in fostering interaction and harmony in India as well as in diverse developed countries of the world. As a result, it is hoped that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will attain progress in this area, in favour of a brighter future for India and the entire world.

### **9.6. Contribution to harmonious living among communities**

Contribution to harmonious living and national solidarity has two directions. One is contribution to building the nation and the society through building human lives. This involves service in the diverse areas that construct and maintain human life. Christian community stands out in India as well as worldwide for the service it has been extending to the human society and country in the area of education, medical care, social welfare, special care of the differently abled, and the like. As mentioned above,

attending to the weaker sections is the fundamental focus of Christian faith. Even as a small community in India, the Christian community in India is contributing 20-25 % of the educational service and it speaks volumes about its national and social sense, irrespective of community-affiliations. Besides, Christians have developed in India several languages, invented printing presses, written grammar books and dictionaries, written the first books in philosophical, religious, literary, linguistic, artistic, cultural and cross-cultural areas. Moreover, the initiative of interfaith engagement has been introduced in India by Christians and till date several persons and institutions are involved in making a more harmonious society, even on a life time basis. In addition, Christian community in India is a pioneer in having hundreds of scholars on other religions, disciplines and secular themes. Of late, there is hardly any area the Christian community and its committed group of priests and nuns, inclusive of other Christian sisters and brothers, has left untouched. I am sure, all these and much more speaks volumes of the Christian perspectives, initiatives and of its deep commitment to making a better society as well as promoting communal harmony and national solidarity.

## Conclusion

Shree Narayan Guru of Kerala, a renowned poet, philosopher and social reformer, makes a categorical statement on religious affiliation, 'whatever may be your religion, it suffices if you are a good human being'<sup>62</sup>. To reverse the statement, if one is not a good human being, what does it matter if one is a Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, and the like! Belonging to the majority community or minority community as well as caste and class considerations wouldn't make any sense either. Being part of the ruling party or of the opposition party would equally render useless, too. From this point of view, the entire exercise of making a nation out of one ideology, culture, tradition or community, that too, at the cost of communities of smaller number, gets proved ridiculous. What is important and meritorious is keeping in touch with all communities of the country, taking special care of the smaller communities and living harmoniously with all the citizens of the country. The esteemed motto of India has to be an all-out effort at advancing an all-inclusive, interactive, participatory and collaborative mindset in the country. Living harmoniously with all communities, with a deep sense of solidarity and sharing with all citizens, is the humane culture India has to rise up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I am sure, then and then only, the nations of the world will respect India as a grown up and developed nation. It is up to the government and the people of this great country to travel steadily towards this sublime ideal.

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