

CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES TO NATIONAL INTEGRATION

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The word 'nation' derives from the Latin 'natio' and the Old French word 'nacion', which means 'that which has been born'. It means 'races of people' or 'community'. 'Nationality' refers to 'belonging to a nation' and 'having a concrete identity'. 'Nation' and 'nationality' are at the basis of national integration.

The idea of 'nation' takes shape as people share a common territory, government and law, as a community of people. The people of a nation share a common language, race, descent and a history. It names collectively the inhabitants of a sovereign state, irrespective of their ethnic make-up.

The basic components of 'nation' are its national geographical area, national Constitution, national flag, national anthem, national currency, national language, national festivals, national art, national literature, national culture, national integrity, national identity, national ethos, etc. They strengthen the bonds of integration among the people who are affiliated to the nation in question.

National Integration is a cohesive idea that is based on being part of a nation. It is a shared patriotic experience that emerges from the social character of a people in a given country. It means living together in the same geographical unit, a sentiment of shared loyalty towards the same nation and an attitude of inter-connectedness and cooperation among the citizens of the nation, which inevitably constructs the nationalistic effect.

National consciousness is the core of national integration. It means a 'feeling of oneness', a 'sense of belonging together' and a 'sense of brotherhood as well as unity and solidarity' at the national level. It implies a state where the diverse social forces in the country are geared towards a single whole. It is 'unity in diversity'. It visualizes intimate sharing of ideas, ideals, values and emotional bonds with each other. Feeling for the other is the spirit of national solidarity.

Constituents of national integration are geographical, ethnic, political, ideological, social, cultural, emotional, sentimental and spiritual. External integration based on the feeling that 'we all are Indians' wouldn't be enough. Internal integration that is the fruit of the awakening of the inner spirit is needed. Mere material advancement in terms of science and technology cannot integrate the country. Interior insights, contemplation and spiritual experience facilitated by educational processes are required.

National integration calls for doing away with all the trifling concerns that divide people into various groups. It would mean diminishing divisive forces and strengthening unifying elements. It discourages inequalities and fosters team spirit, as in Hindi film 'Chak De India'. It denotes sharing the rich and common cultural heritage of the country, being proud of it as

'ours' and celebrating it 'together'. It indicates refraining from all discrimination based on caste, language, region, religion, etc. and working together for 'sarvoday', the rise of all, in the language of Mahatma Gandhi. It implies tuning the mindset of all the people in the country towards the welfare of all.

National Integration necessitates pooling of resources in human, cultural, religious, scientific, natural and educational arenas. It affirms equality and oneness of all citizens in all spheres of life. It is oriented to living in harmony with each other, irrespective of ethnic origin, caste, creed, language, religion, ideology, social customs, profession, cultural leanings, and the like, professed or opted by individuals or communities. The collective progress of the country as well as the prosperity and happiness of all is the ultimate objective of the nation.

National Integration is a round table of diversities. India is a large country. It has the second largest population in the world. It has thousands of languages and dialects. It has seventeen nationally recognized languages that have found their place on the currency. It has cradled all the major and minor religious traditions of the world. It has an immense variety of geographical landscapes, climates, food habits, costumes, ideologies, social customs, cultural practices, etc. Fellow Indians have to celebrate these colossal differences and co-exist peacefully in a spirit of mutual brotherhood and enrichment.

The path of national integration is to be constantly travelled. The national symbols are to be respected. National festivals are to be celebrated together. National language and nationally recognized languages are to be collectively owned and used for strengthening ties among communities. The central and state governments have to work together to foster the spirit of collaboration. The different regions should develop an attitude of inter-dependence for growth and wellbeing. The Constitutional values and ideals, like democracy, secularism and social equality, are to be lived faithfully. Fundamental rights and duties are to be staunchly followed. People have to be awakened towards a shared national identity, a common loyalty and a collective citizenship.

Threats to national integration are bent on bullying and shattering the societal fabric of the country. Communal forces tend to divide the country in terms of ethnicity, caste, language, religion, region, ideology, profession, etc. The danger of extremism, sectarianism and fanaticism coupled with narrow-mindedness, ghetto thinking, prejudice and hostility are to be fought valiantly. Strong feelings about one's own and aversion towards that of others hinder peaceful co-existence. Discriminative policies and practices in opportunities for education, job, etc disrupt the integrity and spiritual character of the country. Politicians aggravate the situation further for their private interests. These challenges are blocks to national integration and they ought to be dealt with sternly and effectively.

Religious communities have contributed to national integration in diverse areas, commendably well and in immeasurable quantities. In earlier times, when means for information, education and travel were very meager, religion used to play almost the central role in human life. Religion promoted education, art, culture, social life, ethical values and spiritual advancement and all these accelerated national integration, in some way or other. Social ideologies and traditions also played a major role in awakening social consciousness and national solidarity. Even today, the diverse major and minor affiliations of faith and ideology continue to render their unique role in fostering national integration.

Religious communities have to reform and empower themselves for a more genuine engagement in ameliorating national unity. Today, unfortunately so, religious communities, to a great extent, have become part of the problem than of the solution. The religious sector is under the grip of a fast growing drive of fundamentalism, fanaticism and superstitious beliefs. While one could observe a ray of hope in the multi-faith engagements and freer inter-community movements in the country, there is a growing intolerance and bitterness among communities. In the wake of the consequent communal disturbances and devastation of material resources and human sensibilities, the religious communities have an ever-increasing responsibility to accelerate their efforts in fostering a 'we-feeling' among people of different communities. 'Commitment to promoting national integration and solidarity' has to be the utmost priority of the religious communities of the 21st century, in view of raising the global stature of the country and of upholding the integrity of the country as well as of retaining the relevance of religion itself.

Fellowship July 2011 is an attempt to portrait the contribution the different religious communities and socio-cultural groups have made to the promotion of national integration. Scholars from diverse communities and social affiliations have analyzed the theme from their own worldviews. Their analysis sheds light on both the perspectives of the respective traditions and on the field engagements in relation to nation building and national harmony. This issue of the journal 'Fellowship' underlines the culmination of the entire engagement of the Commission for Religious Harmony -- sharpening the vision and mission of the religious communities towards active interaction among communities of faith and ideology, a joint ethical and spiritual uplift of all human beings, harmonious living together in social life and the progress and wellbeing of the nation and the society. The editor humbly but ardently wishes – 'May the citizens of India imbibe such a spirit of 'National Integration' and journey towards the construction of a 'Nation' with a difference, a 'Nation', par excellence'!

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