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Tolerance &amp; Inclusion

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■ Michael Green on what the Social Progress Index can reveal about the country

# India's Progress Card on Tolerance and Inclusion

**India's progress card as regards tolerance and inclusion so miserable that it is now placed 128 out of 133 countries, lower than Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal**



BY DR M.D. THOMAS

As per the Social Progress Index (SPI) presented recently by Dr Michael Green, economist and executive director of SPI, India is placed at the 128th rank, out of the 133 countries with similar resources analysed on the parameter of 'tolerance and inclusion'. Dr Michael further commented, 'the most striking findings for India are the *worst performance on the tolerance and inclusion front...It's a complex problem in a diverse country*'. Besides, India ranks 120th place specifically on 'health and wellness' and 101st place on the general indicators of well-being such as basic needs, health, water, sanitation, personal safety, access to opportunity, tolerance, inclusion, sustainable ecosystem, advanced education, personal rights, personal freedom and choice. In addition, India's rank for GDP per capita income is 93,

only slightly better than other areas. Further, it is embarrassing for India that even small countries, like Nepal and Bangladesh, rank higher than India on the ratings. Norway stands first and then come Sweden, Switzerland, Iceland and New Zealand. While the US secured the 16th place in the rankings, Pakistan bagged the 122nd (The Hindu, 09 April 2015).

Why is India's progress card as regards tolerance and inclusion so highly miserable? Does it not defeat all the superlative slogans like Saare jahaan se acchha, Mera Bharat Mahan, Incredible India, etc.? It seems the benchmarks for 'inclusion' and 'tolerance' is currently vague in India. The increasing tendency of intolerance and non-inclusion or exclusion is very well corroborated by the remarks of US President Barack Obama made towards the end of his

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visit to India and immediately after in Washington, “Michelle and I returned from India – an incredible, beautiful country, full of magnificent diversity – but a place where, in past years, religious faiths of all types have, on occasion, been targeted by other people of faith, simply due to their heritage and their beliefs – acts of intolerance that would have shocked Gandhiji, the person who helped to liberate that nation.” The remark is symbolic of the low esteem India holds outside India.

A month before Obama’s visit, India had sent the ‘signals’ in December when the Union human resource development

ministry made an attempt to keep the schools fully functional with competitions for students on 25 December to celebrate the birthdays of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Hindu Mahasabha leader Madan Mohan Malviya as ‘good governance day’. Christmas, the birthday of Jesus Christ, has been a declared holiday and holy day from time beyond memory for India as well as for the rest of the world. Besides, Christmas has emerged the most widely celebrated festival in India and the world, so much so that more and more people from all communities seem to visit Churches and join Christians

with a fibre of celebration.

Three months later, we saw the effort to hijack the other Christian holy day; convening a judicial conference of all Chief Justices and Chief Ministers during the long weekend from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. Justice Joseph, sitting judge in the Supreme Court, questioned the impropriety of dishonouring the ‘holy and national holidays’ while holding such an important conference.

While appreciating the administrative insight of holding conferences during long weekends, it would be undisputedly fairer and wiser to honour national holidays during the important festivals of all religions. If the government gets at odds with the religious festivals of a certain community only, its commitment to the Constitutional principles requires to be questioned, because it smacks of wrong intentions. Equal respect for all religions would demand ensuring that no religion feels excluded. Extending a step-motherly behaviour to a certain religious community cannot emerge from a good conscience, while holidays allotted to other religious communities, even when they are several and too

■ *A policewoman detains one of the Christians protesting against recent attacks on churches in Delhi*



many, remains sacrosanct. Obviously, the capacity to accommodate all communities as well as the inclusive mind-set that has to be the genius of the country appears to be in shatters!

Further again, there is a golden practice in the secular India that the President and the Prime Minister on the national level and the Chief Ministers and the Governors at the state levels extend festal greetings to the citizens of their respective area of operation on occasions of the leading festivals of all communities. Both the Prime Minister and the President did not extend festal greetings to the citizens of the country both at last Christmas and Good Friday, the major festivals of the Christian community. Evidently, this silence was discriminative and unconstitutional. It is a standing proof for the restricted frame of mind of the topmost custodians of the Constitution and the stakeholders of the country. When the Prime minister did not forget to extend greetings to the country even on a small festival like Makar

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Sankranti, the exclusive attitude of the present day government is established beyond doubt.

Recently, Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut stoked up a new controversy. He wrote in the party mouthpiece Saamna demanding that the voting right of Muslims in India be revoked as the community has often been used to play vote bank politics. He too proved the unconstitutional mind-set of those currently in power by advocating the alienation of minorities from their fundamental rights. Though he patched up his statement later to save face, his exclusive and anti-national approach to communities other than his own was bared. Beyond doubt, the statement affirms the non-inclusive and intolerant attitude that is becoming stronger in the country.

Some two months ago, the Prime Minister stated the inclusive credentials of his government, during a Syro-Malabar church's function in New Delhi, "My government will not allow any religious group to incite hatred against others, overtly or

covertly. Mine will be a government that gives equal respect to all religions."

The declaration made by the Prime Minister sounds not only very pleasing to the minority communities but also refers to a perfect system of governance. But, the ground realities contradict the above statement. The national ethos of good governance eloquently professed by the present government is very much contradicted by the day-



■ **As India's economic growth rate surges ahead of China and other developing countries, 300 million Indians still living in extreme poverty.**

to-day events of attacking the places of worship of the minority communities or by the mischievous remarks and acts of the fringe elements of the fundamentalist, power-mongering and divisive forces within the country, very unfortunately so.

The wave of intolerance and exclusion perpetrated by the self-centred, extremist and militant factions from the majority community in India seems to have the sway in the national politics. Well-meaning citizens from all communities of the country as well as other nations are watching the minority communities of India being systematically side-lined. The ancient spiritual wisdom of the land appears to have been failed by the street cleverness of certain forces. Will the responsible people of the country stand up to improve 'India's progress card' as regards 'tolerance and inclusion'?

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