

INTER-COMMUNITY RELATIONS – COULD INDIA LEARN CERTAIN LESSONS FROM ENGLAND?

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I was on a twelve-day tour to London and Birmingham this August. It was meant to interact with inter-faith organizations, universities and religious centres in those places. England has a triangular approach to fostering interfaith relations – the government, educational institutions and interfaith organizations, which enables the society to be secular, harmonious and peaceful. Obviously, it was an opportunity for me to share with them the inter-faith efforts and related concerns of our country. But, more than that, the entire visit was a learning experience for me, or better, a great eye-opener, as regards the interfaith climate of that country. The pieces of information and insights, no doubt, motivated me towards furthering the inter-faith relations in India anew. The interactions raised several questions that point towards exploring new avenues of inter-faith fellowship and harmonious living. I came to the conclusion that India has many basic lessons to learn from England, especially with regard to interfaith and inter-community relations. This write up is based on the above experience and realization.

Governmental initiatives for fostering inter-faith relations

John Brattle, Tony Blair's Envoy to the Faith Communities, was known for his pro-active views on and affirmative action for inter-faith relations. Having been the Labour MP, he was proud of the diversity in his constituency, in which 18 nationalities live, 27 languages spoken and where every major religion boasts a place of worship. He used to spend much of his time touring the country promoting interfaith dialogue. He was on the look out how best he can help minority communities. The clearest message he keeps giving is that 'we do and must live together'. He continues, 'we have to find a way of reconciling and living with other cultures, while maintaining our own identity'. 'We need to interact', he affirms, as quoted in the summer 2006 issue of Interact, London.

British government realized that Sikhism, Judaism and the Anglican tradition are protected due to their status as ethnic groups, whereas Muslims and Catholics are not considered races but faiths, and so are not given the same protection. Government also recognizes that development of policy and governance must be from bottom up, through exchange, rather than trickling down from up. Therefore, through the local administration, government is looking for a new relationship and settlement between faith communities and the state, unlike anywhere else in the world. Government is changing its attitude; it is really opening up to the faith communities. Evidently, this is important because faith and cultural communities play profoundly a cohesive role in society. Various schemes for bettering relations among faith communities and for maintaining the society harmonious have been evolved and implemented to the above effect.

The local councils are held responsible for maintaining harmony

British government has given guidelines to the local councils to engage with faith communities and to empower faith communities to enter into dialogue with government. The local councils are held responsible for maintaining harmony, interaction and relation among faith-based and ethnic communities. This is because no progress can be secured unless grass roots are decisively taken care of. Law is placed supreme in the society and that applies on every one without any sort of preferential consideration. Interference, violence or harassment in the name of race, faith, language, ethnicity, profession or ideology is under minute scrutiny and is fined or penalized. Prayer rooms are set up at major public places like airports, railway stations, hospitals and bus stations, where people of all faiths could pray. The state machinery is active at the national, regional and local levels to enforce and ensure interfaith relations and social amity in the respective area of operation.

Besides, there are several hundreds of inter-faith organizations in the country that are working on the national, regional and local levels. They are very much patronized, funded and supported by the government. Government considers fostering inter-faith relations as its noble task, and it is effective in its endeavour in an observable manner.

Educational institutions foster interfaith fellowship

Educational institutions in England are effective nurseries of cultivating the interfaith fellowship. Religious education is mandatory in the school, college and university programmes of study. Education is mostly nationally funded and the syllabus is state-regulated, and it contains information and values of all faith traditions as a basic component. Faith communities are welcome to add more faith content into the educational curriculum. Markedly, there is more elementary religious information in schools and more advanced religious studies in colleges and universities. Exposure programmes for students to places of worship of other faiths is a regular feature in schools. The programme of religious education of England, let me state honestly, reflects the Christian ethos of the country, both in the spiritual and social areas.

The English society is secular in its fabric

The secular fabric of the English society is greatly commendable. The country is known as a religious or Christian country. So far, the state machinery has reserved top positions in the country for those affiliated to Church of England or Anglican community, with the Queen as its head. All the same, the English society is highly secular. 'Religion' is very much a 'worldview' or a 'background'. People do not become fanatic or fight in the name of religion. Individuals are free to hold any ideology or faith or even no faith. Discriminatory treatment based on ethnic, cultural, racial, linguistic and religious affiliations is not appreciated by anyone. It is not tolerated by law as well. Hardly anyone does it either. People welcome and are very much accommodative to people of all groups. People are secular by being inclusive to all religious beliefs and cultural practices. In the wake of the phenomenon of increasing migration worldwide, I suppose, this is the ideal attitude. The society functions in a harmonious way by spontaneously honouring the courtesy line between persons and communities. There is an innate consideration for the weaker, needy or the smaller. There is order and efficiency in the system of social life in all arenas. People do not make noise or disturb anyone. There is a great civic sense that is in favour of keeping the public places clean and people-friendly. Underneath the secular mindset and the entire system of social life there is an inherent reverence for human dignity, values and the sacredness of life. One gets an impression that the sacred is present all over and in fact it is the consciousness of that presence which makes the difference.

Where does India stand as regards the above realities?

Contradiction between the rich heritage and the derailing practices

We are proud of our Indian heritage. There is no debating the fact that our country has an estimable and unique collection of sacred writings and wise sayings. A large majority of the people in India are of friendly and accommodative disposition, too. All the same, the practice of religion is very much afflicted by rigorous ritual practices that do not produce any fruit. A great deal of beliefs and myths are superstitious, enslaving and baseless. Illiteracy, poverty and uncritical ways create sheep-like crowds that are easy victims in the hands of the politicians as well as self-centred religious leaders. Religious leaders, civil society and corporate sector also are discriminative of religious communities, to a great extent. How could people make distinction between faith communities of Indian origin and that of non-Indian origin, while professing 'atithi deo bhava' and superlative spiritual values? How could the very same people of Indian religions, who enjoy the best of the fruits of the generous hospitality and financial contribution of the Christian countries, be hostile to Christians and other minorities in India, and still speak of 'vasudhaiv kutumbakam'?

Disparity between the secular outlook of the Constitution and the biased religious policies

Even though the Constitution of India professes a secular state, it is disheartening to note that the government, both central and state, keeps biased religious policies. There are discriminative strategies and practices for different faith communities. As a matter of fact, India is a country that is governed by the majority community and considers minority communities as if they belong to a second class grade, as regards several matters. Persons in responsible positions in the governmental and administrative machinery as well as politicians are hardly committed to or interested in efforts of unity and harmony among communities. They seem to be beneficiaries of votes from conflicting and divided communities than otherwise. No wonder, initiatives for inter-faith and inter-community relations pioneered by faith-based organizations and communities are very little supported, funded, promoted or recognized. When will our government become capable of keeping the extremist and terrorist elements of our country under control and stand for the social health of the country? While India wants free entry into Christian and other countries for work, study and tourism, why is it too rigid on citizens of other countries coming to or working in India and thus act on a double standard? When will our government and administration at national, state and local levels wake up from their deep slumber, rise above the party politics and start acting in favour of the well-being of the people of the country and the progress of the nation? When is the government going to revise the discriminative state policies and grow towards a more developed and refined international dealing? Is it not possible that many nationalities live and work together in this increasingly globalizing world of today? Could our government realize the enriching and humanizing value of such a phenomenon and think positive?

Discriminative policies and double standards in life

The system of social life is very much contaminated by corrupt ways and non-commitment to a culture of work. VIPs seem to claim privileges even beyond law, while the innocent and powerless are often dragged under the grip of law. Civic sense, respect for public places and concern for others do not seem to fit in to the cultural and spiritual ethos of the country. Several outfits seem to have licence to vandalize public and private property as well as lives when they outburst in anger. The younger generation is almost kept away from the great human and spiritual values of the diverse traditions. Curriculum in schools, colleges and universities do not yet contain lessons that carry information, knowledge and inspiration of the shared universal values of the human society that the Creator has spread over the entire earth. Even scholars do not hesitate to abuse the western culture while profusely enjoying the merits of the great inventions of the west, even as citizens of those countries. Could we be humble enough that we realize the dark areas of the 'culture' of our country and begin to grow? When are we becoming honest enough, so that we become empowered to appreciate and learn from 'good' in whichever cultural community it may be found? When will we recognize and own the spiritual value of extending a special consideration for the smaller and the weaker and become 'humane' and really greater?

Could India learn certain basic lessons of humane living from England as regards bettering the inter-community relations and in view of emerging as a 'genuine' super power in the twenty-first century?

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