

UNITY IN DIVERSITY: A STUDY ON RELIGIOUS LIFE OF INDIA

Dr. Binodini Das

Retd. Reader (Associate Professor) in History

Dolamundai, Cuttack-753009,

Odisha, India

Email-bintuni@rediffmail.com/bintuni123@gmail.com

India, in present scenario, represents a country of sublime peace and prosperity inspite of her religious diversities. Since time immemorial, her cultural tradition is built upon love, peace, forbearance, and spirituality which brought unity in diversity in a world not only of matter, but also of life of emotion, of intellect , also of consciousness. The religious sensibility and associated moral sensibility of all religions profess some common and essential facts, i.e., the concept of piety, of righteousness and the notion of common humanity. Reviewing the evolutionary growth of the Buddhist or the Hindu religion, it is noted that enormity of changes in the religious perspectives are obtained, though the earlier forms have not been abrogated or annulled, but have been affiliated to later forms of thought. The growth of Islam and Christianity in India has brought changes to a great extent among the people of various creeds. This change is often the effect of varying social conditions, the acquisition of new knowledge, learning and philosophy and a change in the emotional perspective of particular religious geniuses(Dasgupta,1974).¹

India is a country with religious pluralism, diverse divisions in each religion and break away groups battling for their share of flocks and assets, where the right to establish and administer institutions for religious and charitable purposes is a constitutional rights within the secular parameters of the nation (Krishna Iyer, 1991)² . The ancient Indian literature does mention about the word Hindu or Hinduism. The Persians started to call the inhabitants of the river Sindhu as Hindu and the Greeks called the river Sindhu as Indus and the people as Indians. The major religious creed in India is Hinduism which developed upon the ancient *Sanātana Dharma* gradually incorporating and assimilating the foreign faith and belief within it's fold.* Non-Brahmaṇic movements arose in India around 6th century B.C. by two kshatriya princes, which gave birth to other religious creeds , i.e., Jainism and Buddhism. These two religions played a vital role to save India from being disrupted, disintegrated and disunited which would be discussed later on. Then Islam entered into India during the early decades of 8th century A.D. The spread of Islam in India received momentum after the invasion of Mahummad of Ghazni in 1026 A.D. As a counter challenge to Islam, there arose bhakti movements in India from 13th century onwards. The concept of the *bhakti* movement preached the cult of monotheism convincing the people that all of them, irrespective of caste, creed, gender, and profession, can achieve *nirvaṇa*(salvation) extending *bhakti* to a divine authority. Mādhvāchārya, Rāmānanda, Rāmānuja, Śrī Chaityanya, Kabir , and Nānak, etc., were some of the exponents of *bhakti* movement in India.

In Odisha a group of poet-laureate called Panchasakhā* popularized the cult of Śūnyavāda (the Void-ism). They vehemently criticized the caste system, untouchability, gender discrimination, idolatry, rites and rituals. They highlight that God is all pervasive, all powerful who never distinguishes between big and small creatures. He lives in every being. The God is *anāma* (nameless), *aṅākāra* (shapeless), *arūpa* (without physique), *alekha* (not to be scribed), *nirāñjana* (without colour), *nīrākāra* (without form), etc. This concept virtually synchronized with the Islamic doctrine, i.e., “There is but one formless God”. Admiring Hindu religion, Louis Fischer in his book, ‘*The Great Challenge*’, highlights that, “Hinduism is a sponge religion. It includes feature of Buddhism, Christianity, Paganism.....Hinduism absorbs all dogmas and destroys none. There is therefore no Hindu fundamentalism; all its fundamentals are in a constant change of flux, which means they are not fundamentals. Hinduism is bound enough to embrace agnosticism, monotheism. Hindus have idols before which they dance and pray. But when I asked those Hindus whether they believe in idols, they answered: No they believe in one God”.³ Hinduism is all pervasive, and the spirit of universal brotherhood is alive in Hinduism (Bandopadhyay, 1987)⁴. The consciousness of oneness of the people of the country and India’s spiritual unity dates back to thousands of years. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of colonial India, said, “India has left a deeper mark upon history, philosophy and religion of mankind than any other terrestrial unity of in the universe. Powerful empires existed and flourished in India, while Englishmen were still wandering in woods”⁵.

The principal objective of the present paper is to make an analytic examination on :a). What are the abiding forces that united, integrated and consolidated India’s nation-building and development activities amidst the religious diversities?: b). What is the meaning of unity when it is juxtaposed to diversity?: c). Is it acceptable that ‘unity in diversity’ is a common phenomena since ancient times?: c). Has the ‘diversity’ lost its complete identity when it is incorporated with ‘unity’? and, d). What is the meaning of unity when it is juxtaposed to diversity?

To reconstruct the historical functioning of ‘unity in diversity’, the history since ancient times to the current slogan ‘One India’ is revisited. The sacred and secular texts, notes and commentaries since ancient times, treatises composed and published by authors in different periods, journals, magazines, newspapers, electronic media, recent events’ observations are amply consulted along with opinions derived through the personal interviews with the people of different faiths and beliefs.

The idea that India is one territorial unit is derived from the first and oldest scripture of ancient India, i.e., *Ṛg Veda*. It gives no reference to class or caste system except the later part of *Puruṣa Sūkta*. It mentions that the *Varṇa* order is born of the sacrifice of the Cosmic Person from which emerged four *varṇas* each from His different limb (*RV, X.90*). The organic theory of the *varṇa* order which created an organic society was divided giving primary importance to spiritual values which is to maintained over material pursuits. The concept of equality in the *Ṛg Veda* created unity among the people living in the Āryāvartta. A denial of distinction based on *varṇa* and gender is evident in the concept of universality of all souls and the ultimate oneness of all elements in the *Upanishads* (Salgado, 1987, pp51-53)⁶. Further, defying differences among all human beings, *Upanishads* support equality of all mankind telling that they have an equal right over breath and food which symbolize *ātma/Brahma*⁷.

Mahabharat (12,188) mentions that all creation is God’s creation, and that no one is high or low in birth. It is only *saṃskāra* (purification, training) that one becomes a *Brāhmaṇa*. It is explained in the *Bhagavat-Gītā* (Ch.4, Verse 13) that:

“*Chaturvarṇam mayā sṛṣṭim guṇakarma vibhāgassshah*

Tasya karttāramapi mam vidya akartaram avayām”⁸

(The four fold order was ceated by Me(Śrī Krishna)according to the division of and work. Though I am it’s creator, know Me to be incapable of action and change.) The *Bhagavat Gītā* which was composed around 200 B.C. mentions the way of *bhakti* that denies any social or religious barriers to one’s attainment of salvation. In true sense, the definition and the concept of ‘equality’ is so clearly elaborated in the *Bhagvat Gītā* that became the harbinger of ‘unity in diversity’ during the Great Epic age. It is mentioned:”For those who take refuge in Me, O Partha(Arjuna) though they are lowly born, women, *Vaśyas* as well as *Śūdras*, they also attain to the highest goals⁹. Śrī Krishna also explains that “He who is equal minded among friends, companions and foes, among those who are neutral and impartial, among those who are hateful and related, among saints and sinners, he excels¹⁰. Further , Śrī Krishna’s saying, “Even those who are devotees of other Gods, worship them with faith, they also sacrifice to Me (Krishna) alone. O Son of Kuntī , though not according to the true law”¹¹, has been providing a great impetus to the unity of India since epic age to the post modern era . Manu Smriti clearly states that :

“*Janmanā jāyate Śūdrah,
Samskārād Dvija uchchate,
Vedāvyāsāt bhabet Viprah,
Brahma jānāti iti Brāhmaṇah*”

(By birth one is *Śūdra*, by the purificatory process one becomes *Dvija*, by the study of the Vedas one becomes a *Vipra*, and one who knows *Brahma* is *Brāhmaṇa*)

The brahminic hegemony gave rise to a non-brahmanic movements from 6th century onwards to the bhakti movement of medieval India contesting the brahmanic position and asserting everyone’s right irrespective of caste, occupation or *Vedic* learning, to spiritual emancipation. They attacked centrality of rituals and emphasized individual’s moral conduct and striving (*tapas*) as a means of spiritual emancipation (Seth, 1987, p.42)¹². The Buddhist and the Jainas rejected the role of rites, rituals and sacrifices in the attainment of spiritual enlightenment in the one hand, and also decried the authority of the *Vedas* as the source of *dharma* on the other. They defined *dharma* as an embodiment of universal moral ideas such as truth and non-violence, self control and charity and an inherited virtue of *jāti* and *varṇa*.

In the *Vasettha Sūta*, the Buddha points out that by birth all are human beings and belong to one species. Further, He explains that ‘*Brahmanahood*’ is not the property of a particular class rather it is a quality to be aspired by all. A man is free to livelihood by trading, or tilling, or becoming a soldier or a priest, but all this does not qualify (or disqualify him from becoming a *brāhmaṇa*. It is by deeds that one becomes or ceases to be a *brāhmaṇa*. It is through austerity, chastity, self-restraint and control of senses that one becomes a *brāhmaṇa*(*Majjhima* II.I.C: *Khuddaka*,vol.I,PP362ff)¹³. The Jaina texts also vehemently oppose to attainment of *brāhmaṇahood* by birth. The Jaina philosopher Prabhāchandra, for example, argues that a *brāhmaṇa* can be distinguished from a non-*brāhmaṇa* as a cow from a buffalo, nor is there any way of showing purity of lineag(cf.Seth,1987, p.48)¹⁴. Thus the Jaina-Buddha movements

created awareness in the minds of the common people that salvation, spiritual and moral excellence could be achieved by all irrespective of *varṇa*, *jāti*, *śilpa* or *mantra*. This anti-*brāhmaṇa* movement united all people, except the *brāhmaṇas*. On the other hand the *brāhmaṇas* introduced certain concessions and modifications in the social order as the Buddhism and Jainism did not constitute a fundamental challenge to the social order which gave primacy to spiritual goals over material pursuits. This process of absorption and accommodation of the critiques was sought to be achieved through the epics, *Purāṇas*, and the neo-*Vedantic* literature, or the bhakti-cults (Seth, p.49)

The *bhakti* and the Sufi movements in India which started from 13-16th century preached the doctrine of oneness of the God which accelerate to the unity and integrity of the land. The scholars of both Hinduism and Islam started to find out the common truth embodying in the religious scriptures. The Hindu pundits tell us : “*Mittrasya chakṣusa paśyem*(Look upon the world with friendly eyes)”. The *Vedic* concept “*Ekam Sat: Dvutyo nāsti* (Truth is One /One is Truth: There is no presence of Second) bears the same philosophy when it tells “There is One God , Allah”. In an effort to draw common truth from the Hindu and Islamic Philosophy, it is stated:

Bhagavat-Gītā, Ch.10, Verse,20:-

“*Ahamātmā Guḍākeśa Sarvibhotasyasthitah,*

Ahamādiścha madhyam cha, bhutānāmanta rva chao”

Quran: - Hu-wal-Awwal, Hu-wal-Akhir,

Hu-was-Zahir, Hu-wal-Batin

Wehu-wabe kulle shayin Alim”¹⁵

(He is the first, He is the last also; He is the outer, He is the inner too, The Manifest and yet Unmanifest , The Lord , ordainer, Knower of all things”).

Further, the Quran says, “Allah is not the God of Muslims (Rab-ul-muslimeen) only, but He is also the God of all men (Rab-ul-Alimeen)¹⁶. There is also similarity in the Hindu’s saying, ”there are numerous ways to God” with that of the Prophet Muhammad’s dictum;”At-turqu-il-Allahi kan nufusu bani Adam(there are many ways to God as there are souls:as many as the breathes of Adam’s sons)¹⁷. To bring unity among the Hindus and Muslims in India Rumi’s ‘Masnavi’, which is described as the essence of Quran, says:”Ruh ba al-last Oba lim ast yar, Ruhra baHindu O Muslim chekar?(The soul is concerned with wisdom and knowledge;Wha does it have to do with Hinu or Muslim?)”¹⁸.

Babur, the founder of the Mughal empire in India, handed down a non-theological culture to his son Humayun on His death bed:-“My son, India is inhabited by people of different religions. It is God’s munificence that He has made ruler of his country. Therefore, you should always pay attention to the followings;—“a). Do not let religious prejudices dwell in your heart. On the contrary , always do justice, without favour, showing fullest regard to people’s religious feelings and customs: b).You should particularly avoid cow slaughter :c).Never demolish any place of worship of any community and always do justice so that the relation between the king and his subjects remains friendly and peace prevails in the State ; d). The propagation of Islam should be done by the sword of kindness and service and not by

sword of coercion and oppression: e). Always ignore the Shia-Suni differences: e). Consider the different propensities of your as different seasons of the year so that the government remains free from ailments and weaknesses”¹⁹. Akbar, the Great Mughul emperor, left a great legacy of secularism by extending liberality to all religious faith in an equal manner. Akbar’s secularism consolidated, united and integrated India into a coherent bond which led the country into a pinnacle of glory during the reign of his grandson Shahajahan. The declining process started in medieval India when Aurangzeb practiced religious bigotry in his administration. It indicates that the Indian people are used to remain united inspite of their religious differences and to expel religious fanaticism from their land.

The colonial policy ‘divide and rule’ was counteracted by literary movements which tried to foster unity among the Indian people. Thus Muhammad Iqbal, a committed humanist who upholds the cause human freedom wrote that;

“I shall tell the truth , O Brahman, but take it not as an offence;

The idols in the temple have decayed.

Thou has learnt from this image to bear ill-will to thine own people,

And God has taught the mullah the way of strife.

O Brahman, to thee images of stone embody the divine,

For me every particle of my country’s dust is a divinity,

Come , let us remove all signs of division and build a new temple in our land,

Let us raise its pinnacle till touches the lapel of sky...

The salvation of all earth dwellers is in love”²⁰.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee/Chattopadhyaya in his *Anand Math*(1882) conceived India as ‘Mother’(*Bhārat-Mātā*) and offer homage constructing an imaginary iconic form of *Purānic Durgā*²¹. The book describes about *sanyāsī*-rebellion who were determined to expel the British from India. The famous song ‘*Vande Mātaram*’ refers to the country as mother. Here Bankim tries to speak in the voices of the ascetics (*sanyāsīs*) that the country of birth is indeed the Mother. In the essay ‘Why India is Unfree’, Bankim compares *Bhārat-bhūmi*(land of India) to a bee-hive full of bees perceiving many differences in Indian society in the form of major ethno-linguistic groups, in the form of different jātis, religions, languages, customs and so on²². The presence of the conscious of unity as a fundamental essence of Indian civilization is projected as a normal Indian condition in the book of R.K.Mookerji²³.

Rabindra Nath Tagore’s ‘*Bhārat Varṣer Itihāsa*’ projects: ‘*Bhāratvarṣa*’ has not discarded anything’. Tagore’s idea of Indian history being not just a chronicle of genealogies and battles, but of persistent search to forge unity among diversity, of ways of reconciling between seemingly irreconcilables, again underlines the almost inexhaustible range of cultural ingredients which all fused to emerge as recognizably Indian²⁴. D.D.Kosambi’s ‘*The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outlines*’ mentions about the presence of ‘unity in diversity’ since primitive times: A dispassionate observer who looks at India with detachment and penetration would be struck by two

mutually contradictory features: diversity and unity at the same time. The endless variety is striking, often incongruous. Costume, Speech, the physical appearance of the people, customs, standard of living, food, climate, geographical features all offer the greatest possible differences²⁵. What distinguishes India from other countries is “the continuity that we find in India over the last three thousand years or more. The continuity of Indian culture in its own country is perhaps its most important feature”. Kosambi’s notion OF continuity implies the simultaneous presence of all cultural forms from the most primitive hunting-gathering to the most technologically recent: “the survival within different social layers of many forms that allow the reconstruction of totally diverse stages”²⁶

Ramkrishna Paramhansa, the spiritual instructor of Swami Vivekananda, a Brahmin himself, used to cleanse a toilet of an untouchable in dead of night praying to Divine Mother(Goddess Kālī): ‘ O, Mother, please remove the least trace of caste superiority from my mind; make me a servant of all’. The Holy Mother Sarada Devi fed the Muslim labourer Amjad and removed the leaf and cleaned the place with universal mother-heart which embraced, in its pure love, Christians, Muslims and Hindus of all castes. Swami Vivekananda used to live in the houses of princes, peasants, untouchables, Muslims, and others, and was deeply pained to the poverty, illiteracy, and sufferings of weaker sections of all communities, and the heartlessness and exploitation of these weaker sections by the upper classes²⁷. He believed that India could not be happy by imitating the west: “ The spell of imitating the West is getting such a strong hold upon you that what is good or what is bad is no longer decided by reason, judgment, discrimination, or reference to the Śāstras(Vivekananda,2001)”²⁸. The aims and objectives of the Ramkrishna Mission, which was established on 4th May1909, are to train men so to make them competent to teach such knowledge or sciences as are conducive to the material and spiritual welfare of the masses; to promote and encourage arts and industries; and to spread *Vedantic* and other religious ideas as elucidated in the life of Sri Ramakrishna among the people²⁹.

Gandhiji, the father of modern India, says: “ I do not want my house to be walled in all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any”.

India is famous for tolerant tradition. The Hindu Maharajas granted lands for the establishment of the churches and mosques. Similarly, a lot of Hindu temples developed in both Kerala and Mysore by Tipu Sultan. The ‘Satyapir’* culture in India virtually brings unity among the Muslims and he Hindus. The Ajmer Dargha which was a tomb of Khwajah Mui-ud-Din Chisti is still frequented by thousands of people irrespective of their religious background. There are a lot shrines in Indiawhich are worshipped by communities of different faiths, and temples, mosques and churches flourishing in close proximity. Some examples may be cited here: “Among the sectarian groups, the Husaini Brahmanas called themselves followers of Atharva Veda and derived their names from Imam Husain, the grandson of the Prophet. It could be said that they were not the really converts to Islam, but had adopted such Islamic beliefs and practices as were not deemed contrary to the Hindu faith. Except beef, they ate secretly all kinds of meat. The men dressed like Muslims, but put *tilak* on their forehead”³⁰. It is also published in The Statesman of India, March11 1959 that: “A Hindu temple near Suratgarh in Rajasthan has Muslim priests who perform the worship of idol and receive offerings from the devotees. This has been going on for generations”

Article 25(2) (a) of the Indian Constitution empowers the State to regulate and restrict economic, financial, political, and other secular activities even associated with religious praxis. According to this important secular principle, a Christian, or a Muslim, through his representatives in the Legislature or in the Cabinet, is fully entitled under Art. 25(2) to participate in regulating and restricting economic and other secular administration associated with Hindu religion³¹. So too Hindus regarding Muslims or other religious institutions. There is no fundamentalist, doctrinaire compulsion that only Hindu legislators and ministers or Muslim legislators and ministers may participate in making laws regulating economic and other secular operations associated with temple, mosque or church³². The 42nd Constitutional Amendment entrusted a fundamental duty on every citizen to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture.

India is not free from communal conflicts. At regular intervals, communal tension arose over the country. After Blue Star Operation in the Golden temple of Amritsar(Punjab), the enraged Sikh-militants assassinated the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, on 30th march 1984 which was condemned by all Indians inclusive the Sikhs. The demolition of Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992 Ayodhya in(Uttar Pradesh) by the Hindu fundamentalists enraged the Muslims of Mumbai to such an extent they attacked Hindu homes, temples and places of business. This activities of the Muslims also provoked Shiv Senas to strike in 1993. In the last week of February 2002, it is alleged that Muslim hotheads set fire to a railway compartment in Godhra, killing about 59 activists of RSS and other related organizations who were returning from Ayodhya after voluntary labour(or kara seva) for the erection of Ram temple at the site of the Babri Masjid³³.

What is perceived is that the communal conflicts are not the issue of the people in general, it is very often provoked by a group of persons for their selfish design. "What is behind proliferation of religion", says Bernard Shaw "is the motivation to make money". He, further mentions: "I am a millionaire. That is my religion"³⁴. The word religion is derived from a Latin term, 'religare' that refers to the bond between man and God, and in view of most persons religion implies a belief in some kind of supernatural being or beings³⁵. Mostly, the Indian people, irrespective of their religious back ground, are secular in character which is evident from the recent 'Delhi-election' held on 7th February 2015. People outvoted the ruling party who used religion as a trump card.

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 - Panchasakhā are five persons and were cotemporary to each other. They were named Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Jaśobanta Das, Achyutā Nanda Das, and Śīśu Ananta Das
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