

Demystifying the relationship between ethnic identities of Indian Muslims and their level of religious tolerance -a case study conducted at West Bengal, India

by

1. Adrinil Santra

Assistant Professor, Haldia Institute of Technology, MAKAUT, WestBengal, India

adrinil.gabriel.santra@gmail.com

2. Soumyakanti Dhara

Assistant Professor, Haldia Institute of Technology, MAKAUT, WestBengal, India

soumya.dhara@gmail.com

Abstract:

India, the land that witnessed a myriad of religious and cultural experiences, graciously conserving both secularism and freedom of speech in its constitution, has been having a curious debate in recent times -whether the world's one of the leading democracies has become an intolerant nation.

The nation has witnessed the synthesis of several rich cultures and has been predisposed by a history that is several millennia old. In spite of the frantic effort by the various political activists and social bodies to imbibe the amicable spirit of symbiotic and harmonious existence among the multi ethno-religious groups in India, the altruistic effort eventually resulted in disenchantment far from the idealism expected. The obvious reason for such disquieting state of affair is often attributed to the historically reflecting Hindu nationalist position of the present government but an unraveling attempt to reflect deep into consciousness of the largest minority group obviates such claim. The indigenous cultural tradition and passionate religious beliefs of Indian Muslims of different ethnicities underwent a great transformation after its social intercourse with the prevailing social norms of the ethnic majorities. Surprisingly the level of resentment of the Indian Muslims towards the majority Hindus has manifested stark discrepancies among various ethnic groups. Religious extremism and fundamentalism have breed counter-fanaticism and counter-fundamentalism ruining the age-old tradition of peaceful coexistence and reciprocal reverences.

The research paper makes a meek attempt to ascertain the obscure reasons for such differences in the level of resentment of Indian Muslims belonging to two ethnic groups. This case study was conducted by collecting data regarding religious tolerance using the questionnaire developed by Broer et.al (2017) from two hundred and fifty Muslim students hailing from West Bengal, a state in India and the test results can be extrapolated with minor changes within the entire territory of India.

Keywords: cultural tradition, ethno-religious groups, fundamentalism, intolerant nation, secularism.

1. Introduction:

India has witnessed a myriad of social and cultural inspirations since the dawn of civilization. The nation has witnessed the synthesis of several rich cultures and has been predisposed by a history that is several millennia old. Culture is a cluster of mannerisms and the way different social groups communicate with each other. Over the years, India has changed a lot in terms of living standard and lifestyle, but even then, the value and traditions are still able to maintain its original integrity and remain unchanged. The fusion of nationalities, cultures and ethnicities was indeed possible because of the desirability of assimilation within the single identity to be called as "Indian". On account of such assorted influences, the Indian subcontinent in a nut-shell emerged to be a cradle of human civilization. Immigration, invasion, modernization and colonial rule begot with them streams of alien influences, which were partially assimilated into the primordial Indian worldviews; the remaining ones coexisted within the overarching Indian

worldviews (**Sinha**). Indian civilization has succeeded in organically assimilating incoming influences, blunting their wills for imperialistic supremacy and deep entrenching its strong roots and culture.

2. Islam in India:

2.1 Genealogy of Indian Muslims

According to the International Institute for Population Sciences, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, 2018, the Population of India in 2018 was nearly 133.96 crores, and out of this huge population a significant 14.2% of the people follow the Islamic faith. Islam has contributed greatly to the Indian culture and its people. There are indeed scores of fascinating theories to substantiate how India became to be such a largely Muslim land. Politically, some Hindu radical groups of India most unfortunately represent the Muslims as an extraterrestrial populace but in spite of that the country witnesses a faster growth rate of Muslim population, which is much higher than the national average growth rate. Because pre-Islamic India was absolutely based on a caste system in which society was broken into separate parts, conversion to Islam happened in a step-by-step process. There were instances when the entire community of a lower caste living in a place embraced Islam. This would happen for many different reasons. Often, however, the equality Islam provided was more attractive than the caste system's organized racism. In the caste system, a person's social position is decided at birth. There was no prospect for social mobility or to accomplish greater than what your parents their parents did. Converting to Islam ameliorated in upward social mobility and they were no longer subservient to the Brahman caste.

Islam is the second most professed religion in India, next to Hinduism. However, it's obscure whether the proliferation of Islam in India has been only a cultural transformation or is linked with detectable levels of gene flow. Dienekes points to a new paper article which attempts to quantify the genetic pedigree of South Asian Muslims into indigenous and exogenous components: To estimate the contribution of West Asian and Arabian admixture to Indian Muslims, a research study appraised one genetic variation in mtDNA, Y-chromosomal and LCT/MCM6 markers in 472, 431 and 476 samples, respectively, representing six Muslim communities from different territories of India (Khan.R,2009) and it was found that most of the Indian Muslim populations received their key genetic inputs from geographically close non-Muslim populations.

2.2 Role of "Bhakti Marg" and "Sufism" in creating religious syncretism

The rise of fundamentalism in modern times has annihilated the deep entrenched syncretism in Indian culture. Indian civilization has been insightfully impacted by two fundamental believes: The influence of Indo-Aryan cultural stream which was endowed with Vedic philosophies and the Indo-Muslim aspect of culture which was entwined with " Bhakti Marg" and " Islamic Sufism" and accorded the orthogenetic and heterogenetic elements of the traditions of both the

religions. (Khan.R,1987). Naturally it can be apprehended that the synthesis of the composite culture in India stemmed out in an atmosphere of reconciliation, rather than repudiation, coexistence rather than mutual obliteration of the politically assertive Islamic strands. Khan thus vehemently negates the historical perspective that the medieval period in India was conspicuous with the raging vendetta between the Hindus and Muslims. Khan also aptly points out that the term "Hindu", surprisingly doesn't appear in ancient Indian texts at all until it transpired in a Tantric text in 8th Century A.D. The intrinsic anthropomorphism of Hindu religion benefited in the syncretism of some of the Muslim saints. The cult of saints has been one of the religious steps which have promoted Hindu-Muslim unification in India. The proliferation and intensification of the Sufism has been remarkably affected the mechanisms of establishing the Hindu-Muslim harmony in India.

Many scholars advocated that the "Bhakti movement" in India is largely liable to lessen the unwanted religious orthodoxy and brace up the eclectic faiths among the Hindu and Muslims. The advent of Bhakti Movement and Sufism has trounced the entire scenario of religious feuds and disagreements and blurred all the obvious differences in construing the philosophical doctrines which is evident till very recently when a Sadguru or Pir have followers of both the religions and they never insisted their followers to give up their respective religions (Lokhandwala, 1987).

2.3 Exclusivity of Indian Muslims

Practices of Muslims in India are notably different from other countries. Muslim practice differs here from other countries of Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. Majority of the Indian Muslims belong to Sunni Hanafi School of thoughts. But there are other schools too. Zakir Naik is a notable Salafi scholar and widely celebrated in India. Nizari Ismailis and Dawoodi Bohra groups of Shias Muslims are very prominent in India. Peer or sages are very powerful in India. Their graves are hugely venerated by Muslims and even among non-Muslims too. During Eid-al-Adha, Muslims surreptitiously slaughter animals hiding in most places, as cow is Goddess-mother to Hindus who are dominant majority in India. The preponderance of Mughal tradition often carries hints on majority of the Muslim traditions in India which resulted in a cultural *mélange* which is discretely different from the other parts of the world (Sarafan.G,2011).The Mughal Empire was a time period of peaceful religious and cultural prosperity between the Hindus and Muslims of India, conceiving the syncretic ideals and resulting in Islamic-Hindu cross cultural pollination. This "mixed culture" *exposé* might not be tune with Islamic laws as laid down by the strict religious traditions.

3. Background of the Study

3.1 Triggers of recent religious violence

But this situation has changed in recent times and India is now considered as one of the most religiously intolerant country of the world. India historically touts itself as a secular state where

all religions are recognized and can peacefully co-exist. Well, at least in theory, it is. Unfortunately, the reality is much different (Bhattacharya. A,2017).

An April 11 Pew Research Center analysis of 198 countries ranked India as fourth worst in the world for religious intolerance. In the country of 1.3 billion, the incidence of hostility related to religion trailed only Syria, Nigeria and Iraq, all places where sectarian violence is widespread.

Muslims of India have developed a staunch feeling that they have become insecure than ever before which has made them vulnerable. Recent cases of failed justice for crimes perpetrated against them have disheartened the Muslim community. According to a newspaper article by **Aljazeera published on May 2018** also points out that even to outside observers, it is increasingly clear that Muslims are being detested and isolated from the larger Hindu majority and that state institutions are failing them in India. The brawl between freedom of expression and religious intolerance is passionately exhibited in Indian society where the State, through censoring of books, movies and other forms of crucial expression, victimizes writers, film directors, and academics in order to mollify Hindu religious-nationalist and Muslim fundamentalist group (Singh.A,2018). Indian Penal Code provisions 298 and 295A have resulted in the harassment of many writers, journalists and scholars from the academia. In addition, exploiting violence and fatwa is also being used to suppress freedom of expression by Muslims and Hindu fundamentalist groups. The Indian national polity is nonetheless in the process of creating a feasible and equitable balance between regional identities and the national identity -the former emphasizing diversity over unity, the latter unity over diversity. This is indeed a crucial aspect of that endless process called nation-building.

India's present Prime Minister's avalanche victory in 2014 was borne on his promises to set free India's economic potential and build a brilliant future while he played down the Hindu nationalist roots of his Bharatiya Janata Party. But under the Prime Minister's leadership, the country experienced sluggish economic growth rates, jobs have not materialized, and what has actually been unleashed is virulent religious fanaticism that threatens the foundation of the secular nation envisioned by its founders.

In India, Muslims are the victims of physical, psychological and financial aggression more prominently since last five years. In majority of the incidences counted, physical violence is propagated methodically by Hindu mobs. However, the connection of state agencies in supporting such violent behavior is against the rights of Muslim citizens in Indian state. Academic evidence hints that political parties, volunteer organizations and state agencies instigate both physical and psychological violence against Muslims in the name of Hindu nationalism (Hussain.S et.al,2018). This victimization of Muslims is mounting on their social marginalization and vulnerability in India.

3.2 Cow slaughter and "Love Jihad"-the vendetta continues

Since 2014, which witnessed significant change in India's political scenario, there has been a disquieting rise in mob attacks against people accused of eating beef or abusing cows, an animal held sacred to Hindus. Most of those killed have been Muslims. Though the Government spoke out against such horrendous acts of killings, these acts took place not long after the government

banned the sale of cows for slaughter, a move suspended by India's Supreme Court. The ban, enforcing cultural stigma, would have fallen hardest on Muslims traditionally engaged in the meat and leather industry. As a society, India in recent times must admit that religious extremism and hatred are deeply entrenched in its sociocultural body politic. (Pandya.A,2018). The 2015 "Dadri mob lynching" became infamous in which a mob of villagers attacked the home of a Muslim man Mohammed Akhlaq, with sticks and bricks, who they iniquitously suspected of stealing and slaughtering a cow calf. Later an Indian court found prima facie evidence of meat that may be either mutton or beef, and ordered registration of a first information report against the slain Mohammed Akhlaq. The government's inquiry winded up confirming that he was not storing beef for consumption. On December 6, 2017, an unemployed Hindu fanatic Shambhu Lal Regar hailing from a quaint sleepy Indian hamlet of Rajsamand came to mass attention when he posted a video of the appalling murder of Mohammed Afzarul to take vengeance of "Love Jihad"(a term used by Hindu nationalists to express a practice in which Muslim men pretend love to draw Hindu women away from their faith). The gruesome video clipping left the liberals flabbergasted in fear. Washington-based Ahmar Mustikhan,a Baloch activist, championing for the cause of Hinduism in Baluchistan wrote: "My head is bowed in shame as a defender of Hinduism as a humanist faith and an Indophile. I am speechless and very angry."

Whenever India escalates higher on the global barbarity index following such incidents, the concluding effect is almost always a polarization of Hindu versus Muslim. Even the insincerity of reproving such dreadful incidents does not remain an honest exercise. Right-wing political parties and cultural groups start complaining of liberal hypocrisy, of selective outrage. It is challenging to initiate a crusade against religious nationalism particularly Hindutva in an atmosphere of Islamophobia with the state providing shields to heads and activists of one particular religion only. This is also reflected in the policies of the state with regard to visas, refugee policy from religious ceremonies on state functions, and inkling of religious screening in employment (Human Right Council, 2017).

4. Literature Review

Relationship between religion and ethnicity are few and far between as such linkages are often understood as either religion reinforcing ethnicity or vice versa (Barry. D.M,2012). Most literature on the relationship between religion and ethnicity approach the interaction and acknowledges as religion preserving ethnicity. According to Smith, religious community could either "divide an ethno-linguistic population "or alternately "erode ethnic differences" (1991, p.7-8). Whichever case it may be, religion is always used as a major source for preserving ethnicity. Thus, religion serves ethnicity as a resource that can either maintain or divide a group of people based on distinguishing symbols, practices, and beliefs. This relationship between Islamic religion and ethnicity is well documented based on Horowitz's work insinuating that if an ethnic group's dominant religion is Islam, then their Muslim identity is superlative while all other sources of collective identity i.e., ethnicity,nationality,etc are secondary ,if not irrelevant. But it is keenly observed that there are some differences observed at the perceptual level of what means to be religiously tolerant by the Muslims belonging to different ethnicities. The free dictionary

quotes that "Historically, religious tolerance always considered as paramount aspect of tolerance, since religions tend to be intolerant of each other, and religious intolerance has led to innumerable wars, battles and mass massacre". The philosophers and writers of the enlightenment especially Voltaire and Lessing, propagated religious tolerance, and their influence is convincingly felt in Western society. Nevertheless, the lack of religious tolerance causes problems in many regions of the world today and definitely India is not an exception. Tolerance in general sense can be explained by the component's objection, acceptance, and rejection (Forst.R, 2010, p.2). For a practice, belief or religion to be a candidate for toleration it must be objected to or disliked in the first place. Despite the objection there can be reasons for it to be accepted. The fundamental dependence of human self-knowledge on the knowledge of a god, God or ultimate source has its inner ground in 'the essence of his religion as the central sphere of created nature' (Dooyeweerd 1969:I, 55) This fundamental thinking of the idea of God and staunch belief in the divine virtues of impeccability, immutability, omnipresence, omnipotence, immanence and many others fortify the belief of oneness of his divine existence and ascertains the strength of association with one's own religion. Another discourse of related studies avows spiritual struggles involve difficulties that a person may encounter with his or her faith, which may include having a troubled relationship with God or encountering difficulties with other religions (Krause.N et al, 2017). Therefore, it is well affirmed that different ethnic groups tolerance towards other religion is reliant on the ethnic identity of an individual.

5. Methodology

5.1 Sample Size and Sampling Plan:

This case takes into consideration Muslims of two ethnic groups in the state of West Bengal in India and tries to find out the plausible causes of the differences in the process of understanding religiosity and how they are overtly tolerant towards people of other religious denomination. This case takes into account two hundred and fifty Muslim students belonging to two ethnic communities -Bengalis (native of the state of West Bengal) and Biharis (native of the Indian state of Bihar, but presently studying at West Bengal), and tries to demystify how the conception of religiosity, the intensity of attachment to the basic teachings Islam, the extent of prejudices formed and the tolerance towards other religion varies significantly. The two hundred and fifty students included in this sample are all registered under engineering courses at seven different technical colleges at West Bengal. Judgmental Sampling Technique was followed in this case where the choices of sample items were exclusively dependent on personal acquaintances. Random Sampling was not followed for this pilot study because the direct question of religious tolerance has a chance of getting irked during the lunch breaks. Hence for the purpose of the Pilot Study personal acquaintances with the students before hand was ensured. The Appendix III of the questionnaire developed by Broer et.al (2017) regarding religious tolerance was administered among the students to find out what was the

5.2 Data Analysis: Chi Square statistics is used for testing relationships between categorical variables. Here in this case the first categorical variable is the ethnicity of the Muslim students, and the second one is level of attachment towards their own religion and the relationship with the

factors indicating their level of religious tolerance towards other religion .The factors which were identified from the Appendix III of the questionnaire developed by Broer et.al measuring religious tolerance are i) Value attached to own religion ii)Accommodative nature towards other religion and iii) Idea about exclusivity about one’s own religion. Three Chi Square Tests were done to find out the relation between the categorical variables in this case.

5.3 Results: From the three set of Chi Square Tests Performed it was observed that the Null hypothesis can only be accepted in the last case where as in the first two cases the Alternative Hypothesis was accepted. Hence it can be concluded that there are significant differences in how ethnicity (whether Bengalis/Biharis) of Muslim students affects radical attachment towards religious values and norms as well as level of respect shown towards people of other religious denominations however there are no such significant differences in the level of contentment expressed about the minority protection initiatives taken by the government.

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Ethnicity of the students * How radically the follow the religious values/norms	250	100.0%	0	.0%	250	100.0%

Ethnicity of the students * How radically the follow the religious values/norms Crosstabulation

			How radically the follow the religious values/norms		Total
			0	1	
Ethnicity of the students	0	Count	28	137	165
		Expected Count	34.3	130.7	165.0
		Std. Residual	-1.1	.6	
1	Count	24	61	85	
	Expected Count	17.7	67.3	85.0	
	Std. Residual	1.5	-.8		
Total	Count	52	198	250	
	Expected Count	52.0	198.0	250.0	

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.322 ^a	1	.038		
Continuity Correction	3.665	1	.056		
Likelihood Ratio	4.186	1	.041		
Fisher's Exact Test				.048	.029
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.305	1	.038		
N of Valid Cases	250				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 17.68.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Ethnicity of students * Tolerance towards other religions Crosstabulation

			Tolerance towards other religions		Total
			Tolerant towards other religions	Non tolerant towards other religions	
Ethnicity of students	Bengalis	Count	148	17	165
		Expected Count	110.2	54.8	165.0
		Std. Residual	3.6	-5.1	
	Biharis	Count	19	66	85
		Expected Count	56.8	28.2	85.0
		Std. Residual	-5.0	7.1	
Total	Count	167	83	250	
	Expected Count	167.0	83.0	250.0	

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	114.722 ^a	1	.000		
Continuity Correction	111.705	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	118.007	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	114.263	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	250				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 28.22.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

**Ethnicity of the students * Whether happy or not with the minority protection initiatives by the Govt.
Crosstabulation**

			Whether happy or not with the minority protection initiatives by the Govt.		Total
			Happy with the minority protection initiatives taken by Govt.	Not happy with the minority protection initiatives by the Govt.	
Ethnicity of the students	Bengalis	Count	39	126	165
		Expected Count	37.6	127.4	165.0
		Std. Residual	.2	-.1	
	Biharis	Count	18	67	85
		Expected Count	19.4	65.6	85.0
		Std. Residual	-.3	.2	
Total	Count	57	193	250	
	Expected Count	57.0	193.0	250.0	

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.193 ^a	1	.661		
Continuity Correction	.078	1	.779		
Likelihood Ratio	.195	1	.659		
Fisher's Exact Test				.751	.393
Linear-by-Linear Association	.192	1	.661		

N of Valid Cases	250			
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a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 19.38.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

6. Conclusion:

This empirical research is attempted to arrive at conclusive evidence in support of the fact that how the ethnic origin of the Indian Muslim students significantly affects their level of religious tolerance towards students and other community members professing different religion (mainly Hinduism) and the respect or insolence shown towards people whose religious beliefs are different from them. This research also makes an attempt to elucidate whether the students feel free to respectfully socialize with people who hold beliefs different from them. The intriguing results from this research reveal that it's not the religious background, rather it is the ethnicity of the person that decides whether to instill religious fundamentalism or to educate them to become religiously or spiritually unprejudiced individuals as worthy members of their communities. This forms part of their spiritual and moral duty towards the society. The psychological acculturation of minority adolescents refers to the process of adaptation to the multicultural social environment in which they grow up (Mesquita, Deleersnyder, & Jasini, in press). This adaptive practice is part of general developmental progression, which gives rise to multiple pathways of identity development with adaptive value in specific sociocultural contexts. The myriad of uncongenial experiences which the Bihari communities had after the partition of India and the significant changes in the social context which they encountered; the unanticipated bloodshed, the Bihari exodus from India to Bangladesh where they got a resentful tag as "stranded Pakistanis" and subsequently with great antipathy coming back to India to stay along with Hindu majorities had compelled them to think about the world in new ways and conform to new ways of being and doing. However, one striking observation from the research approves that majority of students irrespective of their ethnicity were worried about the increasing trend of Hindu fundamentalism. They expressed their disquiet about political linkages and strong ideological influences with various fundamental Hindu nationalists' groups and their interference on Islamic affairs as well as the minority welfare initiatives taken by the Government. The discrepant life experiences and the spiritual struggles, the two ethno religious groups faced in the greater Indian society is however more indicative of their religious tolerance than the teachings of the religion itself. As India has a vibrant youth and it goes without saying that these youth are the future responsible citizens of this great nation, it is high time that India needs to exploit the strengths of her traditional syncretic culture, embrace a systematic tactic to promote communal accord among all ethnic groups and rein in extremist radical groups from both the Hindu and Muslim communities.

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