



RELIGION AND SOCIETY

- Problems of religious minorities
- Religious communities in India

India is a pluralistic country. India is a land of unity in diversity, therefore, people of every religion and language live in every part of the country, hence, the Hindus, the majority community in India is a minority community in some states.

Government of India has notified 5 communities, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians and Zoroastrians as religious minorities at the national level. As per the Census of 1991, population of the minority groups constitutes 17.17% of the total population of the country. On account of this the concept of minority has to be studied with great care. Here, we will discuss various aspects of this problem in brief.

The International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences defines minority as a group of people differentiated from others in the same society of race, nationality, religion or language, who think of themselves as differentiated group with negative connotation. The Constitution of India uses the term minority but nowhere defines it. The Supreme Court and various High Courts have depended on the statistical criterion. Any community that does not constitute 50 per cent in a state is called a minority.

Almost all countries recognize religious and linguistic minorities. Minority groups are united by certain common features. They often organize themselves into a coherent group to demand such privileges from the state that will help to promote their religion, culture and language, so that they may stay alive and maintain their identity, not get absorbed by the majority.

- “A minority is a category of people singled out for unequal and inferior treatment simply because they are identified as belonging to that category.”
- Minority group refers to “any recognizable racial, religious, or ethnic group in a community that suffers from some disadvantage due to prejudice or discrimination.
- The most common general description of a minority group used, is of an aggregate of people who are distinct in religion, language, or nationality from other members of the society in which they live and who think of themselves, and are thought of by others, as being separate and distinct.
- Speaking about the concept of ‘minority’ in the Indian context, it can be said that the term has not been properly defined anywhere in the Indian Constitution. But ‘minority status’ has been conferred on many groups.
- According to the Article 29 of the Constitution any group living within the jurisdiction of India is entitled to preserve and promote its own language, script or literature and culture.
- Article 30 states that a minority group “whether based on religion or language shall have the right to establish and administer educational institution of their choice.

- The preamble of the Indian Constitution guarantees for all of its citizens justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. There is no discrimination against the minorities on any ground whatsoever.

Minority is a term difficult to define with any degree of precision. It may refer to a relatively small group of people dominated by a majority. Population size is not the only feature of minority status. If a group is discriminated on the basis of religion, race or culture it can be considered a minority.

PROBLEMS OF MINORITIES IN INDIA

In spite of the provisions of the constitutional equality, religious minorities in India often experience some problems among which the following may be noted.

- **Prejudice and Discrimination:** Prejudice and discrimination are found in any situation of hostility between racial and ethnic groups and divergent religious communities.

Prejudice refers to a 'prejudged' attitude towards members of another group. These groups are regarded with hostility simply because they belong to a particular group, and they are assumed to have the undesirable qualities that are supposed to be characteristic of the group as a whole.

Discrimination, on the other hand, refers to an action against other people on the grounds of their group membership. It involves the refusal to grant members of another group the opportunities that would be granted to similarly qualified members of one's group.

Speaking in the Indian context, discrimination especially in providing opportunities to people of different communities is, not at all in practice. The Preamble of the Constitution itself declares that all people irrespective of their caste, class, colour, creed, sex, region or religion will be provided with equal rights and opportunities. Articles 15 (1) and 15(2) prohibit discrimination on grounds of religion.

Article 25 promises the right to profess, propagate and practice religion. It is clear that

there is no legal bar for any religious community in India to make use of the opportunities [educational, economic, etc.] extended to the people. It is true that some religious communities [for example, Muslims] have not been able to avail themselves of the opportunities on par with other communities. This situation does not reflect any discrimination. It only reveals that such communities are lagging behind in the competitive race.

As far as prejudices are concerned, prejudices and stereotyped thinking are common features of a complex society. India is not an exception to this. Commonly used statements such as "Hindus are cowards and Muslims are rowdies; Sikhs are dullards and Christians are converters", etc., reflect the prevalent religious prejudices.

Common people who are gullible in nature never bother to find out the truth behind these statements, but are simply carried away by them. Such prejudices further widen the social distance among the religious communities. This problem still persists in India.

- **Problem of Preserving distinct Social and Cultural Life:** India is one among the very few nations which have given equal freedom to all the religious communities to pursue and practice their religion. Article 25 of the Constitution provides for such a right. Added to this, Article 30 (1) states all minorities whether based on religion or language shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. They are given the right to preserve their socio-cultural characteristics. It has set up a 'Minorities Commission' to help the minorities in seeking justice. No minority community can have a grievance against any government particularly in this matter.
- **Problem of Providing Protection :** Need for security and protection is very often felt by the minorities. Especially in times of communal violence, caste conflicts,

observance of festivals and religious functions on a mass scale, minority groups often seek police protection. Government in power also finds it difficult to provide such a protection to all the members of the minorities. It is highly expensive also. State governments which fail to provide such protection are always criticized. **For example**, the Rajiv Gandhi Government was severely criticized for its failure to give protection to the Sikh community in the Union Territory of Delhi on the eve of the communal violence that broke out there soon after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. The Gujarat state government was criticized for its inability to provide protection to the Muslim minorities in the recent communal violence that burst out. Similarly, the Government of Kashmir's inefficiency in providing adequate security to the Hindus and Sikh minorities in that state against the atrocities of extremists is also widely condemned.

- **Problem of Communal Tensions and Riots:** Communal tensions and riots have been incessantly taking place since independence. However, there are ups and downs in the incidents of communal riots. Whenever the communal tensions and riots take place for whatever reason, minority interests get threatened; fears and anxieties become widespread. It becomes a tough task for the government in power to restore the confidence in them. The Delhi [1984] and the Gujarat [2002] episodes of communal riots as stated above clearly reveal this situation.
- **Problem of Lack of Representation in Civil Service and Politics:** Though the Constitution provides for equality and equal opportunities to all its citizens including the religious minorities, the biggest minority community, that is, Muslims in particular have that they are neglected. However, such a feeling does not seem to exist among the other religious communities such as the Christians, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, for

these are economically and educationally better than the majority community.

- **Problem of Separatism:** Some of the demands put forward by some of the religious communities, in some areas are not acceptable to others. This has widened the gap between them and others. Examples : The separatist tendency present among some Muslims extremists in Kashmir and their demand for the establishment of Independent Kashmir in Kashmir is not acceptable to others. Such a demand is regarded as anti-national. Similarly, some of the Christian extremists in Nagaland and Mizoram are demanding separate statehood for their provinces. Both these demands are supportive of 'separatism' and hence cannot be accepted. Supporters of such demands have been causing lot of disturbances and creating law and order problems in the respective states.
- **Failure to Stick on Strictly to Secularism:** India has declared itself as a 'secular' country. The very spirit of our Constitution is secular. Almost all political parties including the Muslim League claim themselves to be secular. But in actual practice, no party is honest in its commitment to secularism. Purely religious issues are often politicized by these parties. Similarly, secular issues and purely law and order problems are given religious colours. These parties are always waiting for an opportunity to politicize communal issues and take political advantage out of it. Hence the credibility of these parties creates insecurity in the minds of minorities.
- **Problems related to language:** The British brought English language with them, and the Christians missionaries propagated it through their educational institutions. In Bengal and South India, English has been placed after their mother tongue. Consequently, even in independent India, when Hindi is the declared national language, these states continue to consider English as the national language and

do not like to have Hindi imposed on them. Many times anti-Hindi movements have emerged in these areas, which are a threat to the national unity and integrity.

- **Problems related to religion:** The British did not merely want to rule India but they wanted to spread Christianity. Thus, the Christian missionaries opened schools and colleges all over India, and went into the remotest corners to serve. Moreover, incentives in all fields of work were given to those who embraced Christianity. Members of many minorities accepted Christianity, which caused several social, familial and personal problems. Acceptance of Christianity implied acceptance of British way of life. The poor communities could ill-afford to emulate the high standards of the British, which resulted in all sorts of undesirable behaviour such as thefts, illegal human trafficking, prostitution etc. The rift between them and the Hindus gave rise to conflicts between them.
- **Problems related to family and marriage.** The influences of Western culture have created many problems for the minorities in the domestic scene. The generation gap has widened, the youth feel freer to do as they wish, joint family system is almost extinct and the old values have been forgotten. Individualism is the rule of the day at all levels, which is creating conflicts and tensions all around.
- **Problems related to general life.** The minorities are facing problems in day-to-day life. Their dress, eating habits, education, entertainment etc., are changing fast under the influence of Western culture. The older generation is unable to accept these changes; therefore, there is conflict between them the young and the old. Hence social life is becoming tense for the minorities.
- **Problems of anomy.** In the absence of a well-defined code of conduct the problem of anomy has arisen among the youth of the

minorities. They believe that they have no need to observe social or moral codes. Frustrated by the corrupt system all around them, they too resort to unfair means to achieve their goals. It becomes a vicious circle and the society at large suffers the consequence.

A FACT FILE OF MINORITIES

- Majority of Muslims live in the cities and almost all Jains live in cities, whereas the Sikhs, Buddhists and Christians live in village and towns.
- The rate of procreation is the highest among the Muslims followed by Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Christians in the same order. Christians have the lowest rate of reproduction.
- A demographic study of the minorities shows that the ratio of women is less than men in almost all the religious communities, except Christians where the women are more than men. This ratio is the lowest among the Sikhs.
- All the main minorities try to retain their identity. Each one of them has a particular way of worship, and different customs and traditions. This diversity is visible in their day-to-day practical lives.
- The religious diversity and plurality of Indian society has been creating situation of conflict from time to time. It is one of the main problems in the present times as well and communal riots fundamentalism and separatist tendencies are shaking the foundations of the Indian society.
- After Independence India has been acknowledged as a secular state. The Constitution clearly states that all religions are equal and the followers of each religion have equal rights. No citizen of India shall be discriminated against on the basis of religions, caste, race or gender.
- On the practical level the government has not been able to keep aloof from various

religious matters and conflicts. Some leaders of religious communities have openly declared that their religion is comprehensive and includes the social, religious and political aspects in its fold. Thus, they cannot keep politics out of it.

- According to **K.L. Sharma** the literacy rate among the Parsis, Jains, Jews and Christians is higher than others. With the exception of the Christians all of them are involved in trade and business.

In spite of all these diversities there is an underlying unity in the Indian society. In fact, religion has been our greatest treasure. The differences are linguistic and superficial. A deeper study of religions reveals the underlying oneness in them. As a matter of fact, the declaration of secularism is an acceptance of that intrinsic universality of all religions, especially of the Indian origin. The need of the hour is to realize the religiousness of all religions more than the outer layer of rituals and traditions, as spirituality, which is the predominant feature of Indian society, is above religions and communities.

There are so many examples in the Indian history related to minority communities who have made their significant contributions in the field of social, cultural and political development. During the freedom movement, minority groups were very active in their participation. Some of the examples of their participation are as follows:

- Politically they have occupied the posts ranging from the President of the world's largest democracy to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India.
- Punjab, land of Sikhs, is the foremost producer of wheat as well as rice and they have made Green Revolution a great success.
- In the field of cultural activities minorities have made their significant contributions. Urdu language is an excellent example of cultural tradition of Hinduism and Islam.

- Many Muslims, Christians and the members of other minorities have also made their remarkable contribution to literature in other Indian languages. They have also contributed to classical music, dance and films etc.
- By the efforts of minority communities, science, journalism and sports have become richer in India.
- In the industrialization of the country, Parsis have played their splendid roles.
- In this way, minority communities have made their best in promoting national integrity and co-operations.

WELFARE OF THE MINORITIES

The Constitution of India protects the interests of the minority and recognizes their rights to conserve their languages, scripts or culture and establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.

The Constitution of India clearly states that India is a secular state. For making this statement authentic it has provided various safeguards to protect the rights of the minorities. The rationale for this is that the majority community by virtue of its number can guard its interest, whereas a minority community needs additional support to safeguard its interests.

For the effective implementation of these safeguards the government has appointed a Commission for minorities to evaluate the working of the various safeguards of the Constitution for the protection of religious minorities; to make recommendations to ensure the effective implementation of all the safeguards; to secure life and property of the minorities; to provide special consideration for minorities in public employment; to ensure non-discrimination in development programmes and grant of financial benefits; and to act as a national information bureau to inform them of the latest position on minorities.

The Commission presents an annual report to the President. Besides this the Commission

can give a report to the President. Besides this the Commission can give report on any matter that demands attention. This report is then presented in the Parliament, where it is discussed and decision is taken as to what action has to be taken on the basis of the report.

The 15-point programme announced by the Prime Minister has also been implemented for the welfare of minorities. It has the objective of securing life and property of minorities. It is also for providing special consideration for minorities in public employment and to ensure non-discrimination in development programmes and grant of financial benefits. It also aims at curbing communal violence and promoting communal harmony. It safeguards their rights for education and employment.

Thus, the objective of the 15-point programme is to accelerate the process of integration of minorities in the national mainstream. In addition the government has also set up a National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC). This Corporation would provide financial aid for economic and developmental activities for the benefit of backward sections among the minorities. The government has increased its contribution from 125 Crore to 300 Crore provided the state governments and governments of Union Territories also put in their share as well.

The Constitution of India has guaranteed various rights to the minorities. The rationale for this is that while the majority community by virtue of its number can guard its interest, a minority community needs additional support to protect its interests. The constitution has guaranteed them the following rights:

- Under Article 29 if there is a cultural minority which wants to preserve its own language and culture, the State would not by law impose any other culture on it. This provision gives protection to religious and linguistic minorities.
- Under Article 350 the Constitution directs every state to provide adequate facilities for

instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups.

- Under Article 350 a special officer for linguistic minorities is appointed who looks into all matters relating to minorities. Admission to educational institutions cannot be denied to them on grounds of religion, race, caste or language.
- Under Article 300 all minorities shall have the fundamental rights to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. With regard to granting aid, the state cannot discriminate against by educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of a minority. In 1964, the Supreme Court upheld the right of the minorities to choose the medium of instruction in their schools.

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

India is a multi-lingual and a multi-religious country. Indian society is pluralistic in character from the religious and other point of view. Since a very long time people belonging to various religious communities have been living together in this nation. According to the 1931 census there were ten religious groups in India. These were Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jews and other tribal and non-tribal religious groups. The census of 1961 listed only seven religious categories; Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and other religions and persuasions.

Though majority of the people living in this land are Hindus [82.41%], people belonging to other religious communities such as Muslims [11.67%], Christians [2.32%], and Sikhs [2%], Buddhists [0.77%], Jains [0.41%] and others [0.43%] are also living along with the Hindus by enjoying on par similar rights and opportunities. By virtue of their numerical strength the Hindus constitute the majority while the rest of the religious communities come under what is known as 'religious minorities.'

Hindus are much below 50 per cent in the west coastal area where Muslim and Christian population is largely concentrated. Hindus are also less numerous in Punjab where they are a minority, accounting for 2-10% population at the district level. In the tribal areas of the North East with a Christian dominant population, the proportion of the Hindu population ranges between 5-20%.

Religion is really a complex phenomenon in India. For example, elements of Sanskritic and tribal religion are found in a mixed form at various levels. So is the interaction between the 'great', the 'little' tradition. Integration of Sanskritic Hindu religion and tribal religion is also found. The Santhals, for example, observe several high caste festivals. This is also the case with the lower and 'untouchable' castes. Some tribals worship Shiva. M.N. Srinivas writes: "Different tribes are Sanskritized in different degrees, and different sections of the same tribe may not be uniformly Sanskritized."

Conversion to Christianity and Islam has been a controversial issue over the past couple of decades. It is said that the members of depressed classes and tribals have converted to Christianity, Islam and Sikhism in various parts of the country; particularly in the 1920s and also after Independence.

A good number of tribals have accepted Hindu rituals and religious practices in Bihar, Bengal, Assam and other areas. Thousand of Harijans have converted to Buddhism in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. Induced or forced conversion is certainly against the Constitution of India and the law of the land. There may be several factors responsible for change of religion; but it is certain that a number of people have changed religion to get free from religious orthodoxy.

It has been reported that minority religions show a greater percentage of literacy than the majority religions. Parsis, Jains, Jews and Christians have shown this pattern. With the exception of Christians, these communities are also more engaged in trade and business than Hindus and Muslims. A study reveals that the Parsis, Jews and Jains are "advanced" in business, though not diversified. Hindus and Muslims have a diversified occupational pattern because of their large numbers and spread all over the country. The minority groups are found in specific regions, sub-regions and cities, and therefore find themselves in an advantageous position. Syrian Christians, Moplas, Parsis and some other groups have been benefited because of their strategic location in Kerala and Maharashtra.

