

**“Youth Response to Religious Diversity and Religious Beliefs”
A Study across College Students in the City of Chennai, Tamil Nadu**

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Abstract

The Sociological study of religious diversity and youth is a growing field of research. Religious diversity, in the recent years, has been a central issue especially when there seems to be an increase in radicalization of religious belief. India has always been known for its pluralism and multicultural characteristics. This study is concerned with how the younger generation is responding to the challenges of increasing religious diversity. It goes on to explore the nature of belief and practice among young people who have a nominal or no religion identity. It examines the factors that impede religious tolerance among young people. The study allows serious thought into correct understanding of history and spreading awareness about misrepresented facts can help in promoting a secular society, especially among the youth.

Keywords: religion, diversity, tolerance

Introduction

“There is only one truth, only men describe it in different ways.”
– Hindu Holy Book, Rig-Veda1:164:46

Clearly, the diversity of religions in the world has been a fact throughout entire history of all the world's major living religious traditions. This diversity has become the basis for contention. The tendency to display hostility toward different religious beliefs is connected to ethnocentrism. Because the tendency to be hostile to people who are different is so strong, it is an important religious problem. The world is experiencing growing religious diversity amidst rapid globalization. Religious diversity on one hand can create peace and harmony through mutual tolerance and understanding, on the other, it can pose challenges to social cohesion. Recent global events have shown religion can be misused to cause conflict. Religious diversity has been a central issue, especially after 9/11 where there has been an increase in the radicalization of religious beliefs related to the war on terror. Religious diversity and conflict have been topics of detailed study for the past several years and many research works are done in this field. Since 9/11 event, social scientists are striving to explain the role of religion and reintroduce the topic as a very important social variable.

Magnitude of the Problem

According to the Pew Research centre (an NGO tracking religious restriction and hostilities around the world since 2007) the overall global environment to religious faith is hostile. It states that four of five people around the world lack the freedom to worship. Some of its major findings are: the number of countries with religion related terrorist violence has doubled from 9% in 2007 to 20% in 2012. Women being harassed because of religious dress increased from 7% in 2007 to 32% in 2012. The Middle East and North Africa was the most common region for sectarian violence, half of all countries in the region experienced violence. The number of countries with a very high level of religious hostilities increased from 14 in 2011 to 20 in 2012. PEW records that where both, the government and society at large impose numerous limits on religious beliefs and practices, Myanmar, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and Russia figure prominently. China leads in the category of government persecution and India tops the social antagonism list.

Religious Diversity and Conflict in India

India is characterised by more ethnic and religious groups than most other countries of the world. India is the second most populous country in the world, with over 1.3 billion people. India has more than 50% of its population below the age of 25. It has more than 2000 ethnic groups and every major religion is represented. Hinduism comprises of 79.80%, Islam 14.23%, Christianity 2.30% and Sikhism 1.72%. India, having a huge population, with a variety of religions is a breeding ground for communalism. The religious pluralism and the contradictions between the various religious faiths tend to create communal identities, which in turn develops to a stage of communalism, when passing through the democratic process.

The recent spate of religious conflict and social hostility has become a matter of serious concern. Incidents like the murder of rationalists and mob killings over beef-eating and cow slaughter rumours, honour killings, “*ghar wapsi*” (*home coming*) campaigns are disturbing social trends. The rising trend of communalism and the ensuing violence is a major threat posed towards the integrity of the nation. In this scenario, it becomes essential to develop new skills to deal with conflict, and create a community of mutli-religious appreciation. For this, understanding the present religious values of the youth becomes important. This study is an

attempt to examine the religious factors that contribute to social solidarity in the context of religious diversity, among the college students in the city of Chennai.

Historical Background

Historically, there is no convincing evidence for any religious conflict in the ancient or medieval period. Religious conflicts began to spring up only in the colonial and capitalist society and reached its height in the democratic society. India was never homogenous throughout the history and it was highly diverse. Several instances of cordial religious relations between the conqueror and the conquered are evidences to prove social harmony. It is believed that when Sivaji, a Hindu Maratha king, conquered Surat, he brought back the copy of the Holy Quran bearing it reverently on his head (Singh, 2003). But history is replete with examples of Hindus and Muslims destroyed their own place of worship. The Buddhist king of Harsha of Kashmira systematically demolished the Hindu temples and caused the idols to be dragged through the streets and lepers were made to spit and urinate over them. Similarly, a Hindu king cut down the Bodhi tree and constructed a Hindu temple. Aurangzeb destroyed a masjid when he attacked a ruler in Lahore. (Azgar Ali, 1995)

The relationship between major religions in India was not a matter of concern before the advent of British rule. According to Sudhir Kakar, in his book “Colors of Violence” states that before the late nineteenth century, overarching religious entities and identities such as Hindu and Muslim did not exist. Among the Hindus, there were sects who were frequently at odds with each other; nor did the Muslim constitute a monolithic Islamic collectivity. Romila Thapar (2000) writes that segmented identities existed in ancient India. The notion of community was not absent but there were multiple communities identified by locality, languages, caste, occupation and sect. What appears to have been absent was the notion of a uniform, religious community readily identified as Hindu. The first occurrence of the term “Hindu” is as a geographical nomenclature and this has its own significance. It is a common occurrence in the Arabic texts where the term is initially used neither for a religion nor for a culture. It refers to the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent; the land across the Sindhu or Indus river. Al-Hind was therefore a geographical identity and the Hindus were all the people who lived on this land. Hindu thus essentially came to mean “the other” in the eyes of the new arrivals. Similarly the name ‘Muslim’ does not occur in the early records. The term used was either ethnic, Turuska, referring to the Turks, or geographical, yavana, or cultural mlechha. What is striking is that initially none of these terms had a religious connotation (Romila Thapar: 2000).

The precolonial and early colonial period conflicts between Hindus and Muslims were rare. Moreover, there was no need for religious gathering or collective bargaining under the banner of any community. It was the British who created such communities. Communalism and the consequent large-scale violence between the Hindus and Muslims began to spread in the late nineteenth century chiefly because of colonialism. The indoctrination of modernization in administration and educational fields resulted in basic structural changes in the society. To counter growing nationalism, the British followed the “Divide and Rule” policy. Rajiv Dhavan in his essay “The Road to Xanadu” states, the laws of British India entrenched identities, the policies of the Raj politicised them. As the movement to gain independence gathered ground it was more conducive to the British to give a political identity to various communities by promising them separate representation. This communal nomination to government councils continued till India was partitioned in 1947. Despite Gandhi’s interventions, the Communal Award of 1932 was accepted as the basis for the government of India Act 1935 whereby separate electorates were guaranteed to Muslims, Europeans, Sikhs, Indian Christians and

Anglo-Indians. The politicisation of religious communities was thus complete. The politicisation of religious communities paved the way for new kinds of warring demands which often did not admit to consensus solutions or compromise. The reasons for religious gathering or collective bargaining under the banner of a community came into existence in the Indian society. Causes of religious conflict fundamentally are secular like competition for share in political power or government jobs, which was aptly created by the British to divide the people. Religion is not its fundamental cause but an instrumental cause because of its great mobilizing power (Azghar Ali, 1995).

Present Scenario

Major cause of religious conflict in India, in the recent times, is the demolition of Babri masjid. In December 1992, following the destruction of the mosque at Ayodya, rioting across the country left 1,200 people dead. The communal attacks that followed this incident are endless. In January 1993, Mumbai witnessed a nine day anti-Muslim program that left 600 people dead. The gruesome events in Gujarat that began with the Godhra train burning incident in 2002 and the carnage that followed for months are unimaginable violence that India had never witnessed. This tragedy was not due to religion but lust for power, in which religion was used as a tool. On 27 February 2002, a bogie was set ablaze killing 57 lives, comprised of *Kar sevaks (Hindu volunteers)* returning from a pilgrimage. Following the news of this tragic event, communal riots broke out against the Muslims and spread to 24 districts in Gujarat. Mobs comprising of 2,000–3,000 and sometimes increasing to 10,000, all armed with deadly weapons to kill were on the prowl on the streets of Gujarat. There were over 2,000 victims of violence and those killed were subjected to extreme torture. Women and children were special targets. These politically motivated and well planned riots have sent wrong messages to the people as religious conflict and hence have infused hatred towards other religion and their adherents. The events of March 2002 emerged from a long and deliberate construction of hate among the religious communities. According to Martha Nussbaum (2007) Hindu Muslim animosity (and also animosity against Christians) has long been fomented by the Hindu rights in many parts of India. The unprecedented violence that took place in Gujarat has made Indians anxious about what the future holds in store for the rest of the nation.

India is witnessing, as stated earlier violence and social hostility between religious communities on an increased scale. Resolutions previously made by enforcing laws and suppression have proved futile. Peaceful methods could only bring about lasting peace and harmony. To find a remedy for the mounting communal violence and its destructive after effects, a scientific approach is needed. Studying the factors that facilitate the development of tolerance/intolerance to dissenting religious beliefs will help to better understand beliefs of young people and the way this can be prevented.

Religion as a Sociological Concept

From the Latin *religio* (respect for what is sacred) and *religare* (to bind, in the sense of an obligation), the term religion describes various systems of belief and practices concerning what people determine to be sacred or spiritual (Fasching & deChant, 2001). In the wake of 19th century European industrialization and secularization, three social theorists attempted to examine the relationship between religion and society: Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. They are among the founding thinkers of modern sociology.

French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (1915). To him, sacred meant extraordinary –

something that inspired wonder and which seemed connected to the concept of “the divine.” Durkheim argued that “religion happens” in society when there is a separation between the profane (ordinary life) and the sacred (1915). Durkheim is generally considered the first sociologist who analysed religion in terms of its societal impact. Above all, Durkheim believed that religion is about community: It binds people together (social cohesion), promotes behaviour consistency (social control), and offers strength for people during life’s transitions and tragedies (meaning and purpose). By applying the methods of natural science to the study of society, he held that the source of religion and morality is the collective mind-set of society and that the cohesive bonds of social order result from common values in a society. He contended that these values need to be maintained to maintain social stability.

Whereas Durkheim saw religion as a source of social stability, German sociologist and political economist Max Weber (1864–1920) believed it was a precipitator of social change. He examined the effects of religion on economic activities and noticed that heavily Protestant societies – such as those in the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and Germany – were the most highly developed capitalist societies and that their most successful business leaders were Protestant. In his writing *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), he contends that the Protestant work ethic influenced the development of capitalism. Weber noted that certain kinds of Protestantism supported the pursuit of material gain by motivating believers to work hard, be successful, and not spend their profits on frivolous things. For Durkheim, religion was a force for cohesion that helped bind the members of society to the group, while Weber believed religion could be understood as something separate from society. Marx considered religion inseparable from the economy and the worker. Religion could not be understood apart from the capitalist society that perpetuated inequality. Despite their different views, these social theorists all believed in the centrality of religion to society.

Academic Context

In recent years, scholarly attention has been given to religion in the academy arena. Religion has become a central feature of politics and the debate about the appropriate role of religion in politics spurred broader discussion on the role of religion in public life. And the fact that college campuses are more likely to confront the issue of religious diversity has led to many scholarly inquiries. Many of the twentieth century studies on religion was heavily influenced by the theory that society would inevitably secularize or grow less religious as it modernized. Much to their surprise, a closer look at the contemporary role of religion on campus, found that religion appeared to be thriving on college campuses and student interest in religion and spirituality seemed quite high. Sociologist started focusing on the role played by religion during adolescents. These studies provided new information about religion among college students. Religion among the undergraduates has drawn the attention of sociologists of education and political sociologists. Though, scholarly attention to religious life on college campus has already produced important insight, it is also limited in some important ways. My study on youth response to religious diversity will contribute to our understanding of their interaction to divergent beliefs and practises and will also situate the agenda for future research.

Problem of the Study

Until recently, India has been remarkably successful in accommodating the cultural diversity through democratic institution. Religion has the potential to shape a national majority even though it is reflected by a multitude of cross cutting identities. Political appeals on the basis of religious identity and false propaganda against other religious belief and practices has begun to forge an increasingly self-conscious religious communities. This poses a fundamental

challenge to India as a secular state. It also instils fear and a sense of insecurity among the minority groups. This leads to imbalance and disrupts harmony in society. In such a scenario, laws are futile in its attempt to quell the endemic unrest and challenge of religious diversity and conflict. Religious understanding and appreciation are of utmost importance in a multi-religious India. This development need to start from the youth. The youth have to be equipped with the ability to reflect on their own religious inclination and discuss these issues in a matured manner. To develop new skills to deal with dissension, increase tolerance and create a community of multi religious appreciation studying the present religious values of the youth is important. In this context it becomes imperative to examine the factors that facilitate the development of tolerance and intolerance among the youth of different faith. It will help to understand the religious mechanisms which affect young people. A study among young people is very relevant as this is the age where they rely much on peer group, leading to the creation of In-group and Out-group associations. Examining the factors that impede religious tolerance among young people will help to build a harmonious society. Moreover as an educator myself, I strongly assert that transformation can be brought through educating the youth on religious equity for peaceful coexistence. Hence a study of this nature becomes crucial.

Research Questions

1. What is the role of religion in promoting cohesion in a religiously diverse society?
2. Does religiosity play a role in drawing In-group and Out-group boundaries that have implications for religious tolerance?

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the religious factors that promotes tolerance among the Hindus, Muslims and Christian youth of Chennai City.
2. To examine the causes that impedes tolerance among the young people.

Hypothesis

1. Religious persons are likely to be more tolerant than non-religious persons.
2. There is no significant difference between men and women in terms of religious tolerance/intolerance.

Methodology

Research Design

Keeping the objectives of the study in view and the issues mentioned at the outset, an appropriate logic of enquiry is applied. The study is descriptive in nature; it attempts to delve into the religious factors that promote social cohesion and dissent among the religiously diverse college students of Chennai city in Tamil Nadu. Through the adoption of inductive strategy the researcher will collect data related to the concepts and it will produce limited generalization. The study will be conducted in three prestigious Christian colleges of Chennai city, Tamilnadu, India. Random sample survey will be utilised, as it depends on the permission and availability of the students. As it is a very sensitive area, not many institutions are forthcoming in involving their students in this survey.

Sources of Data

It is empirical and analytical in nature and the analysis of the study is based on primary data.

Tools of Data Collection

Primary data was collected using Focus Group Discussion and Sample Survey using semi-structured questionnaire developed for this study by the Investigator.

Analysis

If social solidarity has to be developed in times of communal disharmony, there needs to be an attempt to understand the attitudes of the youth towards religious beliefs and practices as they are useful indicators of the present scenario and also for the future trajectory of social cohesion. The goal of my research is to understand the religiously diverse student community and their responses to different belief and practises, as religious diversity has appeared to prompt religious intolerance in India in recent times.

The data for this article were collected through two principal means – focus group discussions and questionnaire survey. Three focus group discussions were held lasting for three hours. It is understood that a sample of 25 people is not in any way representative, but the strength of this discussion also lays in the fact that same set of open and closed ended questions were asked to respondents who were part of the questionnaire survey. Therefore this could be seen as a comparative tool. The questionnaire survey produced data from a group of 100 young people, in the age group 17-20 years. It had an equal representation of males and females.

Table 1: Religious Belief of the Students

Religion	%
Hindus	27
Muslims	5
Christians	51
Non-Believers	17
Total	100

The data presented in Table 1 pertaining to religious diversity among the respondents in the study reveal that Christians constitute the highest number with 51%, followed by Hindus with 27% and Muslims with 5% of the total sample. It is also interesting to note that 17% of the respondents have identified themselves as non-believers. The fact that Christians constitute the highest percentage could be attributed to the background of the institutions that the respondents are part of the sample for the study has been drawn from a population of students attending different Christian minority institutions in Chennai, India.

Table 2: Gender-Wise Distribution of Respondents' Religious Affiliation

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	28	26
Muslims	2	8
Christians	56	46
Non-Believers	14	20
Total	100	100

Table 2 presents a closer view of the respondents' affiliation to mainstream religions on the basis of gender.

Among the male respondents, Christians constitute the highest percentage - 56 %. As stated earlier, this could be due to the background of the institutions to which the respondents in the study belong. Hindus constitute 28% of the total sample, followed by Muslims at 2%. 14% of the male respondents chose the category of non-believers.

Among the female respondents in the study, Christians constitute 46%, Hindus 26%, Muslims 8% and non-believers 20%.

A comparison of the data on gender-wise religious affiliation of the respondents shows that non-believers are more in number among females at 20% of the total sample as against 14% of the total sample among the male respondents. This finding is particularly interesting in the context of Chennai which is largely regarded as a conservative city, and therefore demands further probe.

Table 3: Gender-Wise Distribution of Students Who Strictly Follow Their Religious Tenets

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	22	18
Muslims	2	8
Christians	38	28
Total	62	44

The data presented in Table 3 reveals that 62% of the male respondents in the study follow their religious principles to the core. The majority of the male respondents can therefore be viewed as religio-centric as they consider the observation of religious tenets as important.

Table 4: Gender-Wise Distribution of Students Who Are Religio-Relative

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	6	8
Muslims	0	0
Christians	18	18
Non-believers	14	20
Total	38	46

Table 4 shows that 38% of the male respondents have expressed a lack of strict adherence to their religious tenets, stating that they belong to a religion as a result of societal and family expectations from them to do so, and that personally, they do not follow religious practices strictly.

Among the female respondents, 44% are religio-centric while 46% are not so concerned about following religious tenets strictly.

A comparison of the above data shows male respondents to be more religious as compared to female respondents. This could be due to the influence of higher education, exposure to different ideas and peer influence.

Table 5: Gender-Wise Distribution of Respondents Whose Life Decisions Are Influenced By Religious Beliefs

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	26	20
Muslims	2	6
Christians	44	40
Total	72	66

Among the male respondents, as the data in Table 5 reveals, 72% have admitted that their life decisions are influenced by their religious beliefs. This percentage is higher than the number of male respondents who identify themselves as religio-centric (62%). This could be due to the fact that even if they do not follow religious tenets, due to the socialization process, they end up placing a premium on religious beliefs while making important life decisions.

Among the female respondents in the study, 66% admitted that they base their decisions on faith. Majority of the female Christian respondents have admitted to the importance of religion in decision-making processes.

Table 6: Gender-Wise Distribution of Respondents Who Are Less Conscious of Their Religious Beliefs While Making Life Decisions

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	2	6
Muslims	0	2
Christians	12	6
Non-believers	14	20
Total	28	34

The data presented in Table 6 reveal that 28% of the male respondents in the study do not base their decisions on faith. They believe that life chances are opportunities that should not be missed for religion's sake.

Among the female respondents, 34% of them do not base their decisions on their religion beliefs.

Interestingly, while 2% of the female Muslim respondents have stated that religion is not an important factor in taking decisions, the number of male respondents from the same community who hold a similar view stands at zero.

Table 7: Gender-Wise Distribution of Respondents Who Are Not Willing To Adopt Other Religious Values

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	12	14
Muslims	2	8
Christians	34	20
Total	48	42

Data from Table 7 reveals that 48% of the male respondents in the study are reluctant to adopt values from other religions. This conveys a sense of intolerance, as the respondents are rigid with respect to their belief in total commitment to their own religion.

Among the female respondents, 42% are unwilling to adopt values that are not from their religion. 20% percent of the Christians, 14% of the Hindus and 8% of the Muslim respondents have reported to being committed to their own religion.

Table 8: Gender-Wise Distribution of Respondents Who Agreed to Adopt Other Religious Values

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	16	12
Muslims	0	0
Christians	22	26
Non-believers	14	20
Total	52	58

Among the male respondents, the majority of the students, that is, 52% have exhibited a secular attitude by stating that it is good to follow values that are for the good of the individual and society irrespective of which religion they emanate from.

As the data presented in Table 8 reveal, the number of females who are willing to adopt values of other religions if they are for the good of the individual and society (58%) is more than that of males willing to do so.

Table 9: Gender -Wise Distribution of Respondents Who Agreed That Well-Being of Society Depends on Being Tolerant Towards Others

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	24	24
Muslims	2	6
Christians	46	42
Non-believers	12	16
Total	84	88

The data presented in Table 9 shows that a large of majority of the respondents - 84% of the male respondents and 88% of the female respondents - agreed that it is their responsibility to breed a tolerant society whose well-being lies in their actions.

Table 10: Gender-Wise Distribution of Respondents Who Disagreed That Well-Being of Society Depends on Being Tolerant Towards Others

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	4	2
Muslims	0	2
Christians	10	4
Non-believers	2	4
Total	16	12

Only a small percentage of the respondents – 16% for males and 12% for females - disagreed, holding that their attitude has no role to play in bringing about a tolerant society and that the responsibility lies with others. 4% of the non-believers, who are generally viewed as secular people, also held a similar view.

Table 11: Gender-Wise Distribution of Respondents Who Expressed Tolerant Attitude

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	24	16
Muslims	2	6
Christians	36	30
Non-believers	10	12
Total	72	64

Table 12: Gender-Wise Distribution of Respondents Who Expressed Intolerant Attitude

Religion	Males %	Females %
Hindus	4	10
Muslims	0	2
Christians	20	16
Non-believers	4	8
Total	28	36

72% of the male respondents were willing to place themselves in the position of others, thus demonstrating a tolerant attitude, while the remaining 28% expressed their unwillingness to do so.

Among the female respondents in the study, 64% demonstrated tolerance by expressing their willingness to place themselves in the position of others. The remaining 36% demonstrated intolerance in this regard.

A comparison of the data suggests that the male respondents in the study demonstrated a greater degree of tolerance as compared to the female respondents.

Interpretation of focus Group Discussion

Participants of the focus group discussions were asked a series of questions about their views of their own religion. They were also asked to comment on other religious group's beliefs and practices. Questions concerning the amount of contact they had with other members of religious and ethnic groups were also asked. The results reveal that the youth are highly appreciative and willing to engage with other members of religious groups. Hindus, Christians and Muslims seemed to have an Inclusivists' attitude. Muslim respondents expressed even greater homogeneity of religious attitudes and willingness to work with other faith group despite strict adherence to their religious tenets.

The following comment from the focus group discussion conveys the perception of one religious group on another:

“I like the charitable spirit of the Christian community. When the recent floods hit city of Chennai, whenever there is a natural disaster they are out always

volunteering and showing their concern for the needy. I like their spirit of willingness to give and share, particularly during Christmas time”. (Female, Hindu 18 years)

“Muslims have lots of things that can contribute to my faith. One thing is their commitment to prayer...I’m always astonished at their commitment to pray five times a day and their strict fasting during Ramzan”. (Male, Christian 18 years)

“Hinduism has so much to offer through their fables and epics. Am always fascinated as to how there is a myth behind everything”. (Female, Christian 18 years)

Through the focus group discussions students’ perception on communal violence could well be understood. Majority of them are of opinion that conflict and violence in society takes place not due to religious reasons, but political interests and politicians are in the foreground for display of such heinous acts in society. Even though they expressed conversion, some bizarre rituals, disruption of traffic for religious rituals sake are irritable aspects of religion; they do not lead to intolerance and hatred towards other religion. Religion they believe is personal and should be dealt at that level. Generally, they are of the opinion that India is a secular nation and by and large its citizens are tolerant and secular. It is politician and caste groups for economic and political benefits who instigate and make a situation volatile. Conflict is provoked in society using religion as a means. Today, communal identity is gaining importance in society for economic and political benefits and not because of one’s religious commitment. To borrow from M.N. Srinivas’ famous term “vote banks, today for politicians they emerge by developing communal identity.

This is corroborated with the survey findings on empirical questions on whether they would consider a religious value that is not flowing from their religion as worthless. 52% males and 58% females stated that they would accept other religious value. On the question of whether they place themselves in the shoes of another person of different religious belief 72% of males and 64% females were in agreement with it. These responses should not mislead the reader that the respondents are secular, as 62% males and 54 % females affirmed following their religious tenets strictly. A section of the youth did not want to mention their religion as they felt they are agnostic or spiritual. Non-believers among males comprise of 14% and among females 20%. Nevertheless, when it comes to being conscious of their affiliation and decision making 72% of the males and 66% females stated that they are guided by religious values. Majority of males, 84% and females 88% agreed that well-being of society and individual depends on their tolerance towards other religion and beliefs. There was total agreement to the question on socializing and celebrating festivals with other individuals of different faith.

To the question on differed opinion of another religious practice and belief, they were varied responses. Students expressed that religious communities should avoid proselytizing, as religion is a private issue. Processions, religious songs over the public address system, disrupting traffic for death ceremonies, bizarre rituals is where they felt they had to be tolerant despite their dissent to such practices. Students also expressed the need to be sensitive to other people’s belief and not insult or disrespect other religious expression in public. Majority of the youth acknowledged the right of everyone to practice their own religion. Though 50% of the sample surveyed believed their religion is true. This cannot be interpreted as an exclusivist view, as exclusivism is characterised by an unwillingness to enter into religious dialogue with followers of other religious traditions. Here, the respondents are prepared to work together with

adherents to other religions, but do not feel the need to enter into exchange about matters of religious truth or salvation, as they already feel they are in possession of truth, hence could be referred as traditional inclusivists. Deeper analysis is required to confirm the other half into religious pluralist group.

On the whole the youth expressed that they have not experienced discrimination based on their religious background. Most of the youth mentioned that reservation based on religion should be avoided and only merit must be considered. Politicians are perceived as source of religious conflict since often they use religion for political interest. According to the youth, their families were also supportive of multi-religious friendships, but not so supportive of close intimate relationships (marriage). Majority of participants thought that religion and customs were important for the selection of intimate partners and would not marry a person from another religion. Discussions with students made it apparent that they do hold prejudice and stereotypes which determines the level of interaction they will have with other members. This could be due to continuous information about hate messages and events that is reported in the media, which leads to formation of dissent towards other religions and formation of In-group/Out-group attitude.

Conclusion

The study reveals that religion is an important part of youth life. The youth see religion as a personal issue and respecting one another is the key to social cohesion and harmony. Any form of disruption and intrusion into their life is resented. There is no significant difference between believers and non-believers in terms of their tolerance. In fact, non-believers have also expressed intolerance by expressing an intolerant attitude, by placing the responsibility on others for the well-being of the society. The hypothesis that there is no significant difference between men and women in terms of religious toleration is accepted. In fact, a closer look at the data reveals female respondents seem to have scored more on the secular aspects. Rigidity over religious matters seems less in comparison to the male respondents. Overall, all the youth seem to be appreciative of one another belief and practices. It is also that the young generation, being part of the globalization processes and information revolution will have all the opportunities to see their unity and not their divide. Data analysis shows that the youth exhibit characteristics of strict adherence to their faith and also willingness to be part of community activities. This behaviour could be encouraged and channelled to help the deserted, abandoned elderly and deprived in the society. Attempts must be made to build and strengthen these youth communities within religious groups and then encourage members of different religion to partake in joint ventures. This might result in successful inter faith partnerships and in due course of time, long established prejudices and stereotypes can be eliminated. As the students opined religion is deliberately used as a tool for attaining political gains. Now, the quest is to deal with differences emanating from diverse groups in society. The answer lies in strengthening secularism. In India, the concept of secularism goes beyond toleration to guarantee equality and freedom of religion; and to deny the appropriation of state and society by any one particular faith. The three important components of secularism in India are religious freedom; celebratory neutrality and reformatory justice. India's secular state was designed to celebrate all faiths and also enjoined to eliminate some especially invidious practices sanctioned by the religion in question (Rajiv Dhavan., 1999).

In today's world all societies have to be secular and a diverse nation like India have to be more secular. (Azhar, 2002) The fact in India an overwhelming majority of people are religious but tolerant and respect other religions are thus 'secular' in the Indian context. The real spirit

of secularism in India is inclusiveness, religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence. It is politics which proved to be divisive and not religion. As Romila : 2000 states, “if we can read our history with more sensitivity and insight, it would contribute to avoiding a fascist future”. Moreover many biases are spread through partial recount of past events. Communal (mis)interpretation of history has become a weapon in the hands of malice seeking groups. As pointed by Ram Puniyani (2003) the ridiculous claim that Christianity is nothing but Krishna Nitii and that Taj Mahal is a distortion of the word Tejo Mahalaya, meaning Siva Temple are intended distortions of historical facts. Chausalkar (1995) observes “The communists used the history as the opium of the people. They build up illusions of the great past”. Avenging for the past in the present is a wrong way of perceiving of the society. A correct understanding of history and spreading awareness about misrepresented facts can help in promoting a secular society, especially among the youth. The heartening factor is that India is still secular and the youth are sensitive to their brethren could be seen in the aftermath of Godhra violence. Dozens of young people, students and young scholars and activists converged in Gujarat. A political science student from Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi said that it was very important to Hindu students to go there and do work, as a type of penance for a collective Hindu guilt: she and others thought in terms of the Hindu concepts of prayaschit or atonement (Martha C.Nussbaum, 2007). Many Delhi University students also volunteered to help in various relief camps.

It is clear that secularism is very much valued in Indian society. Nevertheless, as religion is a complex phenomenon, often interrelated to ethnic, social, political, cultural and historical traditions, to have a deeper understanding of the youth attitude towards their religion and other belief systems, it is important to tackle the complex issues that lie within religious identity. Research needs to be conducted on the role of social, economic, and language on college student’s religiosity. Moreover, noticeable number of students has expressed to be non-believers this lends itself for future important research to be done on how college affects student religiosity? Does it mean students disengage from religion on entering college or is it being transformed through their exposure to education and pluralistic setting? These can be the goal for future study. These are global issues which are complex in nature and require constant reviews. My motive to select this topic is to stimulate debate and move these relevant issues in search of constructive responses for social solidarity.

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