Indian Pluralism: The Clash Within

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Mark Twain once famously remarked that 'in religion all other countries are paupers. India is the only millionaire' India's religious and philosophical diversity is legendary. The rich internal plurality of Hinduism has led scholars to speak of it as a federation of faiths. A variety of Adivasi (aboriginal) religions with elements of animism and shamanism still continue to exist. God-denying philosophical traditions as well as religions with little interest in God such as Buddhism and Jainism were born in India and coexisted peacefully with other Gods-affirming faiths. Evidence of Syrian Christianity exists at least since 4th century A.C.E., though common belief has it that Christianity arrived in India in the 1st century. Islam came with Arab traders in the 7th century and later, with Turks and Afghans conquerors who settled down in the sub-continent. Zoroastrians sought refuge in India when they were persecuted in Persia. Sikhism was born in India in the 15th century out of a confluence of Hinduism and Islam. The Bahai religion arrived in India soon after it was born in Iran in the 19th century. There is no major religion of the world that has not found a home here.

Three reasons explain the persistence of this diversity. First, ancient 'polytheistic' ideas such as that the god of one culture , practice or virtue is called by different names in different regions or that different religions are multiple routes to the same God continue to have stronghold in popular imagination. This makes movement from one religion to another easy. But it also makes conversions redundant. Why leave one to adopt another, when the better option is to have both! Multiple allegiances are not uncommon in India. Hindus and Muslims often visit the same shrine or follow the teachings of the same Guru. Road side shrines of any faith could attract adherents of all. Indian traditions contain conceptual resources of ideological flexibility and freedom rather than unfreedom and doctrinal rigidity.

Second, religions did not possess an internal institutional structure with enormous social power. This is to do with social organization, of loose or tight internal social relations, of rigidity or flexibility within. The capacity of gatekeepers was never strong enough to guard the boundary

and impose extravagant social costs for permanently moving out or for living adventurously on the margins. Third, religions were never closely aligned to the state or directly legitimate political power. In general, states kept distance from religions and provided protection and patronage to all. Moreover, barring a few exceptions in the medieval era, neither political rule nor political violence were sanctioned by religion. Toleration or respect for all religions was a common comportment of states.

These ancient traditions of diversity were revitalized by deft constitutional arrangements in post-Independent India. A distinctively Indian secular state was crafted, one which balanced individualist emancipatory urges with communitarian aspirations but also kept ethno-religious majoritarianism at bay.

However, three factors also at play undermine religious pluralism in India. First, the introduction of a new idea of religion defined by a set of doctrines held by a bounded community of loyalists. Every such religion was clearly demarcated from other doctrinal communities, competed actively with each other for exclusive allegiance so that an individual may enter it only by rejecting all others. This obstructed easy movement across faiths and undercut multiple allegiances. Second, the transformation of Hinduism and Islam from faiths to political ideologies, from soft identity-shapers to hard identity-markers and their alignment with exclusionary varieties of nationalism. Both Muslim and Hindu nationalism have polarized faiths and created sharp division between Hindus and Muslims.   This encourages the consolidation of religious monoliths locked in permanent battle with one another. Third, the ruthless mobilization of religious identities to forge electoral majorities at any cost and gain political power in representative democracies with ineffective constitutional safeguards. Nothing can destroy inter-faith interaction and mutual respect more than sustained negative stereotyping and electorally-induced violence by power hungry gatekeepers of organized religion in contemporary India. How to sustain certain valuable ancient traditions and temper some disastrous modern tendencies is the crucial challenge facing religious plurality in India today.