



Exploring the Status of Religious Minorities in Eastern and Western Cultural Traditions

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Abstract

In the contemporary milieu, religious minority communities reside in every society, both in Western as well as Eastern culture. In modern scenario, religion has become a significant means for ensuring victory at the time of elections in Eastern society, particularly in India. Religion is also instrumental in commercial benefit in Western society. The process of commercialization includes launching new commodities, services or production methods into commerce, making it available in the market for consumption. The market strategy specifically focuses on attracting the customers by employing varied methods for psychologically tempting the customers towards products. For Instance, an interesting and bizarre fact is that Western people are very much infatuated with Eastern culture and philosophy but another and most repulsive facet of this truth is that Western people misappropriated the images of Hindu Gods and Goddesses solely for commercial benefit. When we look at some parts of South Asia in general and at Indian subcontinent in particular, we find that members of religious minority communities are perpetually confronted with indigence and, even, humiliation. India is a nation of variegated cultures where people of diverse religions live side by side. Since the post- independence and partition of India, myriad people of religious minorities, viz., Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, etc., encounter various inconveniences which range from educational institutions, to occupations, governments and so on. Taking cue from these facts, this article will explore the conditions of minorities in the Western and Eastern societies and the difficulties faced by them in their quotidian existence. Further, this article will discuss the binary of minority- majority in the global scenario, the commercialization of Hinduism in the Western culture for monetary purposes by citing some examples. Furthermore, it will examine the situation of religious minorities in India, especially the largest religious minority community of India, i.e., the Muslims.

Keywords: identity, exclusivity- inclusivity, eastern-western culture, majority - minority binary, commercialization.

Introduction:

In the contemporary milieu, religious minority communities reside in every society, both in Western as well as Eastern culture. Hindu religion is the major religion of India and, as professed by myriad scholars and philosophers these days, a way of life. It is the primordial religion in the world and an amalgam of heterogeneous Indian cultures and traditions with diverse roots and no founder. In the present scenario, when the squabble between religious minority and majority communities is a burning issue, it becomes crucial to ponder over the concept of minority- majority in global context. A minor religious community is, conspicuously, a community which have a common religion, culture, language and who differ on these

grounds from the majority of denizens. Conspicuously, people of minority communities can be defined, in simple words, as non-dominant community, both in terms of religion and language. Indeed, the modus of defining these minority communities vary widely in each society but there are some recurrent hassles which minority communities of every society encounters time and again, such as the problem of inclusivity, identity, insecurity, humiliations, etc. They are less in proportion. Contrary to this, majority community is the dominant community of a particular political territory and the people of this community constitute the majority of the population and observe the same cultural and

religious customs and traditions and speak a common language. A major religious community of a specific nation can be a minor religious community in another nation and the vice versa. There are numerous circumstances when members of minority communities confront with bigotry and insecurity because of their race, language, cultural and religious practices without any convincing reasons. Here upon, members of minority community face the problem of identity, inclusivity, exclusion and most of the time they perceive themselves as aliens living in a foreign nation, albeit the nation may not be foreign to them in the typical sense of the term. Any nation, no matter how much they overtly avowed to be a secular nation and talked about egalitarianism and fairness, they all endeavors to establish their religion as major and other religions as minor whenever it comes to praxis. In India, Hindu religion is major religion and all other religions, consequently, becomes minor. But in the Western culture, particularly in the US, Hindu religion is the minor religion.

Majority- Minority Binary:

The members of Hindu religious community constitute a very less proportion of Indian- Americans in the United States. In contrast to this, members of minor religious communities of India, such as Sikhs and Christians, existed in relatively large numbers in the United States (Kurien 2006, 725). In such a situation, when members of a particular community have been marginalized religiously, the question of identity and inclusivity and the craving for recognition and acceptance became pivotal concerns. In discussing the tactics of imitating the prototype of Jewish Americans that members belonging to Hindu community are using Prema A. Kurien notes:

This is the route to success that Hindu Americans also want to adopt in their quest to stake a position in American society. The building of temples around the country was followed or in some cases, paralleled, by the formation of a variety of other types of regional and national umbrella Hindu organizations to unify the community, define their identity, and represent their interests (2006, 730).

Foregrounding Exclusivity-Inclusivity Issue(s):

Every now and then members of Hindu community experience identity and inclusivity problems in Western culture because of legion reasons. One such reason is the commercialization process. The process of commercialization includes launching new commodities, services or production methods into commerce, making it available in the market. Usually, it denotes ingress into the mass marketplace. It also involves production, distribution, marketing, sales and vendee's support requisite for commercial profit for manufacturers. A very bizarre truth is that Western people are very much infatuated with Eastern culture and philosophy but another and most repulsive facet of this truth is that Western people misappropriated the images of Hindu Gods and Goddesses solely for commercial benefit. The people of Western culture commend some notions of Eastern culture, e.g., yoga, Eastern convictions of internal and external peace, sexual purity and, lastly, the notion of vegetarianism. On the contrary, these same Western people manufactures the commodities with the images of Hindu deities on them, for instance flip-flop shoes, underwear and doormats. Neoteric trends have manifested the "problematic misappropriation of Hindu icons for sale in unexpected and uncommon places (i.e., bikinis and flip-flops shoes)" (Lee 2011, 73).

Situating the Concept of Commercialization of Religion:

Nowadays, anyone can easily come across with umpteen instances of commercialization of Hindu religion, e.g., the misappropriate use of the images of Hindu deities on shoes, bikinis, toilet seats and walls, lunch boxes, and so on by western people in order to increase the number of consumers for their artifacts and procure as much profit as possible. In his article entitled "Contesting Hindu Material and Visual Cultures, Forging Hindu American Identity and Subjectivity", Jonathan H. X. Lee has discussed two case studies in which he demonstrates the conflict between Hindu Americans and Corporate America which begins because of the misappropriation of the images of Hindu deities. First case involves American Eagle Outfitters, a textile corporation, which launched flip-flop shoes in April 2003 with the image of Lord Ganesha. Instantaneously, after its display, two Indian American organizations initiated expeditions and demanded the withdrawal of all flip-flops. Subsequently, AEO issues a letter in which it apologizes and assures to remove all flip-flop shoes (Lee 2011, 78-79). Indeed, these sorts of cases require serious attention because these practices desecrate and opprobrium a specific religious minority group. As Jonathan H. X. Lee describe: "Objects with Hindu religious icons matter- or should matter- to us because it is not only about Hinduism per se, or religious transgressions or religious piety. Instead, these things matter because it makes known the power of ethnic identity and cultural nationalism in our modern world" (2011, 83). The notions of identity and inclusivity are perpetually troubling the members of minority groups and their deprecation against these practices insinuates their attempt to be included and identified by the majority community. Actually, the term inclusivity can be expounded as a process, quality or policy of including several different types of people, such as marginalized people, excluded people, people with disability and member of minority groups and treat them all justly and equitably. Videlicet, it is the task or praxis of not excluding any person on the account of their gender, race, class, disability, etc.

There are few people and organizations which oppugned against these kinds of commodities and solicited that the manufacture corporations must remove the commodities from their store and online catalogue forthwith. Notwithstanding, there are certain cases when they do not attain success to some extent sine manufacturers do not yen to withdraw such de rigueur commodities for which there are myriad consumers and which are in great demand in the mass market. Time and again we encounter umpteen instances of this phenomenon. Evidently, Nina Agrawal discusses the case of Rajan Zed who is a Reno based Hindu activist and who raised his voice numerous times in opposition to these types of commercial commodities enounced that oftentimes he got information related to "some insensitive commercial use of a Hindu image". Further, Zed shares his experience with Amazon where he asked Amazon to remove from its online catalogue skateboards and bedding with the adornment of images of Hindu deities. Zed, also, bade the online retailers such as Wayfair and Kess In House "to stop selling bathmats, doormats, dog beds, leggings and rugs with images of Ganesha". One of the many reasons behind the hike up of religious images on artistic and commercial products is that the people of Indian background are comparatively new emigre community in the US. Indians constitute approximately one percent of the total denizens of US and Hindus just a fraction of that. Most of the Americans do not cognize any Hindu and, even if they do, Hindu religious and cultural practices, beliefs etc. are unbeknown to them. Nevertheless, in spite of this fact, some people altercated that one facet of this is western people are very much enthralled with Hindu religion and philosophy and, on the contrary, they choose to be nescient when it barricades their commercial mileage. When a

specific community made it known to manufacture companies that this modus of using the religious images is pejorative the manufacturers, sporadically, continue to use such commodities because they put commercial expedience above everything (Agrawal 2018).

Lately, India Today Web Desk highlights a very egregious matter in which Ankita Mishra, a queer Indian- American woman, dredge up the images of Hindu Deities on the toilet walls of The House of Yes, a New York pub. Ankita visited the pub on Sept. 29, 2018. It was not her first visit to this pub. Heretofore, she had visited this pub numerous times and “had too many beautiful moments here to recount” as she wrote in an email to the pub on Oct 03, 2018. However, she used the VIP bathroom first time on that day. Further, Ankita recounts in the email: “At first when I reached for toilet paper from the dispenser, it did not register that I was looking at Mahadev. Slowly I raised my eyes to take in the room and noticed all of them- Ganesha, Saraswati, Brahma, Shiva, Radha and Krishna, Lakshmi, and inexplicably right above the toilet, Kali”. After her horrendous experience this time in the pub, she could not resist herself from evincing her ire and took to popular social media apps, such as Facebook and Instagram, and posted about her experience. One of the vital facts which she mentions in her email to the pub is: “Hindu, Buddhist and South Asian culture continues to constantly be exploited through Western capitalism in the name of spiritual awakening and sexual exploration”. Ankita receives an apologetic email from Kae Burke, a co- founder/ creative director at House of Yes, as a response to her email in which Kae apologizes and promises to demolish and realign the walls of the VIP bathroom in a different style (India 2018). In such conditions, the question of inclusivity and identity becomes crucial issues. Oft, people of Indian American community found themselves in such a situation when they face humiliations and encounter misapprehension and misappropriation of their religion and culture in their day-to-day life in the US. Sometimes because of the lack of spunk and sometimes because of the notion of being a member of a minor community, people do not raise their voice against such wrong socio- economic praxis and remain silent.

Problem(s) of Muslim Minority in India:

While talking about Indian framework, incontrovertibly, Hindu religion is the major religion of this nation where as Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, etc. constitutes the religious minority communities of India. Muslims are the biggest minority community of India. It is conspicuous that after the partition several Muslims did not leave India and prefer to stay here since they deemed India as their abode. A very riveting fact is that Indian constitution does not define the term “minority” even though it uses the term minority and its plural forms in Article 29, 30, 350A and 350B. Ergo, there has been enough controversy about which group constitute the minority community in India. The Apex Court of India upholds that “for the purpose of Article 30 of the Indian Constitution, a minority- whether linguistic or religious- is determinable with reference to a state and not by taking into consideration the population of the country as a whole” (Cheema 2018, 2). In India, Shia as well as Sunni Muslim communities live ubiquitously. Muslims of India had significantly contributed in forging Indian literature, culture, poetry, music and architecture. Notably, the history of India very clearly manifests that Indian Muslims holds several prominent designations, such as chief justice, president, vice president, etc. in multifarious spheres ranging from government to science, culture, etc. The

organizations of Indian Muslims espoused the republican Indian political framework and Indian foreign policy as well (Lal 2004, 297).

Albeit, despite all this, one cannot rebut the veracity of the fact that members of Muslim communities confront with myriads issues in contemporary Indian circo. The statesmen of India seize the opportunity of manipulating them during the time of elections for political victory. As Sali Augustine explicate: “The element of identity politics that is emerging in the developing economy, combined with religious sentiments, brings new issues and conflicts in a democratic situation. India’s democratic institutions have encouraged mixing religion with politics so as to utilize minority votes to gain political power” (2009, 65). Because of the calculating nature of politicians, the rimose between Hindu and Muslim communities continue to enlarge. There are extensive sectarian frays in India after the freedom due to which countless impeccable denizens were slaughtered and, consequently, the populace has been separated on the grounds of the Hindu majority versus the Muslim minority. There are oodles occurrences related to religious and sectarian riots throughout India. All these occurrences lead to the further enlargement of the rimose between Hindu and Muslim communities (Augustine 2009, 66).

Several situations crop up after the independence of India in which religious minorities faced the problem of inclusivity and identity in the multicultural ambience of India. They had a yen to be included and identified by the central and state government of India. Many a time, however, they encountered serious threats and humiliations owing to their religion. One such case has been represented in the recent Bollywood movie *Manto* which is released in Indian theaters on Sept. 21st, 2018. It is a biographical movie based on the life and works of the famous Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto. The background of the movie is set amidst the India’s freedom struggle against the British Empire and, then, after the independence of India on Aug 15th, 1947. From the inception of the movie, we see that after the freedom of India Manto prefers to bide in his ashore city of Bombay as he considered it his home. At this juncture, the clash between Hindu and Muslim communities was in its extreme form. We saw a very poignant scene in this movie in which the family of Shyam, Manto’s friend, was compelled to scam to Pakistan due to a Muslim horde invasion. Shyam furiously accosted that he could have murdered Manto as well. Aghast and hurt, a non- practicing Muslim, Manto, suddenly becomes conscious of his religious identity and the vulnerabilities that come with it. He expeditiously takes the plunge of going to Pakistan. In the ensuing scenes we saw Manto in Lahore. Manto never completely accepts Lahore as his home. In Lahore, he struggles with an increasing sense of detachment. This is a very tear- jerking scene where we watch that a Muslim who regarded Bombay as his home was helplessly went to Pakistan when he find that his religious and cultural identity and existence was in serious danger (*Manto* 2018).

While discussing about the religious issues and challenges faced by the religious minority communities in India after its freedom from the British rule, it is requisite to note that India has been a laic, republic and multicultural nation from the time of its freedom. Albeit, in contemporary milieu, innumerable incidents occurred when members of religious minority communities sense that their rights has been disrupted. Frequently, the government of India neglects its constitutional liabilities to defend the rights of religious minorities at national as well as at state level (Cheema 2018, 1). As

Dr. Iqtidar Karmat Cheema notes: “Violence against religious minorities, discrimination, forced conversions, and environments with increased instances of harassment and intimidation of religious minorities are not new phenomena in India, as they have occurred under both the Congress Party and Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) governments” (2018, 1).

In the eon of the post-Independence India there has not been even one political party of Muslims which achieve any success. One of the umpteen determinants for this is that since the time of partition members of Muslim communities did not incline to ally themselves to any Muslim political party due to the apprehension of being treated as anti-nationalist or as separatist for that matter. Few doyens of Indian Muslims surmised that this puzzlement on the part of Muslims to forge any Muslim political party persists because of the anticipatory repercussions. Another reason for this is that in most of the territories of India, Muslim people do not constitute a majority and, ergo, there are the chances of not procuring enough endorsement for constituting of a national political party. Lastly, members of Muslim communities are infamous for cliquism and for friction throughout India. Moreover, Indian Muslim communities have emboldened voters to give their votes to a particular political party or candidate who seemed to be congruent for the Muslim minority groups (Lal 2004, 298). The prejudiced notions against Muslim groups have adversely affected their access to rudimentary facilities, viz., education, abode, métier, et al. In Indian milieu, in comparison to Hindus, people belonging to Muslim groups “have a lower family income and lower levels of literacy”. Besides, they have been inadequately represented in professional as well as governmental institutions. In India, the prestige of conventional madrassas had inadvertently influenced the Muslim maneuverability. Myriad Muslim people prefer to send their broods to these madrassas rather than to laic public educational institutions. Hence, they are instrumental in retarding the caliber of their broods to acquire the requisite education in order to “integrate into modern Indian higher education and society”. This has been resulted into the piecemeal dis severance of members of Muslim communities far from the dominant groups and into the feeling of detachment and mustiness in the Muslim groups. The feeling which arose from the assertion that the political organization does not perform its statutory obligations towards the Muslim groups as it does towards the ruling Hindu groups has also been one of the significant determinants (Lal 2004, 310).

It is crucial to discuss the conditions of Muslim minorities in the present scenario. The elections are just few months away and it provides occasions to people for demonstrating, now and then, umpteen mutinies and campaigns and partake in such activities as governance and decision- making. During these days, the political parties are compelled to take into consideration the requirements of Dalits, peasants and informal workers or the Marathas. Amidst all these populace, Muslims, who constitutes the largest minority group in India, “remain absent from public discourse despite their poverty, educational and economic backwardness. . . .” Muslim chieftains and statesmen who appertains to secular parties remain reticent which symbolizes their constrained condition. One of the reasons for their reticence is that there is no existence of any “democratic social leadership” in the group. Political vindications are indispensable for the affluence of minorities and backward communities. These facts fabricated “a situation where there is little awareness about the condition of ordinary Muslims and nobody cares for the absence of Muslims in a crowded public discourse” (Soman 2018, 6).

Conclusion:

In the concluding part, it is imperative to talk about the minority people who reside in every society whether in Western nations or in Eastern nations. What matters is that in any situation their rights must not be violated by any person or organization and their requirements must be fulfilled by the society. They must be treated equally and must have access to every facility. The above-mentioned examples are crucial to discuss because they took place in our day-to-day life and we cannot shun them, even if we want.

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