

Antonio F. X. Rodrigues  
Mount St. Alphonsus, Bangalore

## Religious Sects : Problems and Challenges to National Integration

From the start let me confess that I did not go to any Archives to find the information needed for this article. Rather I dug up the facts as found in the current literature and in the reports filed in by daring fact-finders.

### The Conceptual Framework

Today when dealing with religious topics, first of all we must make sure of the meaning we have in mind and want to convey by the word "religion". Psychologist From, for example, has defined "religion" as "any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion". It appears as if this notion of "religion" has been accepted, made its own and further expanded by the WORLD CONFERENCE OF RELIGIONS ON RELIGIONS AND MAN, held in Cochin (15-21 November, 1981). The final declaration of this Conference shows that the members were aware of the problem which concerns us here. In paragraph 8 we find these words: ". . . we had to face the problem of what we meant by religion. We all agreed that religion is first and foremost what truly religious people say and do and are. . ." <sup>1</sup> Apparently this would mean that we ought to observe 'truly religious people' without knowing what 'religion' means. Whatever that may be, we must note, however, that these definitions of religion could very well leave out the TRANSCENDENT from religion. In India, the religious sects we are dealing with in this article admit the transcendent element, if not always on philosophical grounds<sup>2</sup>, at least on the level of practice. All that

1. *The final Declaration: "World Conference of Religions on Religions and Man" 15-21 Nov. 1981, No. 8, The Examiner (Bombay), Nov. 28, 1981, p.757.*
2. For example, Jaina Philosophy and Buddhist Hinayana Philosophy do not admit God.

could be labelled as 'religion' in India even what is derived from philosophies which do not expressly admit God, do accept the bondage of *Karma* which makes no sense unless it is assumed that there is a transcendent universe wherein each man is given the joys or sorrows in this life, according to each one's merits and demerits accumulated in the past.

Here, again, we are not dealing only with the great religions like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, but also with their sub-divisions wherein sectarian tendency is evident. Among these we would include also the various Christian Churches, for we must confess that tensions among these also have caused problems to National Integration.

### The National Integration

In *Data India* (January-March 1981) we find that the population of India counted in 1981, is 684 million. This means a growth of 24.75 in 1980-81. We must recall that in 1951, the population of India was only 360 million which would show that within the period of 30 years it has doubled despite all the fanfare concerning the success of the 'birth-control' and the 'family planning' campaign.

This huge population of India though politically constituting one Nation and governed by one Central Government, still cannot be said to be integrated. It cannot be said that our 684 millions though constituting one Nation, are indeed one people today 34 years after we achieved the status of a Sovereign Nation. Economic and social disparities and above all religious rivalries keep our millions in a state of seething disintegration. The President of India, speaking to the Governors of States, in New Delhi, in March this 1981, said: "Despite economic development and availability of grain in plenty, a large section of the people is left undernourished for want of purchasing capacity. About 50% of the country's population still live under the poverty line ... the number of business houses with assets of 200 million or more increased from 42 in 1964 to 101 in 1976; in 1975-76, the top 5% of the households in the country enjoyed 22.6% of the total income, while the bottom 5% shares less than 1%."<sup>3</sup>

3. "Conference of Governors", *Data India* : (New Delhi), March 1981.

Although the economic disparities is only one of the factors causing problems for the National Integration, many give the highest importance to it as the one factor most responsible. For example, at a recent Research Seminar held at the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre on THE INDIAN CHURCH IN THE STRUGGLE FOR A NEW SOCIETY (Oct. '81), great emphasis is laid on the "unjust capitalist structures of economy and society in general". This is stated as "the root cause"<sup>4</sup> of presentday maladies.

Our analysis however has shown that we must dig deeper below the economic level to find the 'root cause' of the Indian malaise. If there be one single fundamental cause for the problems faced by National Integration it is RELIGIOUS SECTARIANISM.

### **Right to Freedom of Religion**

The Constitution of India while declaring the country as a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic Republic has guaranteed among other Fundamental Rights, the Right to Freedom of Religion.<sup>5</sup> "Subject to public order, morality and health and to other provisions...all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion." These words are indeed as clear as daylight and there is no doubt about their meaning. Moreover, the commonest belief in India is that all religions lead to the same God just as the many rivers flow into the same ocean. Consequently, religion far from being the cause of disunity and disintegration, should lead all the sections of the Indian population towards oneness and National Integration. In fact, India is known for its tolerance towards the peoples of different creeds and on the face of it, it appears that the different religious sects should not create any problems to National Integration and that it should rather automatically foster integration and lead all sectors of our great country towards solid unity. Yet the facts show the opposite to be true, as we shall presently see.

### **The Existential Situation in India**

From the beginning of our Independence, the country has been wounded and has bled due to religious sectarian fanaticism: the

4. "Conclusions", *The Indian Church in the struggle for a New Society* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1931), p. 9.

5. *The Constitution of India* (as modified up to Sept. 1961), part III, Art. 25.

Hindu-Muslim clashes that led to the partition of India. Possibly the seeds of these bloody clashes—by way of possibilities regarding what could be achieved through such a clash—had been sown at the time of the famous Mutiny in 1857. Historians do say that the ruling Sovereign at the time cleverly used the sectarian forces present in the different religions of the people, promoting at times friction among the Muslims and the Hindus, at other times solidarity among the minorities, sometimes siding with the minorities against the majority of Hindus for their own political purposes. Whatever the verdict of history, the fact remains that despite the spirit of religious tolerance proclaimed high and loud, since that time again and again, religious difference has been used either to achieve political supremacy or to enforce social and economic oppression of the weaker sections of the population.

Today if we look around the many States which form the Federal Republic of India, from the South to the North of the country, we are inevitably struck by what is taking place due to the multiplicity of religious sects which take for granted the caste-system, and which in turn generates communalism and use 'religion' for various ends of its own.

It has been made out that the Hindus in Tamil Nadu are the victims of 'fanatical casteism' which is itself based on religious beliefs and supported by *dharma*. In the restaurants, for example, there are different sets of tumblers for serving tea, one for the harijans and one for the rest of the Hindus. The harijans are not allowed free entry in the temples. It is indeed with bitter, hurt feelings that a Hindu writes :

If a rich man is rich today it is because of the good (*punya*) that he has accumulated. If a non-Brahmin pariah who toiled in the construction of a temple is still not allowed to enter the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple, it is because of the sins he had accumulated in the past. But if the Brahmin, who did not even lift a single brick in the construction of that very temple, is able to enter the *sanctum sanctorum*, touch the idol and perform *abhisekam* (libation) and *archanas* (offering) it is because of his favourable bank balance of *punya*.<sup>6</sup>

6. *Sunday* (Calcutta), Oct. 4th, 1981.

The well of the village is not allowed to be polluted by a harijan drawing water from it. In some places the harijans are barred from using footwear and whenever a harijan comes across a caste-Hindu, the harijan has to unwind the turban and tuck under his armpit as a mark of reverence.

The curse of birth is supposed to be carried by the harijan wherever he goes, be it to Islam or Christianity. Innumerable reasons have been put forth to explain the recent mass conversions of Hindus to Islam. But some Hindus maintain that the unpalatable truth is that conversions took place because of the hegemony of the 'high-caste caucus' in Hindu society and that those converted were treated like insects and that they were exploited in the name of *Shāstras*, *Manusmṛiti* and *varṇāshyama dharma* which posits a casteist society.

The Hindus who are not harijans are classified in Tamil Nadu for example into two broad divisions both of which are further subdivided into several classes or sects. These are again further divided into more sects. Sometimes these sects or classes and groups are also known as communities. We have, for instance the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. Among the former we have the Aiyars and the Aiyangars. Among the Aiyars we have the Vadamas, the Brahcharaṇam, the Ashta Sahasram. Among the Aiyangars we have the Vadagalais, the Thengalais. Among the non-Brahmins besides the traditional division of Kshatriyas, the Vaiśyas and Śudras, we have the Mudaliars, the Naickers, the Naidus, the Chettiars, the Vāṇiyas, the Pillais, the Devars, the Gounders, the Nadars, the Reddiars, the Udayars, the Moopanars. And each of these has further subdivisions.

A casual observer might classify these and others in the North of India as mere castes and sub-castes or as sections of the same caste and within one religion and therefore conclude that they have nothing to do with 'religious sects' as such. It would be a mistake to do so. For some are Vaisnavas while others are Śaivites and so on; all, however, forming well-knit communities which are often found to be quite closed. We have the famous case of the Conjeevaram Temple which was taken right up to the Supreme Court of India. Its purport was to decide which sect or community should or could have the privilege of having its own symbol stamped on the head of the Conjeevaram Temple elephant's head.

Such a phenomenon is not limited to the South or to Tamil Nadu in particular. In the Northern States a similar phenomenon of rivalry among religious sects is at the basis of the social and political life even to the point of showing that most of the political upheavals in the North are merely religious sectarian rivalry camouflaged. It is well-known how in Bihar, politics is caste-ridden. In U.P. Brahminism plays a decisive role in public life and administration. Those who are in need of jobs testify to this role. The lands are left uncultivated because the Vaisias refuse to work in the fields, maintaining that work has to be done by Sudras. In the whole of the Hindi-speaking belt, the Jats have the upper hand, the power, by virtue of which comes from the religious community they form. In Gujarat the prolonged war against reservation of seats and jobs for the scheduled castes, turned out to be really a war waged by certain sects to protect themselves even at the cost of preventing other sects from changing their social status.

What is it that is going on in Punjab today? Whatever political cover may be given to it, actually it is rivalry between the Hindus and the Sikhs. It is a rivalry between religious sects; though Sikhism is an offshoot of Hinduism, it is now trying to protect its own interests as it feels threatened. The aged editor of **Punjab Kesari** was trying to unveil the facts which revealed the true motives behind the outward show of the political stand. Can anyone classify the Nirankari movement as any other than religious sectarianism? Nirankaris, a religious sect of Sikhism, and who accept people of scheduled caste into their fold, are in conflict with the official Sikhism. On their part, the Akali Dal are putting up their politico-religious demands to protect the interests of the Sikhs from the Hindus so that they can assert the autonomy of their religion. The Hindus, however, feel insecure on account of the fundamentalism of Sikhism. The emerging leader in Punjab today, Sant Bhindranwale, is a religious leader. For example, the Head Priest of Akal Takt, at the Golden Temple, and the highest authority of the Sikh hierarchy, has not only announced his support to Sant Bhindranwale but declared recently at Amritsar, that "Sant Bhindranwale's sect is a very religious sect. From the beginning it has been propagating religion and the study of religion."<sup>7</sup> The very appendage 'Sant' attached to the names of leaders, shows that their main thrust is religious even though they may be dabbling

---

7. *Ibid.*

in politics. Thus we have Sant Longowal, Sant Bhindrawale, Sant Kharak Singh of another sect called the Nihang Sect etc.

The whole trouble which is going on in Arunachal Pradesh and in Nagaland is basically religious in that the tribals who never belonged to Hindu religion, are now being told that their religion and culture are Hindu. In Assam we are witnessing a murderous rivalry which is religious and is spear-headed by the protagonists of Hindu Raj, the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS), who have already established more than 2,000 training centres in Assam. The ryots in Aligarh, Jamshedpur, Moradabad, Biharasherif and Hyderabad are known to be of the same nature. Basically religion has been the real motivation for the strife among different communities and of killings and destruction of property.

When we turn to our Muslim brethren, we find that there have been clashes not only between them and the Hindus but also between different sects of the Muslim faith. In Lucknow, for example, the rift between the Sunnis and the Shias is being used and exploited by the influential followers of these sects who come from elsewhere, maybe from Iran, for example.

Among the Muslims also it has been noticed that discrimination is practised according to the origin of the believers; for example, separate timings for prayers in the Mosque for the different groups. The new harijan converts go in a group and offer prayers at the Mosque, taking care to avoid the time when the Muslims by birth are expected to come. It is even reported that in some places at least, Muslim women leave the tanks where they go for cleaning and washing at the sight of the arrival of the neo-muslim women.

With reference to Christians it must be remarked that even these do not escape the label of sects and sectarianism. Many non-Christians consider the diversity of Churches as a variation of sects which exist among them. Some Hindu castes or sects and the inter-marriage between the people belonging to them is not a common practice. Even though Christians do not clash with the people of other religions, yet in recent times sectarian fanaticism based on language groups has shown its ugly face in a few places. For the non-Christians this is analogous to what happens among them.

We get a clearer picture of the conflict between the various religious sects when we consider the political activity in a few sectors

of the communities. Actually we could say that what is happening today in the country is reminiscent of what happened in the time of Jesus Christ which is described in Chapter XI of St. John's Gospel: "So the Chief Priests and the Pharisees gathered the Counsel and said: 'what are we to do? . . . if we let him (Jesus) go on thus, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation'."

One would ask, what was the connection between people believing in Jesus and the coming of the Romans? It may be made clear again by another analogy. Recently, after the news spread that a village in Tamil Nadu, Meenakshipuram had been converted from Hinduism to Islam, a big *sammelan* (public meeting) was held in New Delhi at the now famous Boat House. It was organized by Hindu Virat Samaj which has been formed recently to promote Hindu solidarity. At the *sammelan* a resolution was passed in these words: "If this menace of conversion goes on unabated . . . the day will not be far off when the Hindus will be a minority in their own dear motherland and that will be the end of Hinduism in India."

What is even more important to note is that while this section of Hindus were proclaiming their concern for Hinduism, another section of Hindus, led by Jagjivan Ram, was holding a parallel meeting at the same time and nearby at New Delhi, urging the harijans to beware of their priests, the Brahmins, and telling them they should practise their religion without going to the Brahmins. This parallel *sammelan* also condemned Hindu Virat Samaj as 'Political' aiming at perpetuating the oppression of the harijans. And another Samaj was formed called ALL INDIA SAMPRADAYA VIRODHI COMMITTEE which distributed literature condemning the Hindu Virat Samaj and its *sammelan*.

Often it is found that political jargon is only a cover for the religious sectarian rivalry. Jagjivan Ram was asked a question regarding the possible reasons for the conversion of Hindus to Islam in such great numbers as at Meenakshipuram. His reply was: ". . . if poverty is the reason, then why haven't the very poor Brahmins who are worse off than some of the successful harijans, left Hinduism?"

The organizations like the RSS, which is the youth wing of Jana Sangha, Akhand Bharat, Arya Samaj, Jamaat-e-Islami, Sunis and



Shias etc. often promote sectarian friction. Everything is done to protect ultimately the religion of the followers. Both the Dravida Kazhakam (DK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (DMK) of Tamil Nadu are not more political parties. As a matter of fact these are movements against Brahminism in Hinduism, and take in as members all-Brahmins and non-Brahmins – who stand for a casteless and egalitarian society. It is maintained that DK and the DMK struck at the roots of the high caste exploitation of the lower castes. It is said that E.V. Ramaswami Naicker and C.N. Annadurai, the founders of DK and DMK respectively, were real and dedicated proselytisers. A Hindu writer of renown, 'CHO'-Ramaswami has written: "E.V.R. collected around himself a band of youngsters, who appeared to have no faith either in their mother country or in their religion. And this crowd of misguided men began showering filthy abuses on Hindu gods, and C.N. Annadurai and followers went all out to spread the message of abusive atheism."

The great Periyar is supposed to have advocated that people should throw off the yoke of Brahmin domination because Hindu religion was used as a smoke-screen to perpetuate the *varnāshrama* which professed that a man belonging to a particular caste could seek employment only in the profession of his caste.

In Kashmir, we find the display of headlines like this one: 'HINDUS CONTROL THE PRESS IN INDIA JUST AS DO JEWS IN THE WESTERN WORLD'. In the Broach District of Gujarat, the turmoil about which we read in the papers is due to the oppression of the local tribals by some sections of the higher castes who have succeeded in depriving the tribals of their lands. This has been achieved gradually and not without the backing of religious sectarianism. The tribals who were the owners of the land slowly and imperceptibly find themselves today to be only the labourers on the very land which formerly belonged to them. An identical phenomenon is taking place in the Bilwara district of Rajasthan.

In November 1980, a book has been published by B. Pratap Shukla under the title *What ails India's North-East?* In this book, referring to Assam, the infiltration of Muslims into that State is described as a conspiracy. The Christian Church is called an invisible invader. The Church is accused of encouraging the underground terrorist movements. She is accused of giving monetary help and

ideological support to the terrorists. It states that Christian 'proselytism' not only effects a change of faith and the way of worship but that it also tries and gives the people a separate nationality. The book deliberately misinterprets the Declaration made at the World Council of Churches' meeting in New Delhi in 1961, on the 'Freedom of Religion', by saying that it instigates people to 'betrayal by Christians'. Everybody knows that such misinterpretations are at the basis of the notorious 'Freedom of Religion Bill' introduced in the Parliament some years ago by Mr. Tyagi.

As it is common knowledge today, the Indian National Congress was not originally founded to work for the Independence of India. It was founded to ensure the reservation of jobs for Indians in the British Government Service. Slowly, however, the high castes which succeeded in controlling the organization have knocked out the people of low castes, as many think today, in order to maintain hegemony of their own over all the others. Thus the Justice Party of India was formed to lift the non-Brahmins out of the quagmire of economic and political oppression into which they were pushed by the Brahmins.

### Specific Problems and Challenges

From the above-mentioned medley of facts we can isolate many a problem as specifically relevant to National Integration, consequent on the multiplication of religious sects and their interests which led people into conflict. Perhaps we could identify some of these problems :

1. Even though usually socio-political and economic-military factors are the causes of discrimination among people of the world in India, religion has been used as a catalyst to secure political aims and advantages and thus to dominate others.
2. The different religious sects are fostering communalism in the name of protecting their *Shāshtras* and the *Dharma*, revealing thereby the difficulty for living together in peace and for National Integration.
3. In most cases the real problem is to isolate the religious element from the political and the socio-economic. For the religious sects appear to be political parties and easily mix up political aims with those of religion.

4. From the above study of the existential situation of our country it is pretty obvious that the root cause of problems for the National Integration is not poverty and the economic structure, but the religious fanaticism which has stratified our society on the basis of castes, which in turn are based on religious taboos. This has divided our society into water-tight compartments of numerous segregated communities.
5. We would also mention as a problem for National Integration the fact that many of our people, and thinking persons for that matter, yield to naivety by immediately attributing all the ills of the country to 'the unjust structures of a capitalist system'. The fact is that the unjust structures do exist in India, but we would disagree that this fact is the 'root-cause' of all our ills. In fact, as can be gathered from the facts described above, there is a deeper cause to our ills of disintegration, and that deeper cause is the existence of 'religious sects' closed up within themselves, well protected by the walls of taboos. Because of this fact we find that although formerly socio-political and economic or military factors were the causes of disintegration among the peoples, in our society we find that 'religion' itself is the cause for division and disintegration.
6. The validity of this point of view becomes clearer when we consider the disillusionment of many who are now led to despair of any possibility of National Integration and begin to demand separate states like Kalisthan. It is a fact that all such movements are spear-headed by religious sects.
7. Finally, we must mention as a problem to National Integration the fact that in the measure in which the hold of religion is slackening on the people, superstitious fanaticism is tightening its grip on the mores and interests of many people making them, albeit unobtrusively, intolerant of the adepts of a different religion.

### **A Great Challenge**

Speaking specifically of challenges we must above all, in the first place, become aware of the urgency in dealing with the problems to National Integration. It is acknowledged by many that the problem of National Integration is indeed the most urgent question of today

in India. We could even say that we are sitting on a volcano which could be made to erupt by interested powers from within or even from without. In India, National Integration presents a tremendous challenge due both to racial or caste disparity and to sectarian conflict within religions. And this challenge is made stronger when we find that our country is a union of states with a varied linguistic and cultural background.

### Education as a Task for National Integration

No matter what challenges we meet, what I would single out as the most important task is the *education of our masses*, whether formal or non-formal. There has been an awakening among the masses of India, today. They all want their children to be educated. In educating people we have the golden chance of having people of every sector of our society coming to us freely. It is here where we could teach how to respect one another's feelings and interests, how to live and grow and play together; and all these right from the pupils tender years. We have a noble task to inculcate in the growing minds values on which an egalitarian and integrated society thrives. Unfortunately, however, many of us do not either use this opportunity or care for the 'social uplift' of people; thus deliberately forgetting that it is one thing to give up educational activity and quite another thing to correct the mistakes by which our schools or the educational system came to foster an oppressive system of society.

This challenge to promote a common education becomes stronger specially on two counts: (i) The findings of Cultural Anthropology backed by the findings of UNESCO show clearly that to remove disparities among peoples it is not at all advisable to give them material or even scientific and technological help, but that it is absolutely necessary, first of all, to transmit and to communicate the *Transcultural Values* with the right priorities among these; without the identification and communication of these values it has been found that all the help given merely increases disparities instead of promoting integration. (ii) The fact is that many of our best people are leaving the field of education and choosing to work directly for bringing about change of social and economic structures. Thus they fritter away both the energy and chances they had to foster the discovery and spread of the transcultural values, without which even the change

of oppressive economic structures has proved to be a colossal failure. We should not commit such grave mistakes.

The importance of this challenge of educating people of different religious sects in the transcultural values to foster National Integration, becomes even more evident when we consider the dire consequences of the industrial and technological knowledge imported from other cultures into India. Disappointingly enough, this availability of knowledge and means of highly developed technology instead of removing has only sharpened the disparities among our people thus contributing to further disintegration. For example, in order to abolish poverty, systems of greater production are being fostered and popularized in India. To increase production "capital-intensive" technology though very successful in another cultural milieu has disastrous consequences in India because it does away with the age-old "labour-intensive" methods of production. The cheap and abundant labour available in India will be utilized only minimally and this would give rise to famine and poverty. If people are unable to earn, they will not be in a position to buy food which is available as produced by large machines. Surely India cannot remain in isolation from other nations as it must have trade relations with them. However, without the spread of education in transcultural values to serve as a background for the advanced technology, the latter is merely going to increase the disparity among people. The sooner this situation is remedied the better.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I must point out that it is obvious that the religious leaders must come to an understanding on these transcultural values, I mean, the values through intensive education all over the country. In this respect so far Christians have had a great advantage. Unless effective measures are taken urgently, we are going to lose this advantage and instead of contributing towards National Integration, we will have to blame ourselves for contributing towards National disintegration.