

IDENTITY, RELIGION AND CONFLICT

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In the process of evolution of human societies, identities, as cultural markers, assumed the status of essential feature of societies. It was gradually recognized that identities are intrinsic to social systems. With the advancement of civilizations, identities found vast social space for their advancement, nourishment and recognition. The political support further strengthened this process of advancement. Identities are essentially multi dimensional. It may be noted that multiple elements were subsumed in their formation which added to their profile and accorded them wider dimensions. This development had positive as well as negative implications. On the positive side, the inclusion of multiple dimensions of identities added grandeur and glory to them. The geographical location added the elements of culture, languages, customs and traditions of particular settings which gave distinctive profile to a particular identity. Over a period of time religion, in its structured form, equally became an important and inseparable component of identities.

It is important to note that the negative aspect of identities started appearing in the form of over assertion of their one or the other edge which had its consequences within societies and even beyond. This assertion gave rise to a phenomenon of social exclusiveness which opened the gates of confrontation between and among the groups of people.

Religious edge of Identities

Due to varied political reasons and in view of complexities in the arena of international relations, the process of exclusiveness which was invoked by promoting and projecting the religious edge of identities leading to their over assertion resulted in wider conflicts across the world. One of the mechanisms was to promote a sense of

superiority over other dimensions of an identity at the psychological and emotional levels. A deeper analysis of this contraption reveals the manipulation of religious texts and selective estimation and interpretation of historical developments out of context leading to their projection. A survey of conflicts in different parts of the world for the last more than half a century supports the hypothesis that religion has been used as a device, particularly through indoctrination of minds, to sustain and perpetuate the ongoing violent conflicts. The States in South and South east Asia have been the main play fields of these conflicts.

Special Modules

The different aspects of preparation of religious modules for indoctrination deserve an objective and deeper analysis. It is equally important to underline that these modules were specifically prepared for young and vulnerable minds because their capacities of deep analysis and broader comprehensions are fragile. However, the primary objective of this module, as an analysis of the data reveals, was the selective and distorted use of religious texts particularly relating to Islam. In the historic context, a large number of Islamic scholars and theologians have provided translations and interpretations to Islamic texts. Thus, over a period of time, a large corpora of these works have been providing guidance to the Muslims across the world in conducting and performing their religious affairs. However, doubts have started being raised now about the efficacy and propriety of some of this literature. The evidence is coming to the fore that some of this literature had been manipulated to realize political and strategic objectives. In a conference held in Turkey in 2010 on the contribution of great Islamic theologian, *Ibn-i-Tamiyya*, it was revealed that some of the interpretations attributed to him which sustained the concept of wars and confrontations in certain circumstances articulated in the doctrine of *takfir* were, in fact, manipulated. It is significant to note that the organizers were able to procure the original copies of the works of *Tamiyya* from the archives to establish that the commentaries and explanations attributed to him were not genuine. In fact, the doctrine of *takfir* (excommunication) was advocated by the 20th century Islamist theorist Sayyid Qutb that violence was required to be sanctioned against

corrupt state leaders or society who were deemed to be living in the state of ignorance and disbelief. This doctrine was based on the misinterpretation and deviation of *Ibn-i-Tammiya's* explanation and commentary. The extremist Islamist Organizations like Al-Qaeda made use of this deviation to the hilt. The Saudi monarchs woke up when they were confronted with the situations which were created by the advocates of this very ideology. The large scale mayhem and bloodshed which has been caused and justified on the basis of spurious interpretations and explanations is yet another matter. Moreover, it is a big challenge which needs to be addressed by the Muslims across the globe. Prince Salman bin Khalid, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia claims that he would take a lead in many directions in addressing the distortions which have been introduced in Islam. It may be mentioned that, historically, after the consolidation of present day Saudi Arabia by its founder, King Saud, his close confidante Abdul Wahhab, under an agreement with the King, undertook to revamp the Islam and its doctrines. His interpretations gained currency and are referred as *Wahhabiyat*. A proper School of Islamic Law and Practice emerged on the basis of Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. It is generally believed that this literal translation and interpretation established the strict form of Islam as a religion. During a debate in the UN Commission (as it was called then) on Human Rights about a decade ago on the 'Human Rights and Women', the Saudi delegate admitted before the Commission that many a practice pertaining to women which go in the name of Islam were based on the social customs of Saudi society. The emergence and perpetuation of Wahhabi School of Islam has equally led to the assertion of the followers of other eminent interpreters and theologians of Islam which have been creating intra-religious conflicts and confrontations.

The sharpening of religious edge of an Identity pertaining to Islam (which may be true of other religions also) has brought forth another dimension of sectarian distinctions in Islam. These distinctions which are sustained by the interpretations and explanations of scholars and theologians who are designated as *Ulema* have developed in the form of schools. These schools, as long as they provide guidance to the group of their followers, have been functioning harmoniously in the societies.

However, with the patronage of Kings, monarchs or autocratic rulers to one or the other group has resulted in violent confrontations in societies. The violence and mayhem in Iraq for almost a decade now provides an illustration to the point. The violence perpetuated by different violent groups to gain political control in the territories of their operational areas pledging allegiance to one or the other sect has become the order of the so called Islamic World. The invocation of sectarian allegiance provides a space to these groups among sections of public to facilitate their operations. The overt and covert assistance provided by the international players pursuing their respective agendas has added to the complexity of the problem. The ongoing conflict in Syria provides an illustration to the point. In mid sixties Afghanistan was made a laboratory of this machination to deal with the then USSR. In an interview with *Washington Post* recently, Prince Salman said that during the cold war period when Soviet influence was increasing, the Western countries had requested Saudi Arabia to provide funds to Islamic *Madrassahas* (Seminaries) all over the world to promote extremist Islam to confront the then USSR. The rise and consolidation of *Taliban* in Afghanistan may be traced to a special module which was created for this purpose.

There is a growing global concern to address the issue of invoking religious teachings which promote exclusiveness and sustain the violent assertion of the groups. It is being argued that a moderate approach towards religion should mitigate the disastrous consequences of this phenomenon. This brings us to an important aspect of the preparation of religious modules.

Institutional support

A particular religious module, after it has been prepared, needs a proper institutional support to make it operational. Thus, as experience indicates, specialized organizations and institutions have been established to incorporate these teachings among the learners. In multi-cultural and multi-religious societies these teachings have been made a part of general curriculum of the institutions. This facility is in

recognition of freedom of choice which is an inherent part of human rights to enable the people to learn and pursue a particular thought and philosophy. However, it has been observed that most of these institutions have adopted the traditional interpretations and commentaries of religious texts which promote an ideology of exclusiveness. The spiritual and larger inclusive aspects of religions have been sidelined in majority of these texts. This process has resulted in the stagnation of minds and blurred the perceptions of those who follow them. A cursory estimation of the functioning of these institutions and organizations provides that their functionaries wield an important clout. Historically, this power had been recognized by Kings and monarchs. In a democratic order this influence has found recognition through other means. In passing, it may be mentioned that in many parts of the world, military dictators and autocratic rulers in cohorts with these functionaries have put their citizens under subjugation and deprived them of their democratic rights. This phenomenon is a stark reality even today.

The foregoing observations and brief analysis should lead us to adopt a broader and universal approach to the issue of Religion and Identity. It may be underlined that the initiatives to bring the religious institutions imparting religious instructions under scrutiny would be of little help. A new transcendental approach is need of the hour. It is equally important to recognize that language and culture of a particular identity have greater scope of inclusiveness and accommodation unless these very edges are also sharpened to promote chauvinism. ■