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Inter-Religious Tensions in Multi-Religious India: Challenges to Social Harmony

Minakshi Sardar*

Abstract

Plurality and unity in diversity are unique features of the Indian social setup. The constitutional ethos promises equality, plurality and liberty within a social, secular and democratic republic founded on the principle of fraternity. However, inter-religious tensions continue to be a significant source of conflict in India and pose a serious challenge to the constitutional ethos of mutual tolerance and co-existence. In recent years, communal violence and religion-based incidents have intensified inter-religious tensions, with wider implications for individuals, communities and the state. This paper draws on the primary findings of an all-India field study on youth perceptions, titled "Social Distancing and Social Cohesion among Religious Communities in India: A Study among College Youth," by Lancy Lobo, Minakshi Sardar, and Yatish Kumar (2026, mimeograph). The study was conducted in 2025 and examined youth perceptions of the factors contributing to social distancing among religious communities in India. Drawing on these perceptions and opinions, the paper examines how communal tensions influence social interaction, weaken social cohesion and create challenges for social harmony in a multi-religious society. The paper applies Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory to examine how ingroup and outgroup identities shape interaction among religious communities living alongside one another. It also draws on Morton Deutsch's cooperative approach, Thomas-Kilmann's collaborative model and Lederach's Conflict Transformation framework within a broader conflict-resolution perspective to examine comfort, acceptance and adjustability among inter-religious communities in India. It further explores interculturalism as a cooperative approach to transforming conflict into constructive inter-religious harmony in the multi-religious country.

Keywords: religion, religious tensions, conflict, violence, identity, youth, social harmony, interculturalism.

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1. Introduction

India has long been home to diverse religions, languages, communities and cultures. Its civilisational heritage is closely associated with the idea of 'unity in diversity', reflecting the coexistence of multiple identities within a common political and social framework. The makers of the Constitution envisioned India as a socialist, secular, democratic republic in which different communities could coexist in harmony and pluralism. In recent years, though, communal tensions and violence-based incidents have raised concerns about the strength of social cohesion. Religion-based differences, when accompanied by friction, intolerance, and hostility, can weaken social relationships and affect the broader social fabric. These developments raise questions about the constitutional values of justice, fraternity and equality that underpin India's plural social order.

The coexistence of different religious communities, social discontent and religion-based inter-community distancing are not new phenomena in India. Communal divisions have deep historical roots in colonial and modern India. Several episodes have reflected tension and disharmony among religious communities, including the 1969 Gujarat riots, the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits from Jammu and Kashmir in 1989, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and subsequent communal riots across many parts of country, the Gujarat riots of 2002, the Delhi riots of 2020, the Nuh violence of 2023 and many instances of violence around Ram Navami celebrations in different parts of the country. These episodes have influenced perceptions of community relations and contributed to the wider debate over communal tension in India. Communal tensions in the early 1990s, though, were also shaped by globalisation and the initial phase of economic liberalisation. However, in more recent years, existing tensions have interacted with political and religious polarisation. According to a 2025 report by the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism, India witnessed 59 incidents of communal violence in 2024, higher than the 32 incidents in 2023, representing a near 84 per cent increase in religious violence in the country.[1]

Communalism, as Chandra (1954) argues, is defined as "the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion, they have, as a

result, common social, political and economic interests."[2] Identity is an important factor in understanding communal tension in a multi-religious society. Fukuyama (2018) argues that identity "focuses people's natural demand for recognition of their dignity and provides language for expressing the resentments that arise when such recognition is not forthcoming."[3] Identity-based recognition, particularly around caste, class and religion, has therefore become an important component of political and social life.

Communal-based identity often creates binaries by conditioning the concept of me/us vs them and influencing cognitive actions, individual- or group-based attitudes, behaviour, and perceptions of self and the other. Othering based on socio-religious identity, which leads to social ruptures, escalates social distancing. Commonly shared identities, whether religion, caste, class or gender, create bonding among members. Connecting through a shared identity creates an ingroup. People who do not share a common identity or affinity become the outgroup, which has a different identity from the ingroup.

Religion-based identities can similarly create ingroups and outgroups. Members may develop a sense of affinity with followers of a particular faith or with those who share particular religious values and sentiments. Those outside that shared identity may be viewed as belonging to another group. These distinctions can contribute to contestation between religious communities. The blurring of the distinction between religious identity and religion itself has also been associated with the development of communalism. Nandy (2004) argues that communalism is shaped by the 'fear of the other', observing that "communal violence is triggered more often by secular issues" and "precipitated as part of political strategy."[4]

Communal tension in India must be viewed against the broader backdrop of the country's political polarisation. The escalation of communal tensions has broader repercussions for society and everyday life. It manifests in several forms, including hate speech, the use of violence, riots, injustices, distrust, and hatred, impacting social cognitive interactions and unity among people. Communal tension, with a rise in intolerance and contestations of religion-based identity rather than citizenship identity, has shaped diverse narratives on religion. The narratives and counter-narratives over religion have only escalated the inter-

community tensions in the country. It has implications for social harmony, unity and fraternity. The constant struggle between religions creates binaries that disrupt social equilibrium, increase social distance and affect social affinity and cognitive behaviour. The 2021 Pew Research Center report 'Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation' provides an important perspective on these attitudes. It found that "despite sharing certain values and religious beliefs – as well as living in the same country, under the same constitution – members of India's major religious communities often don't feel they have much in common with one another."[5] The report found that 66 per cent of Hindus considered themselves very different from Muslims, while 64 per cent of Muslims expressed a similar view regarding Hindus.

Pearce (2004) argues that greater diversity in ways of life and religious and ethnic backgrounds, combined with a weaker sense of shared moral consensus, can affect social solidarity and support for a welfare state.[6] Empathy, mutual tolerance and acceptance remain important components of social unity and cohesion. They also contribute to a society's capacity to manage differences peacefully.

This paper examines inter-religious conflict and tension in India through findings from a study of youth perceptions. It considers how religious tensions affect social interaction and examines the possibilities for conflict transformation through cooperative approaches to conflict resolution. It also explores interculturalism as an approach to strengthening social harmony in a multi-religious society like India.

2. Conceptualising Inter-Religious Interactions in Pluralistic Societies.

Tajfel and Turner's *Social Identity Theory* (1979) provides a useful framework for understanding how identity influences social interaction and cohesion. According to the theory, individuals tend to identify with particular groups based on religion, nationality, class and other forms of social affiliation. These groups are commonly understood as the 'ingroup', while those perceived as outside the group are understood as the 'outgroup'. Such distinctions can produce the notions of othering (me/we vs they/others) and influence social interaction between people who identify with different communities.

The theory identifies four major principles. The first is social categorisation, which Tajfel and Turner describe as "cognitive tools that segment, classify and order the

social environment" and which help individuals participate in different forms of social action while establishing their place within society.[7] When these categories are shared among members of a group, they can also contribute to the development of 'social stereotypes'. The second principle is social comparison. Social categorisation is connected to how individuals understand their position in society relative to other groups. Social categories acquire meaning through comparison by allowing individuals to distinguish their own group from others. The third principle is social identity. Social identity develops through comparisons between the ingroup and the outgroup. Tajfel describes it as an individual's self-concept based on "his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership."[8] The fourth principle concerns self-esteem. Within Social Identity Theory, group membership can contribute to an individual's sense of self-worth. When group membership is highly salient, self-esteem can influence intergroup behaviour and shape how individuals respond to members of other groups.

Lederach's Conflict Transformation framework[9], Morton Deutsch's cooperative approach[10] and Thomas-Kilmann's collaborative model[11] provide additional perspectives for understanding the prospects and challenges of inter-religious harmony.

Religion is a complex and sensitive area of social life, and understandings of religion differ across individuals, societies and cultures. These differences can contribute to latent tensions as well as direct social conflict. As Afolaranmi (2021) observes, "religious conflicts are inevitable, especially in a multi-religious society."[12] Conflict mitigation, de-escalation and resolution are therefore important to sustaining peaceful social relations. Conflict management seeks to reduce tensions to a level at which conflict can become a "positive instrument in social relations and organisational development."[13] This approach focuses on cooperation, empathy, and communal consultation.[14]

Resolving inter-religious conflict requires engagement at multiple levels. Interfaith dialogue, families, communities, civil society organisations, state institutions and international organisations can all contribute to reducing social distance and managing conflict. This paper applies Morton Deutsch's cooperative approach to examine how cooperation may reduce social distance between religious

communities. The Thomas-Kilmann model of collaboration provides another framework for understanding the relationship between cooperation and social cohesion. The collaborative approach seeks mutually acceptable solutions for the parties involved and creates space for greater participation and satisfaction among those affected by conflict. The model considers the interests of both the 'self' and the 'other' and treats conflict as a shared problem that requires attention to the concerns of all parties. In the context of inter-religious relations in India, Lederach's approach to conflict transformation adds another dimension by focusing on the structural and relational conditions that sustain conflict.

Conflict transformation is important for understanding how inter-religious cooperation and collaboration can yield fruitful results by transforming conflict into constructive, "mutually acceptable solutions" through changes at the structural and relational levels. Lederach's conflict transformation framework refers to "processes that reduce violence and the continued escalation of conflict. This approach goes beyond negotiating solutions and builds toward something new. This requires negotiating change processes grounded in a broader understanding of relational patterns and historical context. Transformation negotiates both solutions and social change initiatives. It requires attention to relational patterns, historical context and the wider social environment in which conflict develops.[15]

A cooperative approach that encourages collaboration is particularly relevant to societies experiencing religious tension and competing claims. Cooperation creates opportunities for peaceful engagement and can contribute to stable coexistence. In India, inter-religious tensions have consequences for communities across religious boundaries. Religion-based violence affects those directly involved as well as the wider social environment and can have intergenerational consequences.

The escalation of conflict-based violence does not provide sustainable benefits to religious communities. Cooperation in mitigating inter-religious conflict is therefore important to ensuring that communities can participate equally in social life. Mutual respect, accommodation, adjustment and acceptance are central to interaction among religious communities. Conflict transformation can assist groups in addressing shared concerns and developing relationships that support sustainable social harmony.

The following sections draw on passages and findings from the study

report on youth perceptions and opinions titled '*Social Distancing and Social Cohesion among Religious Communities in India: A study among College Youth*'.[16]

A brief note on the study undertaken: The study examines factors influencing social distancing among religious communities. It uses youth opinions to explore the role of religion in identity formation and examines the influence of institutions and social agencies including educational institutions, families, peers, neighbourhoods, social media and the state. It also considers the role of class, caste, gender and workforce participation in shaping inter-religious harmony. The study is a national cross-sectional survey conducted between February and March 2025 in Catholic-run higher education institutions. Social distancing and social cohesion are dynamic processes shaped by changes in human behaviour and social interaction. Using youth opinions and perspectives, the study identifies broad patterns in social interaction and examines factors that may influence these processes. It further investigates patterns of inter-religious acceptability, comfort, tolerance and adjustability. The findings provide scope for further investigation and for establishing specific correlations. They should therefore be understood as reflecting the views of the study sample rather than the entire population of India.

3. Methodology

The study used convenience sampling to select college locations based on transportation feasibility, lodging arrangements and proximity to field sites. A purposive sampling method was then used to interview undergraduate students from different academic disciplines, including Science, Humanities, and Management, who comprised a religiously plural student population. Catholic-run institutions were selected to facilitate access for students from different religious communities. The respondent population consisted of 2,696 youth, of whom 1,385 identified as Hindus, 948 as Christians, 241 as Muslims, 96 as belonging to other religious groups, including Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains and Indigenous communities, and 26 identified as atheists.

3.1 Questionnaire:

A comprehensive questionnaire was developed to examine six broad areas. These included manifestations of social distance, probable factors contributing to social distancing among inter-religious communities and individuals, knowledge of one's own religion and other religions, attitudes towards people belonging to one's own and other religions,

perceptions and forms of stereotypes, prejudices and labels associated with different religious communities, and behavioural manifestations towards people belonging to other religions. The questionnaire also sought suggestions from young respondents on strengthening inter-religious relations and promoting social harmony. Respondents provided information concerning religion, caste, class, gender, academic stream, city, state and college.

The questionnaire consisted of three segments. The first contained 30 factual multiple-choice questions covering six major religions in India: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. The second and third segments comprised 49 questions. The second examined knowledge, attitude, perception and behaviour (KAPB framework), with respondents recording their opinions using a five-point Likert scale. The third consisted of open-ended questions seeking suggestions on how families, communities, educational institutions, religious institutions, the state and young people could contribute to social harmony. Religion was used only as an identity provided by respondents in their profiles. The responses were categorised into Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Others and Atheists. The 'Others' category combined Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Indigenous communities and Tribals.

3.2 Sampling Colleges:

The Fieldwork was conducted in 21 colleges across 13 states, encompassing 21 cities, mostly in urban areas. The location and distribution of Catholic colleges across India were developed based on the concentration of Catholic Colleges using 2025 data from the All-India Association for Christian Higher Education (AIACHE, 2024-25) and the Jesuit Higher Education Association South Asia (JHEASA, 2024-25). The selection of colleges was based on the concentration of colleges mentioned by AIACHE: with total Catholic Higher Education Institutions being 346, with the Northern Region having 26 (7.51 per cent); North Eastern 37 (10.69 per cent); Eastern region comprising 17 (4.91 per cent); South 239(69.08 per cent); and the Western Region having 27 (7.80 per cent).

Across the three academic streams of Humanities, Science and Management, approximately 200 to 250 students from each institution were invited to participate based on classroom capacity and student availability. The final sample consisted of 2,696 respondents, with a survey-level response rate of 89.8 per cent. The selection of Catholic colleges provided access to a

religiously diverse student population. The five-region framework grouped respondents into Eastern, North-Eastern, Northern, Southern and Western regions. This grouping was used to create manageable comparison categories and capture socio-cultural variation across regions. The study adopted an in-person approach, with researchers interacting directly with participants at their colleges. The authors state that this approach contributed to a high response rate and facilitated direct engagement with respondents. Table 1 shows the region- and religion-wise distribution of study respondents.

4. Analysis

This paper focuses on one part of the study to examine comfort and acceptability across religious communities. It uses youth religious identity as a variable to analyse differences in interaction patterns. The paper examines responses to

Table 1
Religion-wise and Region-wise Distribution of the Study Sample

S. No.	State	Region					Total
		Eastern	North-Eastern	Northern	Southern	Western	
1.	Andhra Pradesh	-	-	-	381	-	381 (14.13)
2.	Assam	-	248	-	-	-	248 (9.20)
3.	Bihar	230	-	-	-	-	230 (8.53)
4.	Delhi	-	-	96	-	-	96 (3.56)
5.	Gujarat	-	-	-	-	200	200 (7.42)
6.	Jharkhand	212	-	-	-	-	212 (7.86)
7.	Karnataka	-	-	-	379	-	379 (14.06)
8.	Maharashtra	-	-	-	-	152	152 (5.64)
9.	Meghalaya	-	119	-	-	-	119 (4.41)
10.	Nagaland	-	130	-	-	-	130 (4.82)
11.	Rajasthan	-	-	-	-	103	103 (3.82)
12.	Tamil Nadu	-	-	-	177	-	177 (6.57)
13.	West Bengal	269	-	-	-	-	269 (9.98)
Total		**711 (26.37)**	**497 (18.43)**	**96 (3.56)**	**937 (34.76)**	**455 (16.88)**	**2696 (100.00)**

Source: Lobo, Sardar and Kumar (2026: 29).

three questions asked during the study:

I. How comfortable are you with having people from other religions as your neighbours?

II. How often has your family welcomed visitors from other religions to your home during the last year?

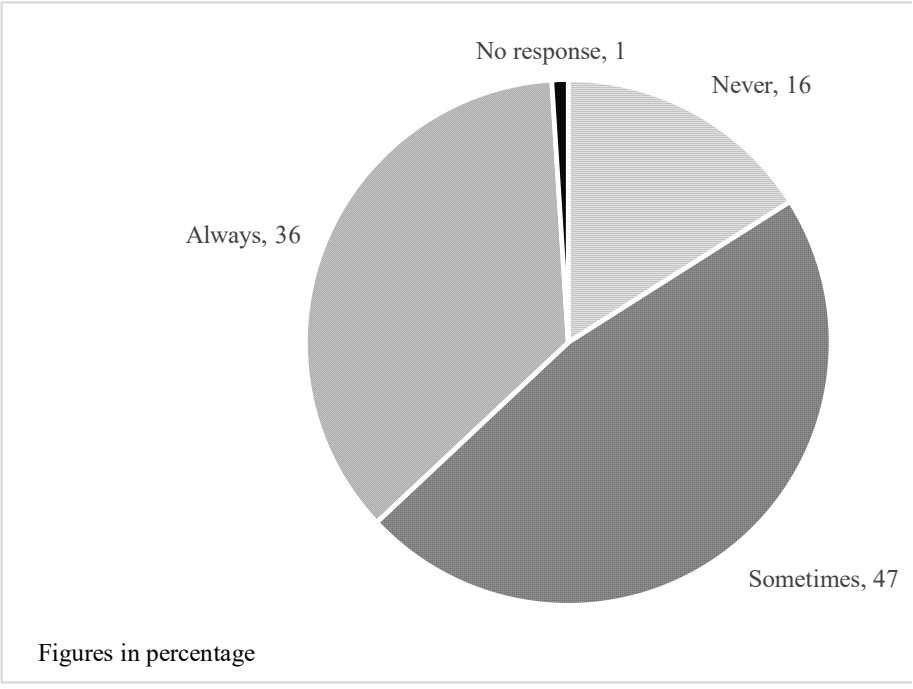
III. Do you support inter-religious marriages?

I. Comfort Level among Youth in Having Followers of Other Religions as Neighbours

Figure 1 presents the overall comfort level among respondents regarding having followers of other religions as neighbours. Among the respondents, 47 per cent stated that they would sometimes prefer followers of other religions as neighbours, and 36 per cent said they

Figure 1

Overall distribution showing comfort level among youth in having followers of other religions as neighbours



Figures in percentage

would always be comfortable with them. In comparison, around 16 per cent said they would never prefer a neighbour from another religion. One per cent did not respond.

The findings indicate different levels of comfort and acceptance among the respondents. While a section of the youth expressed consistent comfort with having neighbours from other religions, a substantial proportion indicated that their preference depended on circumstances. Another section expressed reservations about living alongside people from different religious communities.

The responses indicating occasional preference for neighbours from another religion may be understood within the broader context of communal tensions that frequently receive attention through social media and news coverage. India's religious diversity is reflected in different practices, rituals and customs that shape everyday social interaction. The 2021 Pew Research report also found that while most Indians expressed willingness to accept neighbours from other religions, reservations remained among sections of the population. The report further observed that college-going respondents showed greater willingness to live alongside people from other religions.

Accepting other religions and practices, along with mutual respect, are key to fostering social harmony and stability. But in contemporary India in particular, social cohesion has been a major challenge. The Pune Yavat Clash of 2025 is an instance of neighbourhood communal violence. The example of the Nainital rape case in 2025, in which the accused, identified as Muslim, was arrested, triggered communal chaos between the Muslims and the right-wing groups that vandalised and coordinated attacks on the Muslims in the area. The Bahiyal village incident in Gujarat in 2025, which saw simultaneous counter campaigns of 'I love Mahadev' with 'I love Muhammad', eventually resulted in the demolition of mosques in the village. The rise in such communal tension may have influenced variation in responses.

Religion-wise distribution showing comfort level among youth in having followers of other religions as neighbours

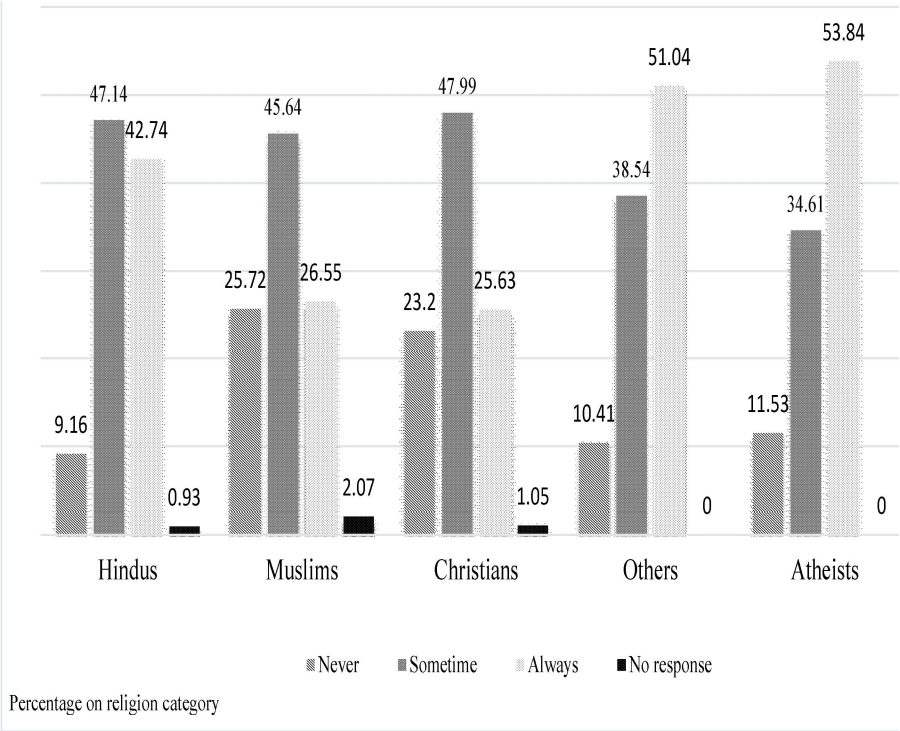
Figure 2 examines the religion-wise distribution of respondents' comfort levels regarding followers of other religions as neighbours. The findings suggest that religious identity is associated with differences in responses within the study sample. Among Hindu respondents, 47 per cent reported being sometimes

comfortable with followers of other religions as neighbours. The corresponding figures were 45 per cent among Muslims and 48 per cent among Christians.

Among respondents categorised as belonging to other religions, 51 per cent stated that they were always comfortable having neighbours from other religions. Among atheists, the corresponding figure was 53 per cent. Around nine per cent of Hindus, 25 per cent of Muslims and 23 per cent of Christians said they would never prefer neighbours from another religion. These differences may reflect several factors influencing attitudes towards inter-religious interaction. The study identifies concerns about possible communal tensions in neighbourhoods, perceptions and prejudices concerning religious communities, and concerns about safety and security as possible influences. The data should be interpreted within the limits of the study sample and methodology.

Figure 2

Religion-wise distribution showing comfort level among youth in having followers of other religions as neighbours



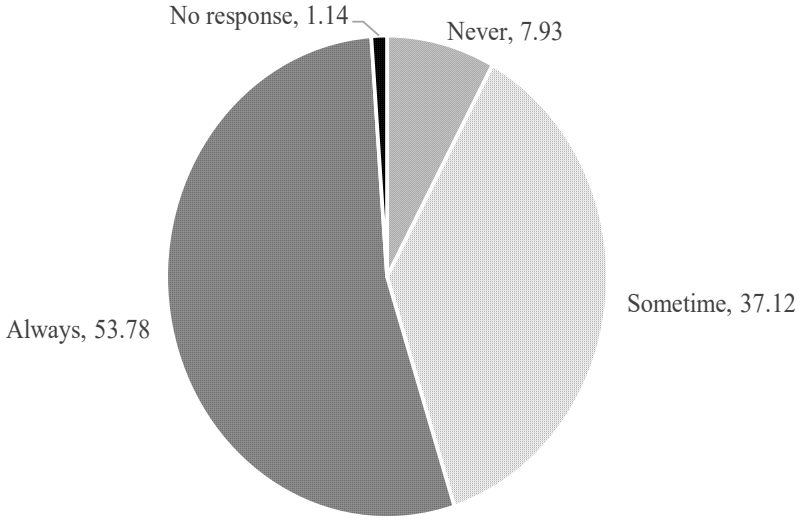
II. Family Acceptance of Visitors from Other Religions

Family values and everyday practices play an important role in shaping young people's attitudes towards their own religion and members of other religious communities. To assess family-level social acceptance, respondents were asked how often their families had welcomed visitors from other religions during the previous year. Figure 3 shows the study population's overall distribution of families' social acceptance of visitors of other religions. The responses are summarised on a scale of 'always', 'sometimes', 'never', and 'no response'.

Approximately 54 per cent of respondents stated that their families always welcomed visitors from other religions. Around 37 per cent reported that their families sometimes welcomed such visitors, while approximately eight per cent said that their families never welcomed visitors from other religions. Around one per cent did not respond.

Figure 3.

Overall Distribution of the Family's Social Acceptance Level of Visitors from other Religions



Per centage on total population

The overall pattern suggests that a substantial proportion of young respondents experienced openness towards visitors from other religions within their families. At the same time, a significant section reported limited acceptance. The findings therefore point to varying levels of openness within families. India's multicultural and multi-faith character provides considerable scope for interaction across religious communities. At the local level, though, experiences of social harmony coexist with experiences of communal tension. Regular interaction with people from different religious backgrounds can foster familiarity and build trust. The comfort level of visitors from other religions must also be considered in the context of social tensions arising around religious issues and influencing individual and family behaviour.

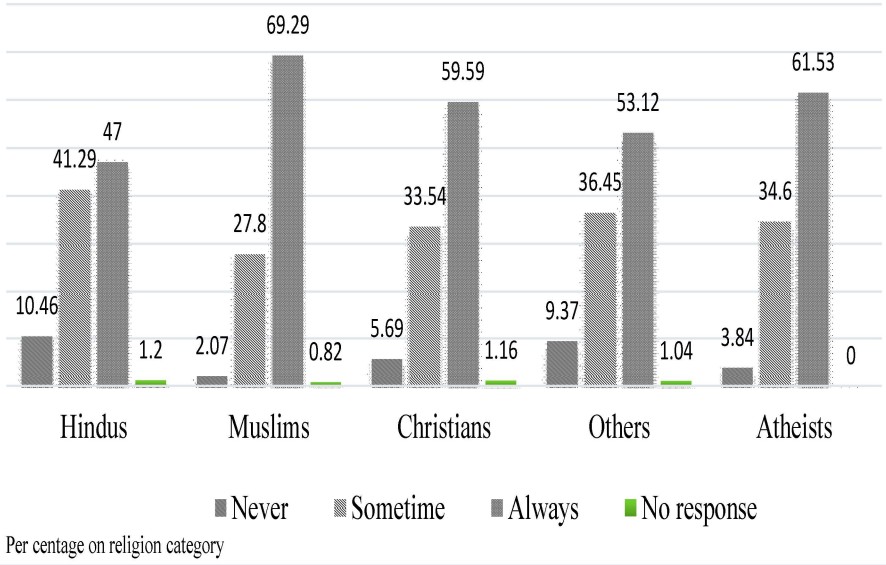
The hate speech incidents of communal tension often impact families and their surroundings, particularly in heterogeneous setups. This also reflects social cohesion across societies and has a long-term impact on people and social harmony. Repeated social clashes on communal pretexts are often escalated by particular groups and pose serious challenges to social cohesion.

Religion-wise Distribution of Family Acceptance of Visitors from Other Religions

Figure 4 examines family acceptance of visitors from other religions across the major religious categories represented in the study. It highlights that religious identity significantly affects families' acceptance of visitors from other religions. The findings indicate differences across the religious groups in the sample and suggest that religious identity may influence family-level social interaction and acceptance.

Among Hindu respondents, 10.46 per cent reported that their families never welcomed visitors from other religions, 41.29 per cent said sometimes, and 47 per cent said always. Among Muslim respondents, 2.07 per cent reported never, 27.8 per cent sometimes and 69.29 per cent always. Among Christian respondents, 5.69 per cent reported never, 33.54 per cent sometimes and 59.59 per cent always. Among respondents belonging to other religious groups, 9.37 per cent reported never, 36.45 per cent sometimes and 53.12 per cent always. Among atheists, 3.84 per cent reported never, 34.6 per cent sometimes and 61.53 per cent always.

Figure 4
Religion-wise Distribution of the Family's Acceptance Level towards Visitors of Other Religions



The findings show that a considerable proportion of respondents across the Hindu, Muslim and Christian categories reported that their families welcomed visitors from other religions. At the same time, responses indicating that families sometimes or never welcomed such visitors remain significant. The study suggests that religion, behaviour, prejudice and concerns about safety may contribute to these differences. These factors would require further research before establishing causal relationships.

III.Youth Acceptability of Inter-Religious Marriages in India

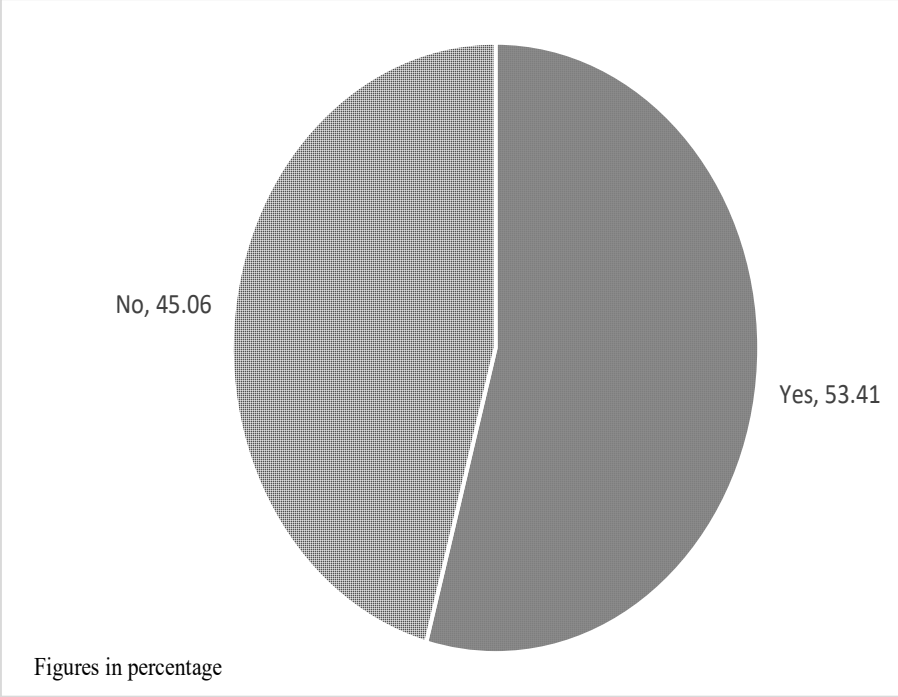
The Special Marriage Act, 1954, provides a legal framework for marriage between adults belonging to different religions without requiring religious conversion. However, public attitudes towards inter-religious marriage vary across India.

According to the 2021 Pew Research study cited in this paper, nearly 99 per cent of married

respondents reported having a spouse belonging to the same faith, while around one per cent reported an inter-religious marriage. The study also found that approximately 65 per cent of Indians considered it important to prevent men from marrying women from other faiths, while around 67 per cent regarded preventing women from marrying men belonging to other religions as a high priority. The report further observed that respondents with lower levels of education were more likely to oppose inter-religious marriages than college-going youth.

Figure 5 presents the overall distribution of youth attitudes towards inter-religious marriages in the present study. Around 53.41 per cent of respondents supported inter-religious marriage, while 45.06 per cent did not support it. The findings show that support for inter-religious marriage was slightly higher than opposition within the study sample. At the same time, the relatively close distribution between the two responses indicates that the issue remains socially contested. Inter-religious marriages in India have often been associated with social and religious pressure. Public

Figure 5
Overall Distribution of Youth Acceptability towards Inter-religious Marriages in India



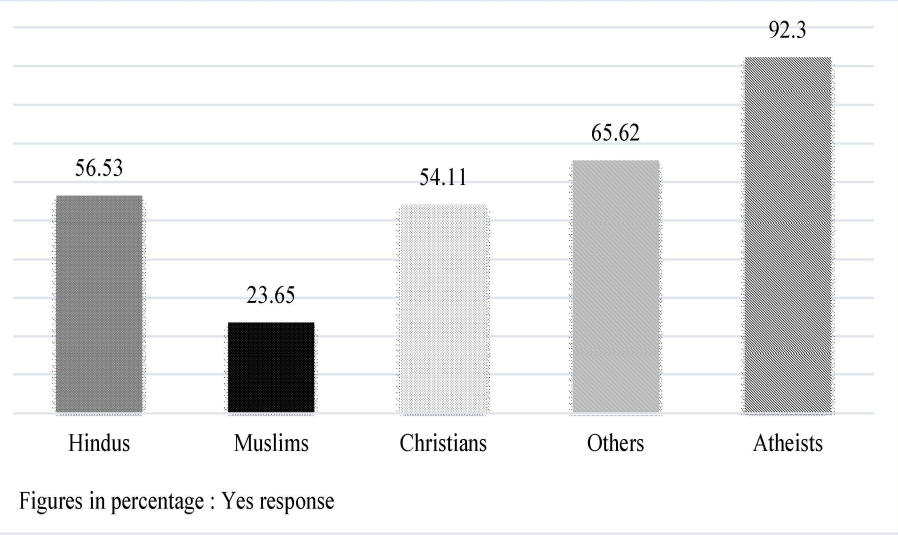
controversies surrounding terms including 'love jihad' and debates over religious conversion have also contributed to tensions surrounding inter-religious relationships.

Religion-wise Distribution of Youth Acceptability towards Inter-Religious Marriages in India

Figure 6 examines differences in attitudes across religious categories. Among respondents in the study sample, 56.53 per cent of Hindus, 23.65 per cent of Muslims, 54.11 per cent of Christians, 65.62 per cent of respondents from other religious groups and 92.3 per cent of atheists expressed support for inter-religious marriages.

The data show differences in acceptance across the religious categories represented in the sample. Among Hindus and Christians, support was reported by slightly more than half of the respondents. Among Muslims, the proportion was approximately 23 per cent. The study notes that these findings are broadly consistent with the Pew Research findings regarding comparatively higher acceptance of inter-religious marriage among Christians. The paper identifies several possible explanations for the differences.

Figure 6
Religion-wise, Distribution of Youth Acceptability towards Inter-religious Marriages in India



Figures in percentage : Yes response

These include perceptions associated with religious traditions and social context. The authors also point to the relatively small share of Christians in India's overall population, approximately 2.3 per cent, as a possible factor influencing social interaction and attitudes towards inter-religious marriage. These explanations remain possibilities and would require further empirical research to establish their relative importance.

5. Prospects for inter-religious harmony: Interculturalism, the way ahead

Huntington's *The Clash of Civilisations (1993)* argues that future global conflicts may increasingly involve differences in cultural and religious identities rather than being driven primarily by ideological or economic factors. [17] Huntington's framework remains relevant to discussions of how in-group and out-group identities can influence social cohesion and tension. In a plural and multi-religious society such as India, the country's diversity makes the question of interaction between cultures particularly important.

Interculturalism emerged partly in response to liberal critiques of multiculturalism.[18] Kymlicka (2003) observes that "we have multicultural states populated by citizens who have only minimal levels of intercultural interaction or knowledge".[19] At the same time, while multiculturalism is often associated with the coexistence of diverse cultures, interculturalism places greater emphasis on interaction and cooperation between communities. Zapata-Barrero (2015) describes interculturalism in terms of acting together towards a common purpose. He argues that "collaborative action can only be accomplished if people feel free to act as human beings, without being categorised in terms of diversity by whatever administration or policy that encapsulates them."[20] Martha Nussbaum, in *Cultivating Humanity (1997)*, also emphasises the recognition of common human needs beyond cultural boundaries and the importance of intercultural dialogue and interaction.

Contemporary Indian democracy has experienced political competition, social tensions, violence, dissent, discontent and distrust among different groups. Religious identity has, in particular, increasingly become an important dimension of several of these tensions. Questions of human welfare and development can become closely linked to identity, competition over resources and ideological differences. This sharp

polarisation undermines the constitutional ethos that promotes guaranteed equality, equity, liberty, and freedom for all.

Religion can be mutually elevating and help build a strong nation, and respect and tolerance benefit society as a whole. The manner in which identities are politicised and interpreted within particular social contexts can influence whether diversity becomes a source of cooperation or tension. The nature of religious and cultural violence benefits a handful of interests but harms the larger democratic structures, creating binaries in national sentiments and further disturbing social harmony.

Interculturalism provides a framework for strengthening interaction across religious and cultural boundaries. It could serve as an antidote to such structural and cultural violence by encouraging communities to recognise shared human concerns while retaining their distinct identities and creating opportunities for dialogue, cooperation and sustainable peace. In the Indian context, interculturalism can contribute to social harmony by encouraging interaction between communities rather than allowing religious identities to remain confined to separate social spaces. The findings of the youth study demonstrate that there is already a degree of interaction and acceptance across religious communities. At the same time, the variations in attitudes towards neighbours, family visitors and inter-religious marriages indicate that social distance continues to exist. The challenge is therefore to strengthen everyday forms of interaction that create familiarity and trust. Families, educational institutions, civil society organisations, religious institutions and state agencies can contribute to this process. Youth in particular occupy an important position because their attitudes can influence future patterns of social interaction.

The cooperative approaches developed by Deutsch and Thomas-Kilmann, together with Lederach's conflict transformation framework, provide useful conceptual tools for this purpose. Cooperation requires recognition of shared concerns, while collaboration creates space for different groups to participate in addressing social problems. Conflict transformation adds attention to the structural and relational dimensions that sustain tension. The findings of the study also suggest that social harmony cannot be measured solely through the absence of open violence. Acceptance of neighbours from different religions, willingness to welcome members of other

communities into the home and attitudes towards inter-religious marriage provide important indicators of everyday social relations.

The responses of the youth surveyed reveal both opportunities and challenges. A significant proportion expressed comfort with neighbours from other religions, while more than half reported that their families always welcomed visitors from different religious communities. At the same time, reservations remain concerning neighbourhood relations and inter-religious marriage. These patterns indicate that social harmony is shaped by different levels of interaction and cannot be reduced to a single measure. The prospects for inter-religious harmony therefore depend on creating social spaces in which communities can interact with one another under conditions of equality and mutual respect. Interculturalism offers one framework through which this process can be encouraged. It places emphasis on dialogue, participation, cooperation and recognition of common human concerns.

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The primary field study used a Knowledge, Attitude, Perception, and Behaviour (KAPB) approach and analysed youth perceptions of religious beliefs, practices, prejudices, and stereotypes prevalent in society; socio-political awareness levels; and the role of religion in present-day India. The findings outlined patterns in the causes of social distance and religious polarisation, with suggestions to reduce social distance and promote harmony. Please see the report for more details on the methodology, site selection, and the questionnaire used for the study.

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