**Religions in South Asia (Part I)**

[Ikram Sehgal and Dr Bettina Robotika](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/ikram-sehgal-and-dr-bettina-robotika/)

November 5, 2021

Globalisation includes the interaction, cohabitation and mixing of people from different ethnicities, cultures, religious backgrounds, values and world views. The concept has considerably changed the world consisting of nation-states. The growing presence of the “other” in one’s neighbourhood has opened up tensions; questioned identities and resulted in a struggle to hold on to one’s inherited positions in society, cultural rites and religious worldviews. Despite our expectations about the 21st century overcoming the terrible wars of the 20th century and being a century of peace, what we see today (globally and in South Asia) is far from peaceful. Among the many reasons is the presence of various religions and the respective world views and values that they promote. The seeming “otherness” of other religions than my own is at the root of many misunderstandings, rejections and prejudices. As a matter of fact, educational systems all over the world have so far refrained from informing the young generation about the ideas and values, culture and history of the different religions that all of us confront to a certain extend nowadays. Not knowing the other prevents our understanding quite a bit.

Understanding, if not accepting, the “other” religion is only possible if and when we have a basic understanding of at least what it is all about. In addition, the power of our modern world – the media in all its forms – more often than not contributes to confusion rather than promoting reliable information. That is especially true for the situation in the subcontinent at large. South Asia is not only the home to an amazing variety of different religions and cults, it is also the birthplace of religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism to name just the largest. Arriving from abroad, Islam, Zoroastrianism and Christianity have contributed an independent South Asian variety to the original belief system.

Different religions have coexisted more or less peacefully over centuries. It was during the colonial period, especially the 19th century, that many of the reservations between different religious communities were created. One main reason was the dualistic British and/or European way of looking at things, either good or bad, right or wrong with no grey areas in between. That applied to all spheres of life like social norms, economy, culture and religion. Western culture recognises only one way to do a thing right, that is their own way. This strange dualistic way eradicated even the possibility of another way to be right, it threw all options into the garbage. One starting point was the introduction of the census in British India. One of the questions that had to be answered in the questionnaire was about which religion the proponent belonged to. In the census of 1911, two hundred thousand people in Gujarat stated themselves to be “Mohammedan Hindus,” a clear sign that they either had never before thought about that question or they didn’t understand the difference. In any case in their daily lives, it seems, there was no need for such a distinction.

Understanding, if not accepting, the “other” religion is only possible if and when we have a basic understanding of at least what it is all about.

But those distinctions became important rather sooner than later. That was when the idea of minority and majority was introduced in political life by the British. After the mutiny of 1857, the British – though reluctantly- introduced representation and later election in their rule of British-India. Of course, it was not a democracy that included all of the population. The voting rights were confined to certain eligibility criteria like property ownership, land ownership, payment of income and municipal tax. Including the wealthy class of India across the board, it securely excluded the urban poor and most of the rural population. Educated Indians, for the first time, learned that to win a seat, you need a majority of votes in your constituency. Given the fact that the Indian population had only a 20 to 25 per cent part of India’s population, a Muslim would have a slight chance only to win a seat because he could not expect votes from other communities. Sir S A Khan, in his speech at Lucknow in 1887, expressed that: “And let us suppose first of all that we have universal suffrage, as in America, and that everybody, chamars and all, have votes. And first suppose that all the Mahomedan electors vote for a Mahomedan member, and all Hindu electors for a Hindu member; and now count how many votes the Mahomedan members have and how many the Hindu. It is certain the Hindu members will have four times as many, because their population is four times as numerous. Therefore, we can prove by mathematics that there will be four votes for the Hindu to every one vote for the Mahomedan. And now how can the Mahomedan guard his interests? It would be like a game of dice in which one man had four dice, and the other only one, unique. ” Even when this counting would not have come true, it matches the reality quite well. Muslim families like Sir Syed’s, who were the former rulers of their states, could not accept not being a part of the political elite of modern India. Thus, the rivalry between different communities, especially religious, was mainly political created by the majority system.

Today, religious prejudices originating from that period have reached a stage when differences in belief and/or ritual take violent forms and the state–far from neutral–has problems to deal with the situation. The idea of tolerance seems to have been pushed away and the attitude “my way or the highway” is ruling in South Asia. This situation brought to us the idea to review the religions of South Asia separately and in a closer way. This new series of articles will thus deal with Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism and Christianity in South Asia. This sequence roughly follows the timeline of its appearance in the subcontinent. South Asia, with a population of 1.9 billion, had the world’s largest population of Hindus (1.0 billion), Jains (4.25 million) and 21 million Sikhs, there were about 600 million Muslims, as well as over 25 million Buddhists and 35 million Christians. Hindus make up about 68 per cent of India’s population and Muslims 31 per cent or about 600 million of the overall South Asia population, while Buddhists, Jains, Christians and Sikhs constitute most of the rest. However, India’s Hindu population includes 200 million Dalits (untouchable) and about 100 million mountain tribes. About one-third of the world’s Muslims are from South Asia. Even within the broad denominations of each religion, there are hundreds of sects, creeds or movements, nowadays with some political connotation. The hope is that by giving a closer look at the details of each of them, we can not only learn something about our neighbours but even detect some common ideas within the wider variety.

**(To Be Continued)**

*The writer is a defence and security analyst, Chairman (Karachi Council of Foreign Affairs) and Vice-Chairman (Board of Management, Institute of Nation-Building, Quaid-e-Azam House Museum).*

*The writer is a former Professor of South Asian Studies, Humboldt University, Editor (Defence Journal) and a Consultant (Pathfinder Group)*