

It's a god-eat-god world

Naren Bedide (Kuffir)

~ The correct view is that religion like language is social for the reason that either is essential for social life and the individual has to have it because without it he cannot participate in the life of the society. ~ Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar, *Away from the Hindus*

Northern Ireland was divided by religion into two groups. If it was a caste society, it would have been divided into two hundred groups. So, one could say that it was religion, paradoxically, which ensured that Northern Ireland was divided into *only* two major groups. But to an outsider, say from India, it would still seem like Christians were fighting Christians.

How alike are Christians? There are over 40,000 (and growing) kinds, denominations or organizations of Christians around the world. It's difficult to understand why they are all seen as a homogeneous group.

President Trump proposed a 'Muslim ban' during his campaign. Now his defenders argue that it's not a Muslim ban, while the courts want to be sure it isn't, and the protesters are certain it is.

Trump was quite clear in his mind during his campaign: he regarded all Muslims as a homogeneous group. Now his administration has to pretend the President doesn't see them as homogeneous. But not all Trump's electors might agree with them. Or do they? Following Trump's logic, should we see all of them as a homogeneous group? Diving further into the heart of Trump's argument, is religion the essential reality of men, their definitive identity, above everything else? We're all Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims and nothing else?

The truth is: Muslims live across the globe, across all continents. There are around 50 Muslim majority countries in the world and a dozen countries where they form significant minorities. Think of as many histories, political economies, languages, cultures, geographies. And also, castes or classes. How can they be thought of as homogeneous, unless you dismiss all those other factors?

If Trump is telling Muslims *not to come to America*, the Modi regime is telling Muslims and those who stand by them to *go to Pakistan*.

Across the world, discourses around religion have shifted from the social to the anti-social. Power has reinterpreted religion as nation, ethnicity or ancestry, and race.

Beyond these 4-5 major organised religions which seem to attract most of the attention, probably due to their increased association with power politics one way or the other, there are 4,000 other, mostly old, religions in the world. They're mostly practiced by various indigenous peoples, tribes etc., from America to Australia.

There's a huge gap in numbers: while the 4-5 large, organized religions boast of hundreds of millions of members each, the smaller faiths seem to attract anything from a few hundred to a few thousand or so, on an average. How do the latter manage to survive, despite the overwhelming pull of the former religions?


It is difficult to say, because it has not been researched much, one has to admit. But, as Babasaheb said, perhaps their faith systems still allow them to 'participate in the life of the society'?

The larger religions too have splintered into several thousand faiths, despite being nominally labeled as Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist etc. Why?

Going back to Babasaheb, for answers: A religion which does not recognize the individual is not acceptable to me personally. Although society is necessary for the individual, social welfare cannot be the ultimate goal of religion. To me, individual welfare and progress is the real aim of religion. Although the individual is a part of the society, his relation with the society is not like that of the body and its organs, or that of the cart and its wheels. (*What Path to Salvation*)

Meaning, religion has to be social, but the social can't ignore the individual or the particular. Particular histories, political economies, languages, cultures, geographies etc., which shape the experience and nature of each individual's religion.

What the Trumps and Modis of the world have done is to strip the individual of the right to religion. But they're only symptomatic of a disease that has been festering deep inside world society for a long while now. Religion should be social, but can it be national and global?

 Naren Bedide (Kuffir): bjati52@gmail.com

Round Table India (www. <http://roundtableindia.co.in/>)