



Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India

Drawing on the Power of Faith in Building a United India

Background Note

The unity and integrity of a nation as diverse and vast as India over the past seven and half decades has been an astonishing achievement of which all of humanity can be proud. While there could be many factors contributing to keeping India together as a nation, few can deny that a vital cohesive force that binds the nation together is the spirituality of its people. This spirituality finds expression in a culture that values human beings as the creation of the Divine, is open and accepting of people of all backgrounds, that views in all living beings the reflections of the sacred and therefore enjoins respect, gentleness and non-violence in all relationships as the ideal way of life.

This spirituality of the Indian people is not a free-floating, amorphous, or superficial condition, but rather a state of being that is rooted in the religious beliefs of the people. India remains a deeply religious nation where its peoples' spiritual convictions have a strong bearing on the way they understand and carry out their civic duties. Thus, living together in peace and unity is viewed not just as an outcome of citizens fulfilling their formal obligations to each other in a social contract but rather as the expression of the profound spiritual principles that govern interpersonal relationships where the individual finds joy and fulfillment in the well-being of the other.

While religion plays a powerful role in India in strengthening the social fabric through its altruistic injunctions, it is also a historical fact that from the time of India's independence, religion has also been made into the primary cause of conflict and social tension in the country. Over the past few decades there has been a worldwide resurgence of religious fundamentalism. Voices that represent religious extremism and intolerance have increasingly entered the political and social mainstream and, in many countries, they now dominate public discourse. This has created an atmosphere of confusion around the concept of religion where its unifying and constructive role has been steadily obscured by the tendency to view it solely through an identitarian lens. India too, has not been immune to it and these challenges come at a time of great uncertainty in world history when the need for internal unity is vital to successfully navigate the waves of present and impending crises that can gravely undermine the nation's progress including increasing geopolitical instability and war, economic recession, climate change, terrorism and a global food and energy crisis.

The need of the hour then is for a constructive discourse involving individuals, communities, the State, institutions of society such as the media, the judiciary, the private sector and the education system and religious leaders on the role of religion in contributing to social harmony. The ground for such a discourse must be laid by clarifying the fundamental nature and purpose of religion as a system of knowledge and practice, and the common foundations of all religions. Such a discourse must show a practical path forward for interreligious collaboration in contributing to the progress of the nation.

To contribute towards such a process, the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India is organizing a symposium titled 'Drawing on the Power of Faith in Building a United India'. The deliberations during this symposium will seek to explore and gain deeper understanding on questions such as these that will need to be addressed in bringing the power of Faith to bear on the building of a united and prosperous India:

1. If religion is to become a force for promoting unity in diversity, a new level of interreligious harmony and unity must be realized in both understanding and practice. The surest foundation for interreligious unity must be sought in their common nature and purpose that all religions share. Despite differences in their outward form which can be attributed to the particular historical and social contexts in which they appeared, at their core all religions share a common set of moral and spiritual teachings. All religions expound upon spiritual realities. They call upon people to develop qualities such as honesty, justice, truthfulness, uprightness, kindness, love and trustworthiness. The Founders and saints of all the major religions exemplified to a superhuman degree perfection in these qualities and set for humanity peerless examples of moral excellence. Although the social teachings, laws and rituals of different religions have differed based on changing historical needs and circumstances, they ultimately can be seen to serve the same purpose of advancing humanity's collective maturity. How can this sense of unity between peoples of various religions be continually reinforced to override theological, sectarian and doctrinal divides?
2. A discussion on religion's nature and purpose must also address the many harmful attitudes, beliefs and practices that are perpetuated in the name of religion and that have their basis in superstition, blind imitation and prejudice. Such beliefs and practices are not only inherently harmful because they stunt individual and collective progress, they can also gradually grow into a dense thicket of dogma and rituals that chokes the vivifying spirit of each religion. When religion gets reduced to such beliefs and practices that are neither morally edifying nor amenable to reason, it is a short step away from turning into a source of prejudice, hatred and contention. Addressing these complex challenges will require a vibrant normative discourse on religion that continually refocuses on its social and moral purpose in light of contemporary realities. It will also call for religious beliefs and practices being vigorously exposed to the light of reason with the intention of cutting through layers of blind belief or superstition to reach to the heart of religious meaning and intention that is in harmony with science and reason. How can such a discourse be advanced?
3. Addressing the complex and unprecedented challenges of the twenty first century will require the masses of humanity to make deep changes in their patterns of thought and behavior and a willingness to make profound sacrifices for the common good. The kind of structural and systemic changes that are needed to become more just, united and to restore our balance with nature will require selfless efforts from the masses of humanity on a scale and for a duration never before witnessed. History bears witness that other than religion no other power or man-made ideology has been capable of stirring the depths of human motivation and calling forth the spirit of nobility, sacrifice and initiative needed to achieve such an objective. The world today is in dire need of the power of religion to once again course through the veins of a beleaguered humanity and to stir a common and collective response to humanity's challenges. How can this unifying and constructive power of religion be stimulated and channelized by one and all and not just religious leaders?

Office of Public Affairs

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India

Bahá'í House, 6, Shrimant Madhavrao Scindia Marg, New Delhi - 110001

Ph. +91-11-23386458, 2389326, 9873642273, 9953825600 Fax: 91-11-23389333

Email: dea@ibnc.in Website: opa.bahai.in