



INTEGRATING SOCIETY BY FAITH AND SOCIAL COHESION: ROLE OF WOMEN

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of women, their faith and value system in building cohesive communities and examines their initiatives for developing and evaluating social cohesion activities. The term 'community cohesion' is increasingly used to denote local action and meaningful relationships between people from different backgrounds. This research sought to explore how meaningful interaction between individuals and groups is affected by differing access to resources, capacity and power between and within groups. The role of women in this regard becomes important as they are the ones who takes the maximum responsibility of upbringing of the child during the child's formative years of life. These early years of child's life are crucial for the mental development (including attitudes and prejudices) of the child. Therefore it's the women, who could develop sound mental health among children who would become the future citizens. The secular values (like tolerance, respect of others etc) inculcated in these formative years among children prove to be a deciding factor in the child's development in later years. It also depends upon the continuous learning which the mother provides to the children throughout its initial learning stage as well as moral and emotional support from mother which makes the child feel secure, thereby reducing the tendencies of developing aggression towards other people, in the future. The present study explores how faith and religious beliefs can influence cohesion of the society and the development of shared values. The study also suggests that a climate of trust is needed for interaction that leads to shared values and the resolution of real issues. It identifies key issues for the inclusion of women within communities and in leadership positions for National Integration and Harmony. Failure to focus specifically on involving women in formal structures could marginalise and silence their voices. Existing structures may need to be reviewed with input from women as a more effective way of creating sustainable harmony and integration.

Keywords: *Integration, women, harmony, cohesion*



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Introduction

When you fill up a form for admission or apply for a job, there is a word *nationality* or *nation*. In front of that column don't we all write 'Indian'. That means we know that India is our Nation and our Nationality is Indian. Our Nation is not only a geographical entity; it is

a body of people sharing the sentiments of belongingness. Whenever our nation faces threat or some major calamity happens, don't we all stand together with a sense of emotional oneness to fight against evil forces. Our constitution, our flag and national anthem make the whole country one.

"United we stand, divided we fall".

The human being is a social animal and in order to increase the probability of survival the humans form groups. This is how great civilizations are being formed and the survival of the human race continues. But the groups whether small, medium or large are not free from conflicts and tensions both internal as well as external. These conflicts have a positive connotation along with a negative connotation of risking the existence of the group or society under consideration. The positive aspect of such conflicts is that it provides a necessary push to change the group's organization, interactions, relationships etc for better adaptation to the changing environment. This will help in developing harmony within the group and would also increase the group cohesion so that the group would be able to face strongly, the impinging challenges of the dynamic environment. In the absence of such harmony and integration the chances of survival of the group in the long run, get reduced.

Before we ponder over the issue at hand, let's begin with simple yet sublime assertion—

"How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes and she-roes!"

--Maya Angelou, African

American Poet.

Aren't these words the very abstracts of women's competence to run alongside men in facing and countering problems and challenges the humanity as whole or a nation in particular confronts? We need not answer the obvious. Gone are the days of such notions as "frailty, thy name is women". Any solution to a problem, to me, is a half-solution if it does not have a women quotient in both its' formation and application. They are half of humanity (if we, for a while, ignore the unfavorable sex ratio as regards to their gender) and as such their exclusion from any problem and its solution can never be contemplated. They are as much at the receiving end of various natural, national, social and global challenges as their male counterparts are. And such situations not only warrant women's equal participation in contriving remedies but throws equivalent onus on both the genders to strive for a common ground to attain perfectly harmonious and universal solutions. Shedding their age long involuntary seclusion the women of new era are seeking newer grounds for their newfound activities adding a newer dimension and perspective to every thought and all conceivable

riddles of the life. And this only alludes to their wisdom and sagacious capacities as to provide a panacea to all the socio-national problems. We can never be in doubt about their proficiency and adeptness in various avenues.

Social cohesion and women

There are many ways to create social integration and communal harmony in the society. In all the ways it's the members of the society who has to play an important role in creation of an integrated and harmonious society. The leaders of many sub groups within the society and their followers need to take a broader perspective while enhancing their narrow group interests. The followers of different religion should develop tolerance for people of other religion and must be able to see the basic human aspect of all the religion. The development of an ability, to accept the differences with other members of larger society belonging to different groups , will go a long way in preventing communal clashes as well as boost national integration.

Women, communal harmony and national integration might give one a disjoint impression at first look, yet these are so intricately woven that expatiating one without the aid of others is hardly possible. When we have expounded all we can understand the uncanny connection among them which we propose to do by and by.

The instrumentality of women in effecting communal harmony and maintaining and buttressing national integration is critical and needs thorough attention. Since we are mulling over what women can do about these two serious issues, a fresh look over their past and present status is also called for. Women's centuries long subduction in all walk of social life, their sordid condition as to education, health and economy, various social taboos attached to their sex, innumerable incapacities being a sign of their gender, their deification in myriad of divinities yet their sub-human treatment in real social life et al are some plaintive moments in the history of entire humanity. Sadly enough, this sorrowful state of affairs is still persisting in varying degree in all the societies of the world. The long practice of subjugating a human mind to prevent its creative outlet yields ennui and habitual inability. Whatsoever incapacity and incompetence we associate with womankind is but the outcome of this compelled inactivity. Nothing can be more serious than a half of humanity afflicted with this conditioned inefficiency and problems and challenges become more glaring in the light of this gender impairment. Notwithstanding these prejudices and stigmas, a simmering awakening to fight all the odds against womankind has always been existing alongside since ages though with less vigor and potency. These forces gathered momentum with the time and

touched its zenith during our struggle against foreign occupation and our resurgent intelligentsia did not deem it fit to ignore the exclusion of womankind in pursuance of our long devoted aspiration i.e. freedom. They could no longer afford to isolate this section of humanity when the fight was against civilizational forces quite superior at this front at least. This alienation of women was a serious impairment which marred the social life thus rendering it debilitating and feeble against foreigners. Various social and inhuman maladies like sati, widow's plight, women under perpetual tutelage without any choice of freedom in decision-making, their utter subjugation on all accounts of existence viz. physical, mental, moral and spiritual were conspicuous by its all pervading presence. The increasing uneasiness of modern leaders and visionaries with these maladjusted and medieval institutions convinced their prior fight against these inadequacies rather than foreigners. For freedom from inner enemies is a precondition to the fight against outer forces. Some successes hither and thither yet work is still unfulfilled. We got our freedom and the actions of womankind, though not innumerable, are etched in the history of our freedom struggle like glittering rubies in the crown of independence. We achieved yet another feat in this determined endeavor when we created our pious document named constitution and accorded universal adult franchise at once still unparalleled at that point of history. We bestowed on this gender every right conceivable at par with their male counterpart in various places of our constitution. But in practice we have not achieved the desired and still miles to go in realization of this goal. Women and their indelible mark on the sands of time while battling for our independence quite a lesson we need to remember in our foregoing discussion for it proves the inevitability of women's participation in any serious struggle.

Women and Faith

The role of women in this regard becomes important as they are the ones who takes the maximum responsibility of upbringing of the child during the child's formative years of life. These early years of child's life are crucial for the mental development (including attitudes and prejudices) of the child. Therefore it's the women, who could develop sound mental health among children who would become the future citizens. The secular values (like tolerance, respect of others etc) inculcated in these formative years among children prove to be a deciding factor in the child's development in later years. It also depends upon the continuous learning which the mother provides to the children throughout its initial learning stage as well as moral and emotional support from mother which makes the child feel secure, thereby reducing the tendencies of developing aggression towards other people, in the future.

The role of women in spreading communal harmony is crucial as they are the ones who get strongly affected by such clashes. The women become the substance for taking out all the frustrations from all sides. They are the major stakeholders and keen participants in spreading communal harmony in the society. The women by their soft and sympathetic influence on their men folks could also reduce their aggressive impulses against the members of other religious groups thereby creating soothing conditions for dialogue. This could lead to increase in tolerance among the men folk belonging to all religion.

The role of women as teachers also could pave the way for development of communal harmony and national integration in the society. The influence of teachers on children is very strong only next to the influence of family especially that of mothers. The value education along with scientific education both are desirable in making a future citizen who can resist pressures and temptations from various divisive groups and take decisions based upon the facts of the situation and on that of his or her own secular values rather than basing them upon narrow parochial interests of religious groups. The aim of education is to develop a scientific temper and the ability to see the situation from different perspectives. The education could also provide a check on the development of prejudices and biases among the people. Therefore the women as teachers could provide the desired education to the children for enabling them to develop as responsible citizens of the country contributing to its harmonious and integrated development.

Higher Religious Tolerance than Men

The women as members of small groups (like Self Help Groups) are creating conditions in which their influence is increasing as they are getting economically empowered. Further since the women are higher in religious tolerance than men, therefore these small groups are providing platforms for intermingling of members of different religions, castes, communities etc. There is also an economic motive for bringing in women of different religions together under one group as the economic viability of the situation demands it. Thus economic conditions take precedence over religious prejudices making them irrelevant in other spheres of life as well. This directly helps in spreading of communal harmony in the society. It also encourages the men folk to organize themselves on similar lines for their economic growth instead of blindly following religious leaders who might have a vested interest in creating an environment of hatred against the members of other religion, thereby directing the energies of followers in violence and aggression to further his interests. An example of a village in Uttar Pradesh can be taken in which a self help group of women is

involved in producing embroidered caps which the Muslim people wears during their Namaaz. The women of that self help group belong to both Hindus and Muslim communities. Thus it provides a platform for cooperation between different religious communities.

Political Empowerment of Women

The political empowerment of women would also help in creation of conditions of communal harmony, thereby providing boost to national integration efforts. The women have mostly been at a subordinate position in the society. They demand equality of opportunity as well as status. The political empowerment of the women in local self government has helped in enhancing their social status. Their self esteem has also risen as now the women are to participate in decision making for their development. The women would not want to handover this enhanced power to narrow religious interests instead they would like to use it for the development of themselves. The woman in general has a welfaristic tendency which will guide their use of political power in the direction of growth and development. Thus women empowerment will prevent the growth of religious prejudices and enhance the communal harmony within the communities leading to social integration of the society.

For the social integration of a society, the communal harmony in the society is a necessary condition. It may not be a sufficient condition as there might be conflicts (like class, race, gender, geographical etc) other than communal conflicts that may arise and dent the social fabric of the nation. The women also play an important role in resolving various other types of conflicts which endanger the social integration and could lead to balkanization of society. The different roles which the women play in creating communal harmony are that of a mother, teacher, wife, friend, executive, member of self help group etc. The women can play similar as well as other different roles in resolving newer conflicts thereby contributing to the national integration.

The women directly influence the future generations of any society through their everlasting influence on the children in their crucial formative years. The mothers are the first school of children for inculcation of social values of the society and for giving the direction of growth and development of the child. The inculcation of attributes of national character among children will develop citizens who are better integrated in the social fabric of the nation, thereby strengthening the national integration. Thus the women play a multifaceted and comprehensive role in creating communal harmony and national integration.

Social Integration and Communal Harmony and We, the People of India

In India from time immemorial, people belonging to various religious faiths lived in harmony and peace. There are fundamental values and traditions in our culture that promote integration among different communities. This was helpful for the growth of a great civilization in the Indian sub-continent. It will be our endeavor as the citizens of this country to preserve the rich tradition of Social Harmony among diverse religious and ethnic groups and pass it over to the future generations. Even though communal tensions in India are well under control, there is no place for complacency as many internal and external forces are waiting with their ulterior motives sowing the seeds of ill-will. The preamble as amended runs as follows:

"We, the people of India having solemnly resolved to Constitute India into a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic Republic and to secure all its citizens".

Three things make a nation. First are noble ideals, second are the citizens capable of achieving the noble ideals and third is the striving for excellence by such citizens. Our dream of free India was, and is as Rabindra Nath Tagore in 'Gitanjali' put it beautifully:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up

Into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth

Where the mind is led forward by the into ever widening thought

and action into that heaven of freedom, my Father,

let my country awake.

Folklores and Harmony

A decade or so ago to counter the threat of the divisive forces, a catchy slogan on buses and public places read "from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari India is one". Incidentally, around the same time, V.S. Naipaul's India: A Million Mutinies Now (1991) was released, visualizing a strong and unified India despite its "million mutinies" threatening its very existence. The mutinies, he said, are a process of integration and restoration and are not to be wished away. These were a part of a new beginning, of a new way for millions, part of India's growth, and part of its restoration. It is true that a central will, a central intellect and a national idea has always prevailed underneath Indian culture lending cultural wholeness to the country.

A mother from the Kangra region of Himachal Pradesh is tenderly bathing her infant and singing sonorously of a bird which says: “ I have taken my bath, diving in the Ganga, I have said my prayers, eaten my rice and am ready, while the lazy ones are still asleep”. The organization of the words in the local language is rhythmic and the child is tickled. One remembers then a mother in far off Maharashtra, feeding her child and singing of crows and sparrows and mynahs, inviting each to come , eat the offered grain, drink water and notes tickle the child and he/she laughs. These activities are not mere futile exercises, we know. They establish a bond between the child and the mother and help in developing the child’s Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and national feeling. These two situations make one aware of the similarities between the folklores of the two States - Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra. It indeed makes one realise that culturally, India has always had a continuous and dynamic dialogic relationship.

Considering the geographical situation of Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra (the distance from one nearest point to the other could well be over 1500 kms), and the near on-existence of an effective communication system in centuries past, it is surprising that the folklore should have identical strands to an extent. The translation process not only linguistic translation but also thematic - may have taken place effectively at a certain stage. These transactions have contributed greatly to inter-cultural relations between the ethnic groups living far away from each other. This is, in fact, the “contact zone”, the place where cultures come together and establish a relationship which binds the members of a national community as a coherent group. The cohabitation of the purity of codes and languages along with the ethnic identity and the constituent difference make India a mosaic of culture, an immense contact zone.

Women with a Special Value System and Love for Peace

Now let’s take women and communal harmony together by underlining their all important part in a struggle as mentioned above and its eventual success. At every point of time in a national life some or other challenges lurk to unsettle the very fabric of which a nation is made of. Communalism is one such problem. Communal harmony is a friend to win and communalism an enemy to vanquish. Any discord between two communities on a number of bases viz. region, religion, cast, creed etc can be taken as communalism in literal sense of meaning but in modern parlances the base of religion has become more akin to communalism. Communalism in its extreme form exudes violence. First and foremost, Women are more disposed to solve problems with the aid of peace and affection than by way

of violent means. And as such they can be quite instrumental in solving communal problems peacefully or rather these communal problems will not crop up if they are in a position to provide a leadership to the society. Also, women plight and infirmity cut across religion, caste etc and women are suffering across all sections of society. For them fight against these various social inadequacies are far more crucial than to engage in some futile communal conflict. These forces of a better future binds them together to crusade for the attainment of ideal and real equality. Communal harmony one among many catalytic forces is needed to provide a fresh momentum to the realization of gender equality. Like many fissiparous forces communalism is bound to inflict the national and social stability thus injuring the cause of women upliftment. Both women empowerment and communalism are mutually reinforcing and one can't be attained without the fulfillment of other. Women through various forums and institutions are addressing their common grievances without any communal awareness and they are aware of the increasing fundamentalism of communal forces hindering their efforts towards gender equality. To fight against such divisive forces as communalism we need to ensure larger women participation which is not adequate by now seeing all those serious disabilities like health, illiteracy and women's lower economic status which seriously affects their pragmatic decision-making. When they are grappling through such issues neither they have time nor will to counter such forces. Number of educated and aware women is increasing but very slowly and inadequately. This is high time when accord them greater no. of berth in decision making bodies where they can fight against their own incapacities and such national threats. While a number of initiatives have taken place to promote women's participation in decision making bodies such as parliaments, decentralized form of governments, various surveys and questionnaires and complementary research reflect very few initiatives in place specifically targeted at promoting women's participation in national social dialogue institution. Through various formal and non-formal institutions, NGOs, social dialogue institutions women are not only trying to improve their lot but they are increasingly becoming aware of futility of such issues like communalism which is nothing but manipulation of religion and culture to achieve some narrow political end thereby putting all the appropriate issues of national development in abeyance. Through Panchayati Raj Institutions and increasing women's leadership they are addressing various viable issues to alleviate their plight and proving issues like communalism as misfit to national development.

Now we see women's part in engineering national integration which is but continuation of previous issue as communalism is one among many forces threatening our

national integration. We have already observed the indispensability of womankind in fighting all those forces which scares our socio-national life. Various forces and factors are always acting to divide the nation in myriads of disjoint compartments and which must be countered resolutely. Communalism, regionalism, linguism, are the very forces which if ever become potent result in separatism. These are the very forces which split the nation in plethora of small social atoms mutually exclusive to each other sharing no common value but animosity. In this case our national life becomes full of conflict thereby rendering the whole idea of national unity and integrity as null. This like other problems must be understood by women in order to assist in its purposeful and more vigorous solution. Again they have to fight twin battles here—one against inner incapacities and other against outer threats as national disharmony. Women are aware of these twin challenges and they not only understand the utility of first and futility of second but also are quite convinced about necessity of previous to outdo the later. Through various social dialogues forums and NGOs platform they are addressing the problems to be remedied thus integrating women of entire nation under the auspices of women empowerment without caring for caste, region, religion, language, culture for their problem cuts above all these. Through increasing strength in political decision-making and policy-formulation they are stressing the need of grater care for women development which is quite a secular and universal issue. Women leadership and inspirational models are well popularized by media which are heartily accepted by women all over nation. These are nothing but the invigorating elements of national integration. In local and decentralized governments the number are increasing and by their acts they are becoming role models for other regions.

Thus we see that women are quite instrumental in conserving national unity and undermining communal disharmony. They are the agents of positive growth and all efforts should be there to ensure their greater participation in fighting whatsoever challenge our nation faces as has been rightly observed—

“Because man and woman are the complement of one another, we need woman's thought in national affairs to make a safe and stable government.” --- **Elizabeth Cady Stanton.**

Conclusions

- ‘Strong, positive relationships’ can result when people move beyond contact and consensus to resolving conflicts and addressing social injustice.

- A more equitable distribution of resources, capacity and power is needed to enable women and faith communities, particularly those from minority backgrounds, to take on a 'bridging' role.
- A climate of trust is needed for interaction that leads to shared values and the resolution of real issues.
- Such relationships are needed between diverse individuals and groups, but also between social groups and statutory authorities, including government.

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