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PERCEPTION OF YOUTH ABOUT RELIGION AND
VIOLENCE IN THE NAME OF RELIGION :
A STUDY OF THE URBAN-SLUM YOUTH IN MUMBAI

BY

MS. HELEN JOSEPH
MS. AMRUTA LOVEKAR
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK
NIRMALA NIKETAN
38, NEW MARINE LINES,
MUMBAI-400 020

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INTRODUCTION

Religious fundamentalism seems to be rearing its intolerant head in many parts of the world - and India seems to be no exception to this. In India its ugly manifestation has been seen in the communal riots that have bedeviled the nation right since its inception, with the horror stories of the time of the partitioning of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan reminding us of a history that none of us can be proud about. After independence, with a view to giving equal respect to all religions, secularism was adopted by the Indian State. However, in the post-independence decades India has witnessed communal violence in many parts of the country. But what is of particular concern is the fact that since the riots of 1992-1993, this religious communalism has begun to hold centrestage in our political life.

Unfortunately, in these communal clashes the ones who actually pay the price, particularly in terms of loss of life, are generally the poor and vulnerable. As Hussain Shaheen (1985) says, communal prejudices are practised and propagated by the upper classes, but it is the lower classes that are driven to exercise the 'hardware' - i.e. the violent activities that lead to the riots. And among these classes too, it is often particularly the youth who are very much involved in carrying out and sustaining these violent deeds.

This study on "Religious Violence and Youth" is, therefore, an attempt to understand our urban slum youth, and their perceptions on "religion" and "violence" - for in present political climate an attempt to understand these issues from their perspective cannot be underrated.

Objectives of the study

- (i) To find out the importance that urban slum youth (Hindus and Muslims) give to religion in their lives;
- (ii) To explore what these youth think are the basic teachings of their own religion;
- (iii) To explore what they think are the major beliefs of the other religious group being studied;
- (iv) To explore the perceptions they have of the adherents of the other religious group being studied;
- (v) To find out why, according to them, youth gets involved in violence in the name of religion;
- (vi) To find out how deeply, if at all they believe there is a real threat to their own religion and why;

- (vii) To explore the strength of their emotions on matters of religious beliefs/identity; and
- (viii) To elicit their suggestions, if any, to make their neighbourhoods a more tolerant and harmonious community.

METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the study was to explore the concepts of religion and violence, as they are perceived by youth. Hence an exploratory design was considered appropriate. It must be emphasised here that as far as religion is concerned, the purpose of the study was not to evaluate how much or how accurate the knowledge of the youth was, but only to explore whatever was their own understanding of religion.

As religion is a very vast subject understood in many different ways by different groups and individuals, a meeting of six persons representing three different faiths (Hinduism, Islam and Christianity) was organised. The aim of the meeting was to brainstorm on what areas of religion ought to be considered for the purposes of the study, and the tool (questionnaire) was developed and refined through this process. As a result of this open-ended discussion it was concluded that the questionnaire could be based on three different aspects connected with religion, as it is understood by the average person. These three aspects are:

- i) the SOURCES; i.e. the sources from where the individual gets his or her understanding of religion, and these include religious texts, religious leaders, family members, one's own experience, etc;
- ii) the BELIEFS, i.e. the intellectual understanding of religion within each person that develops as a result of the above;
- iii) the BEHAVIOURS, i.e. the resultant practices of religion that flow from the above. These behaviours would not only consist of religious activities mandated only for the adherents of their own religion (e.g. rituals and festivals), but also those ethical behaviours that their own religion considers as normative for all human beings. The latter would particularly include questions related to the matter of violence in the name of religion.

As the focus of the study was Religion and Violence in the name of religion, it was felt that the sample must include youth who were witness to violence in the name of religion. Therefore it was decided to use the Srikrishna Commission Report on the Riots in Mumbai (1992-1993), as the basis for the selection of the sample. This

report had examined cases/evidence in twenty-six police jurisdictions in Mumbai. However time and financial constraints allowed us to focus on only six of these identified areas. The criteria to select these six areas included the following:

- (i) Since the impact of the riots was different in different parts, only those areas which were badly affected during the riots, as identified in the Srikrishna Report, were selected.
- (ii) Furthermore since it had already been decided to focus only on Hindu and Muslim respondents, the areas chosen had to include predominant populations of the adherents of these two religions.
- (iii) As the issue being explored was extremely sensitive, it was felt necessary to select those areas where contacts had already been established over the past few years by *SALOKHA*.

FINDINGS

1. For most of the urban-slum youth, whether Hindu or Muslim, religion holds an important place.
2. Religion is important to the youth primarily because it gives them a sense of identity (26.5% Hindus and 39.7% Muslims), and a code of conduct or meaning to their lives (33.5% Hindus, and 54.1% Muslims).
3. The majority of these youth did not seem to spend time to reflect personally on their own religion.
4. The majority of the respondents therefore seemed to manifest a religious identity, which is derived primarily from social factors rather than one developed from a personal religious experience.
5. A significant number of the urban-slum youth interviewed, also had little or no interaction with the members of the 'other' religious group.
6. The respondents also displayed very little knowledge of the 'other' religion.
7. A majority of the respondents responded very inadequately when asked their opinion of the members of the other community.
8. An overwhelming majority of the respondents, both Hindu and Muslim, said that they would not tolerate desecration of their holy shrines.
9. Another instance of lack of tolerance was in the area of inter-community marriages.
10. As far as instigation to violence is concerned, provocation by politicians has also been identified.
11. The lack of faith in the law and order machinery is, according to a certain number of respondents, a significant reason why youth get involved in violence.

12. A larger number of a Muslim youth (43.8%) as compared to the Hindu youth (23.9%) felt that they were being unfairly treated as a religious community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Participation in each other's festivals and effective working of the law and order machinery were the two main suggestions offered by a sizeable number of respondents.
2. The second major suggestion, regarding the need for the law and order machinery to be effective and non-partisan such that the guilty are punished severely, was proposed by 11.8% of the Hindu respondents and 13.2% of the Muslim respondents.
3. Political leaders who provoke violence ought to be debarred from contesting elections.
4. It is very important to introduce into our educational system topics/themes like the comparative study of religion, the composite culture and syncretism traditions.
5. A corollary to this awareness building is the need (again as mentioned by the youth) of members of different religious communities coming out of their self-imposed ghettos and intermingling with members of other religious groups.
6. Another extremely important suggestion made by the youth refers to the need for a law and order machinery functioning in a way that would encourage trust in the citizens of a democracy.
7. There are many resources in every one of the various religions practiced in India that could be tapped into in order to foster the horizontal dimension that would focus on building better human relationships as even more essential to religious teaching than the fulfilling of various rituals.
8. The findings of the study seem to suggest that we must work towards expanding the self-identity of the youth, so that it is not circumscribed by religion alone, but is built around a national identity.
9. Education should also include training to develop conflict resolution and mediation skills among the youth. Once the youth have a better understanding of their own and their neighbour's religion, and once they see themselves as having a self-worth and self-identity that is not circumscribed by their socialization into a particular religious culture, they are made free to move towards making their neighbourhoods a less violent and more peace-filled place.