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Study of Religion in Contemporary Indian Society: Status, Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract: *Since its inception, Indian religious studies are no longer exclusive in nature as it includes people from multicultural backgrounds and diverse communities. The study reflects the same tune as that of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’, meaning the universe is our relative, which represents the essence of religious texts and the practice of contemporary Indian politics. Sometimes it is misinterpreted and distorted due to different political intentions of different groups. Ultimately, this is the cosmic relationship scent that characterizes pluralistic perspectives on human society. Pluralism is the essence of body, soul and spirit, while war, hatred and migratory nature of the population keep this perspective away from the realm of life. The wisdom and knowledge permeate the continuous process of the entire nation in close connection. This article examines the essence of pluralistic viewpoints in the study of religion and society.*

The study also evaluates how it guides the idea of the country of pluralism and multiculturalism amid tolerance. It also means the coexistence of all groups or communities regardless of race, caste, colour or varna system. The Indian religious texts Upanishad, epics Ramayana and Mahabharata denote the moral character of man because the human mind is limited by morality and spirituality, without which humanity could disappear from the social sphere. Nowadays, the study

of religion and society is very significant and lively, as it was the main topic in the past centuries. It will continue to matter in centuries to come because people who are born in a religion live in a religion and die in a religion. Without religion, no other matter matters in this world.

This article further examines each and every aspect of the values of religious study as well as the frequent violence that occurs in society due to tremendous individualistic tendencies of the postmodern world. As a result, fundamentalism occupies an important place in society. Although not everyone is in favour of fundamentalism, barely ten percent of the population commits violence, which certainly has a negative impact on social conditions.

This article also highlights the discussion on secularism, although it is not very applicable in the social life of India but is still important as India has been declared a secular state in the constitution. Therefore, the concept of secularization, which is characteristic of the Western social structure, cannot be ignored as the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution took place in Europe, but the highly motivated Indian society and eventually Indian thinkers adopted the idea of European Renaissance and on Indian soil applied. Consequently, the nature of the latent secularist syndrome cannot be ignored in any form. Nowadays, the secular issues have taken shape in contemporary discourses. Surprisingly, the role of women workers in the study of religion is currently highly valued as women are viewed as gatekeepers of civilizations, which was once expressed by Swami Vivekananda.

Key Words: Fundamentalism, Multiculturalism, Secularization, Secular State, Women labour force and Renaissance.

Religion as a political and social factor has received increasing global attention both in academia and in the media. 09/11, the Mumbai attacks and the bombings in Bali, London and Madrid are just a few

examples of events that have led to a new awareness of the role of religion in the modern world. The theory that secularization will end religion has now given way to theories of a more vibrant resurgence of religion in secular societies. The study of religion is becoming a key to understanding the structure of most contemporary nations and this is even more true of India.

DEFINING RELIGION

The definition of religion holds significant importance in the study of religion, a task that proves both necessary and challenging within the social science of religion. Emphasizing the intricacies of this definition, Durkheim, in his seminal work 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,' asserts the indispensable role of religion in the societal fabric. According to Durkheim, "Society can neither create itself nor recreate itself without at the same time creating an ideal. It is the act by which it is periodically made and remade. The ideal society is not outside of the real society; it is a part of it. For a society is not made up merely of the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things which they use and the movements which they perform, but above all is the idea which it forms of itself" (1964). Durkheim's perspective underscores the paramount importance of the broader social entity, highlighting that society is not merely a collection of individuals and tangible elements but is fundamentally shaped by the overarching ideas it holds about itself.

Durkheim, in his exploration of the functional aspects of religions, acknowledged the challenges posed by the highly specialized and fragmented nature of advanced societies. In response to this complexity, he opted to direct his focus toward the study of "primitive societies" in Australia. His rationale was rooted in the belief that examining these societies would offer insights into the most elementary or basic form of religion. Durkheim argued that totemism, as observed in these primitive societies, represents the earliest manifestation of religion, providing a foundational understanding of its core elements.

According to Durkheim, a totem is characterized as an object or artifact, whether animate or inanimate, from which a social group (clan) traces its common ancestry. Typically, a totem is an animal or plant endowed with specific symbolic significance for the social group. Functioning as a sacred object, the totem is held in veneration by the group, and numerous taboos are associated with it. Notably, the act of consuming or killing the totemic animal or plant is strictly forbidden, given its sacred status. The totem is believed to possess divine properties, distinguishing it from other animals and plants that, lacking this divine essence, are not subject to the same prohibitions and can be hunted or consumed by the group.

Durkheim posits that the totem holds a central and multifaceted role within society, influencing social, political, economic, and cultural functions. As a symbol of common descent, the totem dictates rules and regulations governing various aspects of the community, including marriage, family structures, trade, leadership, and more. The permissible social distance, as defined by the group, is intricately tied to the totemic representation of their shared ancestry. Moreover, he asserts that rituals and ceremonies within the society must necessarily involve the totem. It serves as a focal point for collective activities, reinforcing the communal bonds derived from a shared symbolic identity.

Durkheim introduces the concept of an implicit belief in a mysterious or sacred force or principle inherent in the totem. This force establishes rules, regulations, sanctions, and moral responsibilities for the members of the society. Objects that are otherwise mundane, such as a piece of wood, polished stone, plant, or animal, undergo a transformative process when designated as a sacred emblem. Once imbued with sacredness, these objects come to symbolize not only the sacred but also embody a source of power within the collective consciousness of the community.

In Durkheim's words, "Since religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force of the clan, and since this can be represented in the mind only in the form of the totem, the totemic

emblem is like the visible body of the god" (The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, 1973). Here, he underscores the intimate connection between the totem and the collective religious force, portraying the totemic emblem as a tangible manifestation of the divine within the community.

Durkheim's concept of the "sacred" evolves as a central theme in his work on religion. Over the years, Durkheim refines and articulates his ideas, emphasizing the significance of the sacred within the social and religious framework. In his perspective, the "clan" emerges as a cohesive group where members are bound together by shared characteristics. This unity is manifested through a common "name," identical emblems of identity, and ritual connections with the same sacred objects. In the context of the clan, Durkheim underscores the collective nature of religious experience. Members of the clan are not only united by familial ties but also by their association with symbolic elements that represent their shared identity. The "name" serves as a unifying factor, linking individuals to a larger collective entity. Additionally, common emblems of identity, such as totems, contribute to a shared symbolic language that reinforces the cohesion of the group. Ritual relations with sacred objects further solidify the social bonds within the clan. These rituals are not only expressions of shared beliefs but also mechanisms through which the sacred is reaffirmed and maintained within the social fabric. The sacred objects, often totems, become focal points for collective activities, symbolizing the unity and shared identity of the clan.

Durkheim's exploration of the sacred in the context of the clan reflects his broader understanding of religion as a social phenomenon. The sacred, for Durkheim, is not merely an individual or personal experience but a collective and communal force that shapes the dynamics of social groups. By examining the role of the sacred within the clan, Durkheim sheds light on the intricate connections between religious beliefs, shared symbols, and the social cohesion of communities.

In the late 1960s, the influence of neo-Durkheimians, such as Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, Peter Berger, Louis Dumont, Clifford Geertz, Robert Bellah, and C. Levi-Strauss, became prominent. Their contributions were regarded as both academically and religiously enriching, providing a fresh perspective on Durkheim's work. The neo-Durkheimians not only filled theoretical gaps in religious studies but also offered conceptualizations that couldn't be dismissed as anti-religious, presenting Durkheim's ideas in a new light. These scholars made reading Durkheim an intellectually invigorating experience, making his work more accessible to students. Their theoretical contributions not only strengthened the academic discourse on religion but also provided a framework for understanding it. Durkheim's seminal work, 'The Elementary Forms of The Religious Life,' came to be recognized as a theoretical treasure trove, earning a place in classroom courses on theory and method. This shift allowed for a more nuanced examination of the ultimate referential reality of religion within academic discourse. Durkheim's ideas, as interpreted and expanded upon by the neo-Durkheimians, facilitated a more convenient exploration of questions surrounding the essence of religion. This academic development was not limited to a specific geographical context, as evidenced by its impact in India. The reception of Durkheim's ideas in India reflects the global recognition of the relevance and richness of his theoretical framework in understanding the complexities of religious phenomena.

Certainly, the perspectives of Van Baal and Van Beek (1985) offer a significant contribution to the discourse on religious knowledge. They highlight the non-empirical nature of religious knowledge, providing a distinct definition of religion. According to them, religion encompasses "all explicit and implicit notions and ideas, accepted as true, which relate to a reality that cannot be verified empirically." In this definition, the emphasis lies on the subjective and experiential aspects of religious beliefs. What believers feel and experience within the realm of religion is positioned as a domain that transcends empirical verification. This aligns with the idea that the sacred reality,

integral to religious experiences, eludes empirical and scientific explanation.

Van Baal and Van Beek's conceptualization draws attention to the unique nature of religious knowledge, suggesting that the truth claims within religious beliefs go beyond the scope of empirical validation. This perspective resonates with the understanding that religious truths often involve dimensions that are deeply personal, subjective, and resistant to empirical scrutiny. By acknowledging the non-empirical nature of religious knowledge, Van Baal and Van Beek contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complexity inherent in the study of religion. Their definition opens up space for recognizing the validity and significance of religious experiences, beliefs, and notions that may not conform to empirical or scientific standards of verification. This approach prompts scholars to engage with the diverse and multifaceted aspects of religious knowledge, acknowledging its distinct epistemological nature.

Peter Berger's perspective, as articulated in 1967, underscores a fundamental approach to the scientific study of religion. He asserts that scholars must "bracket" the ultimate truth claims associated with religious subjects. According to Berger, gods are not empirically available, and their nature or existence cannot be verified through the limited procedures available to scientists. Instead, gods are only accessible as contents of human consciousness.

Furthermore, Berger introduces a methodological typology that focuses on the technical and professional attitude of scholars rather than their personal beliefs. This typology distinguishes between methodological theism, atheism, and agnosticism.

Methodological Theism:

Scholars adopting this position recognize religious truth as an essential and significant element in scholarly discourse. They acknowledge the relevance of religious truths within the study of religion.

Methodological Atheism:

Scholars taking a methodological atheistic stance reject the inclusion of religious truth in scientific study. They consider religious truth as irrelevant or invalid within scholarly analysis.

Methodological Agnosticism:

The agnostic position maintains neutrality regarding religious truth. It neither includes a truth claim nor denies one. Scholars adopting this position refrain from making assertions about the validity or invalidity of religious truth within their scholarly work.

This typology, according to Berger, is methodological and addresses the technical and professional approach of scholars rather than their personal beliefs. The positions outlined in this typology influence how scholars define religion, shaping their methodological stance on the inclusion or exclusion of religious truth in scholarly discourse. While Berger acknowledges that the typology may not create representative definitions, he suggests that it can be extended to the defining of religion. The varying methodological approaches of theists, atheists, and agnostics may lead to differences in defining and understanding religion within the academic context.

The distinction between substantive and functional definitions of religion sheds light on different aspects of religious inquiry. Substantive definitions delve into the sacred, providing insights into what is considered sacred. On the other hand, functional definitions centre on the use of religion, emphasizing its role and purpose in human societies rather than the nature of the sacred.

Adding to this discussion, Norris and Inglehart (2004) propose an intriguing perspective that addresses a perceived contradiction in society. They assert the validity of two seemingly conflicting statements. Firstly, they observe that in post-industrialized societies, there is a trend towards increasing secularization in beliefs and religious practices. However, paradoxically, the proportion of people adhering to orthodox and traditional forms of religion is also rapidly on the rise.

According to Norris and Inglehart, secularization is intricately linked to modernization. As societies advance economically, technologically, and socially, one might expect a decline in traditional religious beliefs. However, their observation challenges this expectation, suggesting that the simultaneous rise of traditional religious adherence is a noteworthy phenomenon. This proposition implies that, contrary to conventional expectations, societal progress and modernization do not necessarily lead to a decline in traditional religious practices. Instead, there appears to be a coexistence of both secularization and a resurgence of traditional religious beliefs. The reasons behind this apparent paradox may be multifaceted, involving cultural, social, and individual factors.

Norris and Inglehart's perspective prompts scholars and researchers to delve deeper into the complex dynamics between societal evolution and religious adherence. It challenges assumptions about a linear trajectory from traditional beliefs to secularization with modernization, suggesting that the relationship between modernity and religiosity is more intricate and nuanced than previously thought.

INDIAN SCENARIOS

Syncretism and Religious Diversity in India

Religious syncretism in India is encapsulated by the phrase 'unity in diversity,' reflecting the country's rich civilization as a blend of various cultures, religions, and languages. India's Hinduism, known for its heterogeneity, provides a fertile ground for the acceptance of diverse religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, and Islam. Throughout India's history, religion has played a significant role in shaping its culture. The nation's commitment to religious diversity and tolerance is enshrined both in law and custom, with the Constitution declaring the right to freedom of religion as fundamental. As per the 2011 census, Hinduism is practiced by 79.8% of the population, Islam by 14.2%, and the remaining 6% follow other religions like Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and indigenous ethnically-bound faiths. India also has significant adherents of Zoroastrianism and Judaism, despite these religions not being native to the country.

Indian spirituality has influenced various world religions, as seen in the Baha'i faith, which recognizes Buddha and Krishna as manifestations of the divine. The Sufi and Bhakti movements, along with the initiatives of rulers like Ashoka and Akbar, contribute to a pluralistic understanding of religion. Akbar's 'Din-e-Ilahi,' drawing from Zoroastrianism, exemplifies this pluralistic approach. The concept of pluralism in India ensures that every religious or social group has the right to practice its beliefs and traditions within its cultural space. The existence of religious pluralism relies on freedom of religion, ensuring that different religions possess the same rights of worship and public expression. Conversely, religious freedom weakens when one religion is given preferential treatment over others. In some regions, like communist countries, religious freedom was restricted, suppressing public expressions of religious belief. Similarly, in some Middle Eastern countries where adherence to one religion is predominant, pluralism may be limited.

As highlighted by Amartya Sen, being born as Indians means being part of a culture that celebrates flourishing diversity, a community proud of its many languages and literatures, a polity that tolerates dissent, and a country persistently making room for different religious and non-religious beliefs. The normative importance of pluralism enriches societies globally, not just uniquely in India.

Colonial And Post-Colonial India

The concept of Indian civilization in its early expressions can be traced back to nationalist writings by figures such as R.G. Bhandarkar, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, and Swami Vivekananda. However, it underwent significant evolution and refinement in later works, notably in Mahatma Gandhi's "Hind Swaraj" (1909), Rabindranath Tagore's essays (published between 1902 and 1907) and reached its pinnacle in Jawaharlal Nehru's "The Discovery of India" (1946). Gandhi, in particular, advanced the idea of the assimilative nature of Indian civilization. For him, the central issue lay in acknowledging the vast difference between European and ancient Indian civilizations. Emphasizing the diversity inherent in India, Gandhi intentionally

avoided substituting 'Indian civilization' with 'Hindu culture' or 'Hindu civilization.'

Subsequently, the nationalist perspective became rooted in Tagore's vision, asserting that Indian civilization was inherently 'syncretic.' Tagore celebrated the true essence of Bengal and India, expressing unity amidst diversity without eradicating the uniqueness of individual elements. In Tagore's view, India was a pilgrimage site for humanity, a meeting place for different races through the ages. In his renowned poem "Bharat-tirtha," Tagore encapsulated the idea that India, as a cultural crossroads, has been a melting pot where diverse elements coexist without losing their distinctiveness. Tagore's vision, echoing in his words, "Dibe ar nibe milabe milibe jabe na firey," encapsulates the dynamic and continuous nature of cultural exchange and synthesis in India. The idea of Indian civilization, as shaped by visionaries like Tagore, is deeply rooted in the recognition of diversity as a strength and the ability to synthesize various cultural elements into a cohesive whole. He writes:

*He mor chitta punyatirthe jagore dhire
Ei bharater mahamanaber sagartire.
Keho nahi jane kar aobhane kato manusher dhara
Durbar srote elo kotha hote samudre holo hara
Hethay aya hetha anarya hethay dravir chin
Shak hundal pathan mogal ek dehe holo lin
Paschim aji khuliachhe dwar
Setha hote sabe ane upahar
Dibe ar nibe milabe milibe jabena phire
Ei bharater mahamanaber sagartire*

[My heart, awake in this holy land of India; it is a place of pilgrimage for nations to mingle in a confluence of humanity. Nobody knows who urged them yet they came from different lands and merged in a single body – the Aryans, the non-Aryans, the Dravidians, the Chinese, the Scythians, the Huns, the Pathans and the Mughals – all of them like so many separate streams flowing irresistibly to lose at the end of their journeys their individual identities in one vast sea. Now the West has

opened up its gates, all are collecting its prized gifts and the same irreversible process of mutual exchange and assimilation is taking place once again in that holy confluence of humanity.]

Tagore vehemently opposed the aggressive approach of Western civilization, which sought to forcibly homogenise different cultures. He stood in direct opposition to the coercive assimilation of diverse cultural identities by the Western world.

Swami Vivekananda's brand of nationalism is distinctly non-materialistic, rooted in spirituality, perceived as the fundamental source of strength in Indian life. His ideology aligns with the essence of Rami Chandidas's renowned song 'Sabar Upore Manush Satya, Tahar Uporey Noye' (meaning man is supreme in this universe, and after that, there is nothing). Unlike Western nationalism, which tends to be secular, Swami Vivekananda's nationalism is deeply tied to religion, considered the lifeblood of the Indian people.

In this context, Peter van der Veer writes, 'The notion of the pluralist, tolerant nature of Indian civilization is not only held by India's nationalist leaders. It is perfected by the idea that there is a 'folk culture' or a 'popular religion' in India which is at the grassroots level 'pluralistic' and 'tolerant' (1994).

Ashis Nandy (1990) presents the traditional pluralism of India through a distinction between religion as faith and religion as ideology. He characterizes faith as 'religion as a way of life, a tradition that is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural.' In this context, faith is seen as a dynamic and multifaceted way of life, resisting a rigid and singular definition. On the other hand, Nandy defines ideology as 'religion as a sub-national, national, or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic, interests.' In this perspective, ideologies within religions are associated with particular texts, which, instead of representing the ways of life of believers, become the final identifiers of the pure forms of the religions. Nandy draws attention to the distinction between the lived experiences of

faith and the more rigid, text-based nature of ideologies within religious contexts.

Nandy and other postcolonial scholars criticize the modern secularizing project of the nation-state, viewing it as an artificial imposition on the traditionally plural and syncretic notions of mass religion in India. They attribute blame to the secular state for partially dismantling this syncretic tradition, leading to a political culture marked by sectarian conflict and communal violence. Nandy's perspective holds a hopeful outlook, aiming to rescue a more positive image of religion from the contemporary and troubling rise of communal violence in India. An illustrative example of this perspective is found in a significant advertisement for the Hindu nationalist movement Vishwa Hindu Parishad in *The Times of India* (13 February 1988), where Hinduism is portrayed as the religion of mankind.

In line with this critical examination of Indian syncretism, Christophe Jaffrelot (1993) introduces the concept of 'strategic syncretism' as a tool for constructing an ideology of Hindu nationalism. He explores religious reform movements in the early 19th century, highlighting the formation of the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj as instances of 'strategic syncretism.' Reformers like Rammohan Roy and Dayanand Saraswati sought to reform and protect Hinduism from Western theological modernity and Christian proselytization. Jaffrelot argues that these reformers, by propounding the 'golden age of the Vedas,' engaged in the 'invention of tradition' to resist Western influences. The Arya Samaj, influenced by Christian monotheism, undertook practices like 'Shuddhi' or purification ceremonies, which contradicted the pluralist understanding of Hinduism. Hindu nationalism, as an ideology, matured within the Hindu Mahasabha in the 1920s.

Examining Islam in India, historian Aziz Ahmad (1969) describes Indian Islam as a mosaic of demotic, superstitious, and syncretic beliefs. Movements of mass reform, such as that of the Mujahidin in the nineteenth century, attempted to erase these syncretic elements with only partial success. Asim Roy, in his book 'The Islamic

Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal' (1983), recounts how syncretism faced opposition from Islamic reformist movements in nineteenth-century Bengal. Anthropologist Imtiaz Ahmad (1981) argues that Indian Islam integrates Islamic theological and philosophical precepts with local, syncretic elements.

CHALLENGES

Religious Violence

The association of religious symbols with acts of violence often raises questions, and one of the reasons behind this phenomenon is the exploitation of religion by violent individuals for personal agendas. It is crucial to understand why those engaged in potentially violent struggles sometimes turn to the language of religion. In the case of Sikhs, this raises the question of why individuals facing economic, social, and political issues sought leadership and guidance from figures like Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

Bhindranwale played a significant role in sacralising the concerns of people facing issues, giving their political activism an aura of legitimacy. Primarily attracting individuals from a peasant background, especially the discontented Jats who felt marginalised by large landowners due to the gains of the Green Revolution, Bhindranwale gained support. Even Sikh businessmen and political leaders, initially supportive of Bhindranwale, had uncertain relations with him as they became drawn into his campaign. The primary political demand seeking legitimization was the call for Khalistan, a separate Sikh nation. Separatist leaders found inspiration in Bhindranwale's rhetoric, even though he did not outrightly support Khalistan. His appeal to sacrifice resonated with separatists, making his rhetoric appealing. While nearly every religious tradition, including Sikhism, advocates non-violence and prohibits the murder of humans, Bhindranwale nuanced this stance. He acknowledged the Sikh prohibition against keeping weapons and killing but validated occasional violence in extraordinary situations, emphasizing the greater sin of having weapons and not seeking justice. Bhindranwale often spoke of Sikh identity as that of a religious community with

national characteristics, using the term "QAUM" in Urdu, which carried overtones of nationhood.

However, support for these efforts and Bhindranwale's speeches was not unanimous within the Sikh community. Sikhs socially marginal to the community, including those from lower castes and those residing abroad, were fervent supporters of Bhindranwale. Beant Singh, an Untouchable Caste member and the assassin of Indira Gandhi, was an ardent follower of Bhindranwale. Financial and moral support for Punjab militants came from Sikhs in distant places like London, Houston, and Los Angeles, contributing to a sense of possessiveness among Sikhs. Sikh communities in England, Canada, and America were emotionally connected to Bhindranwale's message of strength, unity, and defence of tradition. Politically active village youth and small-time clergy gained popular support, and Bhindranwale's influence encouraged a form of political revolution akin to the one observed during the Islamic revolution in Iran.

Fundamentalism

In the contemporary era, global fundamentalism is a pervasive phenomenon with various socio-political movements sharing common features in response to the globalizing processes. These movements are often shaped by their reactions to secularization, a process characterized by the separation of religion from other institutions. It's important to note that India's approach to secularism is unique, as the Indian Constitution allows significant state interference in religious affairs, such as the abolition of untouchability and opening all Hindu temples to people of lower castes.

Simultaneously, two interconnected developments are unfolding alongside the globalizing process. Firstly, there is a growing separation of religion from other societal institutions, leading to the compartmentalization of religion. Secondly, the world is witnessing increased economic interdependency among nations through transnational corporations. This institutional differentiation results in cultural diversity, driven by factors like immigration, employment,

rapid communication, and, at times, the loss of freedom in one's own country.

India, like other nations, is not exempt from these global trends. Violence has emerged as a tool for some groups to reclaim what they perceive as sacred values. For instance, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran employed violence as a strategy against the Christian West and Muslims who did not align with the Islamic revolution. Thousands of men were killed during the 1980s, and Khomeini orchestrated a violent incident during the Hajj to the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979. Other examples of violence linked to fundamentalism include the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by Sikh fundamentalist extremists in 1984, the attacks on the World Trade Centre on 9/11 in the USA, and the 26/11 attacks in India. Incidents like the Dhulagar attack in West Bengal, the Telenipara massacre in Howrah districts of West Bengal, and the Deganga massacre in North 24 Parganas in West Bengal further highlight the complexities arising from the interplay of globalization and fundamentalism.

In this rapidly evolving society, new technologies and high-speed communication do not necessarily foster a shared identity; instead, they often fuel a desire for separate identities and the preservation of one's own culture. It is essential to recognize that globalization and fundamentalism, while seemingly opposing forces, are interconnected and represent different facets of the same complex socio-political coin.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

The vulnerability of women, encompassing economic, social, and physical dimensions, has prompted many to seek solutions within the realm of religion. In contemporary societies, the question arises: have women's positions evolved, or do they persist in facing challenges and hardships?

While women are increasingly participating in the economic sphere, achieving a degree of parity with men, it is their role as primary caregivers at home that exhibits a stronger connection to religious activities. This association is particularly evident during the

childbearing period, a phase that, until recently, characterized the vulnerability of women. Factors such as evolving roles in childbearing, their integration into the workforce, and the reordering of their lives and family structures contribute to the complex interplay of women's religiousness.

Age, life cycle, and societal perspectives on death, dying, and disposal have also experienced a resurgence of sociological interest. Interdisciplinary endeavours now bring together scholars from various fields like medicine, history, sociology, psychology, social policy, and religious studies to explore these multifaceted aspects. Notably, Western culture has increasingly embraced Eastern religious ideas, traditions, and cultures. A prime example is the Hare Krishna movement or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), which has witnessed significant growth since its establishment in 1965. This bhakti movement, rooted in the worship of Krishna, reflects the influence of Chaitanya, a mystic poet. The presence of ISKCON practitioners in Western cities, performing sankirtana (chanting in public spaces), underscores the global exchange of religious practices.

The acceptance of Indian religious attitudes in the Western world mirrors a broader trend that began in 1784 with the translation of the Bhagavad-Gita by Charles Wilkins. This cultural exchange challenges the notion of a wholly secularized world, a perspective critiqued by sociologist Peter Berger. He contends that the assumption of living in a secularized world is false, as the contemporary world remains fervently religious, if not more so in some places. This reinvigorated interest in religion signifies its enduring relevance in societal discourse.

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