Journal of Polity & Society (2023) 15(1), 89 - 103

Local Knowledge and Culturally Contextual Approaches to Peacebuilding: Experiences from India

ANJOO SHARAN UPADHYAYA
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

AJAY KUMAR YADAV
Banaras Hindu University

PRIYANKAR UPADHYAYA
MIT World Peace University

The discourses on 'peace' and peacebuilding continue to grapple with the unresolved tensions between the proponents of a universal, objective, and singular approach and those who view peace as a plural, subjective, and culturally contextual phenomenon accommodating the images and efforts of indigenous and local knowledge and expertise. Drawing on Indian texts and experiences, this paper steps outside the dominant Western theoretical frameworks to evolve alternate approaches to peacebuilding. We look at the non-dualistic understanding of peace and conflict in Indian traditions, which often reconcile divergent and often contrary viewpoints presenting peace as culturally contextualized rather than a coherent set of universally valid ideas. Apart from some of the leading ancient texts and narratives, i.e. Mahabharata and Bhagavad-Gita, it looks into the beliefs and practices in independent India to discern alternate visions on peace and conflict resolution, including the streams of pacifism and the ethics of accommodation and interreligious coexistence.

Keywords: Peace, conflict resolution, intercultural coexistence, tolerance, diversity, dialogue, devotional, culturally contextual, local knowledge, nonalignment, transformation, inner peace, social peace

The plural understanding of peace in India embedded in the long lineage of Indian culture and civilization could be an instructive case. Many leading cannons of India's ancient civilization exemplify inter-community peace and global citizenship norms. They have inspired various thoughts and movements during medieval and modern times. It is easy to find several narratives and texts which reconcile divergent and often contrary viewpoints. For instance, the Mahabharata, along with the Bhagavad-Gita, looks at peace and conflict on a non-dualistic continuum reflecting both the salience of war around the exigencies of early state formation and the growing maturity of rulers who, in the post-combat and post-carnage land realized the acute pragmatism of peace.

Similarly, the Arthashastra, the much-celebrated 'realist' treatise, prefers peace on pragmatic grounds. It insisted that wars should be undertaken only as a last resort, not because wars were immoral but expensive and troublesome, and victory was uncertain. Many ancient texts and narratives alongside Mahabharata and Arthashastra can be cited, which conceived peace as culturally contextualized rather than a coherent set of universally valid ideas.

The vast and varied discourses on peace offer an alternative stream of composite values and standards of stability. While focusing instead reflexively on some select Hindu texts and narratives, the study disclaims offering a representative Indian approach to peace. It acknowledges that the thoughts and practices during the Mughal empire and the subsequent British rule are equally essential to detangle India's overall approach to peace and conflict issues. The effort highlights some salient features of Indian thinking from the past to the present, enriching cross-cultural insights on peace and conflict analysis- a domain dominated by Western discourses.

Admittedly it is not easy to conjure a representative template amid the countless religious and spiritual traditions and their myriad transferences. Referring to the conceptual challenge of putting together 'treasonous richness and diversity of Indian peace cultures', an international handbook on peace studies finds that 'one could write some volumes of this kind just on India without ever achieving full coverage of its most important contributions to world peace discussions'.

However, it is still possible to identify a set of values and standards as also 'lived in' traditions of peacefulness that have endured the vast and varied tracks of community life in ancient India and continue to embellish the collective Hindu consciousness. We would primarily focus on the dynamic ethos of peaceful coexistence, diversity and dialogue embedded in primary Hindu scriptures and traditions and their varied transferences in the modern era. The endeavour is not to judge whether Hinduism is a religion of peace or war but to focus on 'lived-in' ideas and experiences of community peace embedded in its historical ethos and pedagogies.

Apart from some of the leading ancient texts and narratives like Mahabharata and Bhagavad-Gita, this paper examines prominent ideas and practices in independent India to discern alternate visions on peace and conflict resolution, including the streams of pacifism and the ethics of accommodation. Few writings of this era emphasize the vital role of the traditional image of care, tolerance and interreligious coexistence. We propose that the regional legacies of reconciliation and non-violence could also serve as practical resources for community-based peacebuilding and an alternative to western liberal discourses on peacebuilding.

A critical case is the non-dualistic understanding of peace and conflict in Indian traditions, which challenges western binaries by reconciling divergent and often contrary viewpoints presenting peace as culturally contextualized rather than a coherent set of universally valid ideas. This article also explores the patterns of coexistence between 'internal' (indigenous, local, community-based) and external (top-down liberal peacebuilding) approaches to conflict resolution exploring the knowledge-practice exchanges in select peacebuilding environments. It also examines the doubts and challenges about the 'hidden agendas' of local political elites who may not be committed to nation-building (Donais, 2009).

India's long heritage of peace and strategic thinking has oscillated from an initial dependence on aggression and violence to more peaceful ways to conduct community

life within and across borders. But eventually, the impulse of peacefulness made a deep imprint on the popular imagination. The continual celebration of Mahatma Gandhi's life and work is instructive. The traditional wisdom on peace was never a static field but a constantly evolving arena. It was construed relationally, varying from region to region, culture to culture, and time to time. India's peace–conflict syndrome has been more like a broad spectrum seemingly free from dualism or binaries, which afforded transit possibilities between pacifism and pragmatic recourse to warfare.

Mahatma Gandhi's visions of nonviolent world order and Jawaharlal Nehru's articulation of nonalignment in the twentieth century illustrate the remarkable lineage of India's peace perspectives. This image resonates in India's recent policy statements and also when it is criticized for disowning it. Gandhi's tall image as the apostle of peace helped Nehru to slip easily into the role of a peacemaker amid the turbulence of the Cold War. Nehru, who dominated the Indian visions of peace in its formative years, was determined to break free from the scourge of cold war power politics and thus enunciated five principles of peaceful coexistence known as 'Panchsheel' to conduct international relations. He proposed to create a 'Zone of Peace' consisting of non-aligned states, thus rejecting the Cold War matrix based on power politics and armament culture.

Unsurprisingly post-independent decades saw multiple writings proliferating around Gandhi Nehru's legacy of world peace and order. India's emergence as one of the leaders of the nonaligned world sixties inspired many international relations scholars to project nonalignment as an appropriate foreign policy response of the newly independent countries. There was an emerging consensus that the economically and militarily vulnerable post-colonial states must steer clear from the precarious power alliances and follow collaborative, somewhat adversarial relationships. A non-bloc foreign policy reflecting the ethos of national independence would thus lead to peace within and across borders. Scholars like John Burton saw nonalignment as a course-correcting alternative to conflict-prone western discourses and predicated his general international relations theory around its precepts. He even recommended nonalignment as a foreign policy option for Britain for a more peaceful world.

Tolerance, Diversity and Dialogue

Historically, Hinduism has been acclaimed as a rich resource of peace ideas and practices. Its credentials as a religion of peace so amply enshrined in its foundational cannons have been variously illuminated and carried forward by Hindu sages and spiritual leaders. In Hindi and Sanskrit, the expression for peace is Shanti (úânti), which emphasizes spiritual and inner peace and harmony with nature. The ethos of religious tolerance and inclusion thrived in the medieval era through spiritual movements like Bhakti, sprouting exemplarily in the religious pedagogies of Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi in modern times.

Like other religions, Hinduism is undoubtedly embedded in various ideas and practices relating to peace and conflict. One can easily find pedagogies that censure war and violence, and those which endorse it as a moral duty. However, the Hindu thought and practice typically illustrates strategic rationalities that allow transit possibilities between pacifism and pragmatic recourse to warfare (Upadhyaya, 2010). In this respect, it is free from dualism, so typical of western religious discourses.

Many negative assessments of peacefulness in Hinduism tend to conflate peace narrowly as an antonym of war. Such a restricted vision of peace does not correspond to the ancient Hindu traditions or its current holistic meaning. In most Hindu texts, the expression of peace does not have war as a referent, nor is peace defined as the absence of war. Conversely, war is described as an aberration, a divergence from natural peace, and a disturbance in the natural order (Bharati, 2011). Such understanding links well to the notion of peace which does not predicate on war for its self-ascription.

Modern commentaries on Hinduism frequently allude to quotes from ancient Hindu scriptures about respecting wisdom from diverse cultures. The Rigvedic dictum: Ekam sat viprha bahudha vadanti' (truth is one; sages call it by various names) and 'Aanobhadrakrtavoyantuvishvatah' (may noble and auspicious thoughts come to us from all over)[2]are commonly pronounced in the public sphere to denote inclusiveness and tolerance. A recent popular commentary refers to the Rigveda pronouncement as '... a first in conflict resolution, in keeping with the communal life project and maximum damage control (Narayan, 2015). More recently, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned the ethos of inherent conflict management being inherently present in Indian traditions and culture (Modi, 2016).

India's ancient thought and practice have a deep-rooted aptitude for accommodating the diversity of faiths and beliefs. The eclectic template of Hinduism permits contrary visions and philosophical traditions. For instance, while nurturing various spiritual practices, Hinduism also admits the strands of materialism best expressed in Charvaka's (Cârvâka) philosophy. Lokâyata- this materialistic school of thought presents an alternative vision of philosophical scepticism, which considers direct perception, empiricism, and conditional inference as the appropriate sources of knowledge and interrogates spiritual beliefs of Vedas and its ritual practices (Chattopadhyaya, 1959). Hinduism also includes philosophical traditions like Samkhya, Mimansa and forms of Yoga, which remain indifferent to the notion of divinity.

Hinduism has continually evolved through internal reform, innovation and absorption. An upcoming exponent of Sanatan Dharma argues: 'Sometimes it was the slow accumulation of small changes, and then a rapid shift led by Adi Shankaracharya or Vivekananda. Sanatan Dharma (Hinduism) absorbed a foreign idea and made its own in many instances. The new generation commentaries on Hinduism continue to value its openness and dynamism. Metaphors like 'Indra's Net' or the computer-derived image of "open architecture" illustrate Hinduism's continually sprouting character (Malhotra, 2016, p. 12). Likewise, its constant evolution is compared to a 'complex adaptive system' (Sanyal, 2014, p.1).

With its characteristic versatility, Hinduism has proliferated globally through many distinguished sages and religious movements promoting various streams of spiritualism and yoga. A broad range of such new groups with Hindu roots includes Brahma Kumaris, Ananda Marga, Siddha Yoga, Sahaja Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, the Neo-Sannyas movement of Rajneesh, International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), to name but a few (Coney, 2000).

The malleable character of Hinduism has been supplemented by its intrinsic countenance to dialogue and heterodoxy. The long traditions of tolerating doubts and disagreements have created ample space for profound scepticism in contemporary Hindu discourses (Sen, 2005: 3-33). One of the oft-

quoted Rigveda verses thus says: "... But, after all, who knows, and who can say, whence it all came, and how creation happened? The gods are later than creation, so who knows whence it has arisen? Yet another popular Rigveda prayer recites how the 'One has become many forms: One fire alone is kindled in many flames. One Sun is sovereign over all the world(s). One alone indeed has become all this manifold' (Rigveda.8.58.2). Or when Krishna says in Bhagwat Gita, 'In whatever way people approach Me, so do I respond to them. In all paths, they follow my path from all directions. Whichever form or aspect of Mine they worship in faith, towards that same form or aspect of Mine I sustain their faith" (BhG 4.11; 7.21.22). The ancient Sanskrit dictum of 'Vade vade jayate tattva bodha' (through continuous dialogue alone does one arrive at the truth) continues to enjoy widespread endorsement in everyday conversations and public pronouncements.

The trajectory of dialogue, or (Shastrarth in Sanskrit) rooted richly in its ancient scriptures, continues to resonate in contemporary parlance. It refers to a public debate at the end of which the two contestants would agree to one meaning or interpretation of the scripture. These dialogical traditions were not about winning or losing but more about pursuing truth and knowledge, followed by much reflection and practice by the spiritual pursuant (Bhawuk, 2012). Such an ethos of listening, acknowledging and appreciating one's detractors expands the consciousness with diverse truths and contrary opinions (Pattanaik, 2016). According to a popular commentary: "Modern Hindus are questioners who try to answer existential questions in just and inclusive ways and then live by those answers" (Narayan, 2015). This is indeed a recipe for tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

While Buddha used the Shastrarth tradition to convert people to Buddhism, Adi Shankara, a founder of Advaita Vedanta, tried to reclaim the Vedantic view by having dialogues with the Buddhist monks. As per a famous Hindu legend, Adi Shankara famously prevailed over Mandana Misra, a Purva Mimamsa who challenged him in a Shastrarth. The ancient city of Varanasi (Kâúi) acquired a reputation for holding such intellectual contests, which the rulers often patronised. The tradition of Shastrarth saw the founder of the Arya Samaj Swami Dayanand Saraswati challenging Kasi pundits in the late eighteenth century to prove if Vedas have sanctioned idol-worship. Shastrarth tradition continued to enrich Hinduism from the ancient to the contemporary age. Luminous Hindu protagonists like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Raman Maharshi, and J Krishnamurti regularly engaged in such dialogue (Jayakar, 1995).

Adaptable Epics

The ethos of transformation and diversity reflects vividly in major Hindu epics like Ramayana Mahabharata. The Bhagavad-Gita, which forms the philosophical core of Mahabharata, admits multiple variations and interpretations to accommodate the evolving dynamic of vast and diverse Hindu communities.

The leading Hindu epic 'Ramayana' presents the legend of God Ram varied widely in India and abroad to suit the varied social and ideological underpinnings of the diverse Hindu community. The original Sanskrit text of Ramacharitmanas, composed by Valmiki, was recapitulated in a transformative spirit by Tulsidas-a revered Hindu saint in the sixteenth century. Apart from this most popular version in Awadhi (a popular Hindi dialect), the story of Ramayana has been envisaged in several hundred versions with varied plots and characters to suit regional norms and histories (Bulcke,

1950). "The Ramayana", according to historian Romila Thapar, "does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places" (Thapar 1989, pp. 209-31; Cited in Richman, 1991, p. 4). The main protagonists of Ramayana are characterised in different moulds to accommodate varied social and cultural imperatives. A case in point is how the story of Sita, God Ram's wife, has been recast to suit popular imagination. The past decade alone has seen several worldwide best-sellers, presenting Sita as a formidable feminist protagonist (Patnaik, 2013; Arni, 2011; Tripathi, 2017).

The spirit of diversity and transformation also comes alive in enacting the Ram Lila, a venerated dance drama based on Ramayana, in varied storylines in various traditions in India and abroad. Ram Lila is enacted. Similarly, the Ram Katha (oral mediation/rendering of Ramayan/Ramcharit Manas) has undergone necessary transference during the past centuries reflecting several socio-political transformations in Hindu identity (Lutgendorf, 1989). It is as much a modern story as an ancient narrative tradition. However, the flexible pattern of Ram Lila and Ram Katha is challenged by the homogenized narratives of nationwide televised serials like Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana in the late eighties (Lal, 2008).

The Mahabharata, the other leading Hindu epic along with Bhagavad-Gita, which exemplifies its philosophical core, also represent a non-dualistic and flexible approach wherein '(M)any conflicting beliefs are worked into a simple unity to meet the needs of the time, in the true Hindu spirit . . .' (Radhakrishnan, 1993, p.15). Conscious of societal diversities and their different needs, Mahabharata introduces nine other Gita's, each catering to a distinct societal stratum. Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita has been interpreted variously to suit the exigencies of respective Hindu generations. The medieval poet Jnanadeva thus compared Gita to the legendary multifaceted "wish-granting gem" Chintamani, which allows its followers to bring their desires toward fulfilment (Davis, 2015, pp.7-8). Like other Hindu epics, the Bhagavad-Gita presents the trajectories of peace and war on a continuum. While it offers many justifications for killing in warfare, the dialogues between Arjuna and Krishna over the negative consequences of violence are dealt 'with much care and sympathy' (Sen, 2005, pp. 3-6).

During the freedom struggle, Gita's message of dutiful action and desireless action (karma yoga and nickâmakarma) was employed to invoke the freedom struggle against British rule (Doniger, 2014). Public intellectuals like Lokmanya Tilak, Lajpat Rai and Sri Aurobindo interpreted Gita to endorse violence as acceptable. On the other side, Gandhi's commitment to nonviolence made him reject the invocation of the Gita to justify the use of violence, even for a righteous cause. He preferred to treat Gita as a manual of nonviolence. He wrote, "Then does the Gita teach himsa (violence) and ahimsa (non-violence) both? I do not read that meaning in the Gita. ... I interpret the Gita to mean that if its central theme is anasakti, it also teaches ahimsa" (Gandhi 1959, p. 18). Others, like the Vaishnava saint SrilaPrabhupada (founder of 'The Hare Krishna Movement'), illuminate the Gita as the supreme embodiment of the idea of bhakti (devotion).

Intercultural Peace

The recognition of heterodoxy and interreligious understanding has been an intrinsic feature of Hinduism. The plural ethos of Hinduism, enriched through its

interface with other homegrown religions, i.e., Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism and its creative encounter with Islam, has inspired a range of multi-religious rituals and syncretic practices rendering the Indian landscape a unique character, creating composite spaces across varied religious and cultural.

For instance, Dara Shukoh, the erudite Moghul Prince, studied Hindu mythology, Vedanta philosophy, Hindu scriptures and epics and translated the Upanishads into Persian. Belonging to the Sufi tradition, he associated with Baba Lal Das Bairagi - a follower of Kabir and Jagannath Mishra (Dabhade, 2017). The legend of Ghazi Miyan, an 11th-century Muslim warrior saint, is often cited as instructive. The sites associated with the Ghazi attracted many Hindu worshippers, especially women seeking his blessings or making a ritual offering to gain male progeny. Veena Das finds the basis of such peaceful demotic communal transactions in everyday life, which knits disparate "lives" together in mutual attraction and antagonism (Das, 2016,p. 96).

In the modern era, Mahatma Gandhi and spiritual leaders like Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda propagated an individual's freedom in choosing one's path of devotion. They asked others to be respectful of the same. Sri Ramakrishna practised the spiritual disciplines of different religions and asserted that they all lead to the same goal. Thus, he declared, "As many faiths, so many paths". The paths vary, but the goal remains the same. Harmony of religions is not uniformity; it is unity in diversity. It is not a fusion of beliefs but a fellowship of religions based on their common goal — communion with God. So, he said, 'you remain firm in your faith and opinion, give the others the same freedom to remain firm in their faith and opinion' (Mysorekar, 2015).

Swami Vivekananda, the illustrious disciple of Ramakrishna, echoed the sentiments by proclaiming that all religions should be treated with equal veneration because God is only one, irrespective of what name he is known by. His equal admiration and respect for all faiths were evident in his concluding prayer in his historic speech delivered at the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, '...may he who is Brahman of the Hindus, the Ahura Mazda of Zoroastrians, the Buddha of Buddhists, the Jehovah of the Jews, the Father in Heavens of Christian, give strength to you to carry out your noble ideas'. He further stated that '...we believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as accurate. Our civilisation is excellent as it is based on the coexistence of faiths- Sarva Dharma Sambhava- implying that we have equal respect for all Dharmas and beliefs (Narasimhananda, 2012, p.146). Vivekananda used the metaphor of many rivers flowing into one mighty ocean to express his vision of diversity. He referred to an ancient hymn to elaborate his viewpoint: 'As the different streams having their sources in other places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through other tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee' (Narasimhananda, 2012, p. 134).

While Gandhi described himself as a believer in Sanatan Dharma (eternal religion), his life and work embodied a quintessential model of interreligious understanding. He called all religions an assortment of flowers from the same garden, 'Just as the tree has many branches but one root, the various religions are the leaves and branches of the same tree. Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism are the main branches, but as far as varieties of religion, there are as numerous as humankind' (Gandhi, 1962, p. iv). He emphasized the importance of exploring all religions to discover their underlying unity and develop equal respect for all. He had the courage

of conviction to say that the Bible is as much a book of religion as the Gita and the Koran. His favourite devotional song (Bhajan)- Ishwar Allah Tero Nam, continues to evoke interreligious amity in Indian popular thinking. Many other sages and spiritual leaders like J Krishnamurti, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, and Mata Amritanandamayi disseminated pedagogies of intercultural understanding (Upadhyaya, 2017).

The syncretic traditions have continued to inspire various interreligious initiatives in the recent era. A unique example is the life and work of Mumtaz Ali – a born Muslim who became a living Yogi under the influence of Hindu scriptures and mentors. Popularly known as Sri M, he undertook a 7,500-km long 'Walk of Hope' in 2016 to promote communal amity and inter-faith harmony (Sri M, 2010)

Holistic Concerns

Peace in Hindu religious discourses denotes a multifaceted aspiration rooted in inner or spiritual peace and harmony with nature and the planet. The notion of dharma in Hindu tradition connotes a much broader template than how religion is defined in Abrahamic faiths. In its generic sense, dharma sustains the orderly fulfilment of an inherent nature or destiny. It comes from the Sanskrit root dh[, which means "to sustain; carry, hold". In this sense, dharma refers to the sustenance of the cosmos, human society and each member of society. Traditional and contemporary Hindu observances envisage peace on a universal template, bringing together human community, ecology and environmental concerns in a mutually enriching manner. The modern Hindu way of life features the continuing sway of traditional prayers of peace incorporating planetary peace and the essential unity of humanity in the spirit of "Live and Let Live (Chapple and Mary, 2000).

The Hindu scriptures and texts are replete with peace liturgies and chants (Shanti-path), emphasizing unity and oneness among diverse physical forms on Earth. The transformative dictum of "Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam" (the whole world is our family) (Maha Upanishad, Ch. 6, Verse 72) and "Maata bhumi putro aham prithivya"- (Atharvaveda, 12.1.120), signifying Earth as the typical Mother of one and all, is routinely recited in Hindu worship and other public proclamations. One of the routine peace verses for such an occasion is from BrihadâraGyaka Upanishad 1.4.14 'Om Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah, Sarve Santu Nir-Aamayaah | Sarve Bhadraanni Pashyantu, Maa Kashcid Duhkha BhaagBhavet | Om ShaantihShaantihShaantih || (May All become Happy, May All be Free from Illness. May All See what is Auspicious, May no one Suffer, Om Peace, Peace, Peace).

Similarly, a celebrated prayer of peace from Atharvaveda thus invokes: "Peace be to earth and airy spaces! Peace to the heaven, peace to the waters, peace to the plants and the trees!" (Atharvaveda, 19.9.14). So, says Yajur Veda, "May there be peace in the heavens, the atmosphere, peace on the earth. Let there be coolness in the water, healing in the herbs and peace radiating from the trees. Let harmony be in the planets and the stars and perfection in eternal knowledge. May everything in the universe be at peace. Let peace pervade everywhere, always. May I experience peace within my own heart?"

The tradition of including nature and ecology as intrinsic components of peacebuilding continue to echo in contemporary Hindu dialogues. Nature as an analogous entity is not seen to pander to human needs but as a mutually replenishing and potent site of harmony and peace. J. Krishnamurthy, a leading philosopher, thus

argues - "if we could start with ourselves, not to hurt, not to be violent, not to be nationalistic, but to feel for the whole of humankind, then perhaps we shall have a proper relationship between ourselves and nature" (Krishnamurti, 1992,p. 34). Highlighting the imperatives of sustainable development, Mahatma Gandhi famously said that there is enough on Earth for everybody's need, but not enough for everybody's greed. These transformative perspectives have led to conceptualizations like 'deep ecology' and 'ecological peace', which pose nature and the environment as essential to sustaining peace.

From Inner to Social Peace

Over the millennia, many spiritual sages, *gurus*, and saints have enriched the Hindu traditions of connecting inner peace to social peace. These streams of thought have typically stemmed from the Vedant, Advaita philosophy and various systems of Yoga, and proliferated in the mediaeval era through spiritual movements like Bhakti, which are well embedded in the contemporary pedagogies of social reform.

One of the foundational drives came from the traditions instilled by Adi Shankaracharya, who illuminated the Upanishads and the Gita in the light of Advaita Vedanta to realize social and planetary peace. By establishing four religious orders (known as Mathas) in four corners of the country, Adi Shankaracharya inspired many generations of religious reformers to fight against social evils. Vivekanand (1863-1902) was the most outstanding of these reformers, who, in his interpretation of Advaita philosophy, found everyone to represent divinity and, thus, worthy of dignity and equal treatment. He opposed caste discrimination and emphasized ending poverty and illiteracy as critical religious work. He said no spiritual and religious attainments were possible amid such endemic poverty (Banhatti, 1995: 212). Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1892, which continues to serve as an active site of peace education and spiritual learning in India and worldwide today. There are several hundred educational institutions inspired and supported by the Ramakrishna Mission. Vivekananda presented Hinduism to the west as an intrinsically tolerant faith. His stirring Chicago address at the World Parliament of Religions made him a global emissary of contemporary Hinduism.

The other significant social reformers in the nineteenth century include Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayanand Saraswati, who set up reformist organizations like Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj to oppose idol worship, untouchability, child marriage, bride burning and prohibition of widow remarriage. The Arya Samaj continues to influence the course of social peace and harmony through its disciples spread worldwide. Some of his disciples, like Swami Agnivesh, were globally recognised for his crusade against bonded labourers.

Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore(1861-1941) drew inspiration from the Hindu spiritual scripture and India's diverse religious traditions. He promoted education to eradicate social evils like caste and gender discrimination, and religious conflicts. Mahatma Gandhi successfully employed religious terminology to lace his commitment to inter-communal harmony and elimination of structural violence in its insidious forms— untouchability, exploitation, and inequality. He popularized the term Daridra Narayan given by Vivekananda in his appeal to offer care, dignity and love to people experiencing poverty from all religions. Drawing from various Hindu perspectives and other beliefs, he firmly believed that positive peace could be brought only by peaceful means and never by non-peaceful means.

Drawing on the Integral Yoga system based on Hindu scriptures, Sri Aurobindo (1872-50), a nationalist, philosopher, yogi, a spiritual reformer, introduced a unique vision of human progress and spiritual evolution of human life into a life divine just as human species have evolved after the animal species. He believed in a spiritual realisation that liberated man and transformed his nature, enabling a godly earthly life (Aurobindo, 2006). With the help of his spiritual collaborator, Mirra Alfassa (known as "The Mother"), he founded the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville, a globally acknowledged icon of 'human unity and peace on earth.'

Sri Sathya Sai Baba of Shirdi (1894-1969), worshipped by millions of disciples, stressed the harmony of Hinduism and Islam and celebrated intercultural understanding as peacefulness. He set up a chain of schools for young children, which celebrate the festivals of all major religions and teach through Bhajans (prayers), which are non–sectarian and universal in appeal.

The Brahma Kumaris (daughters of Brahma) are another flourishing peace movement that draws on Hindu spiritual resources. Founded in India in 1937, Brahma Kumaris (BK) derives its intellectual inspiration from the Raja Yoga, as illustrated in Bhagavad Gita - a form of meditation that focuses on identity as souls, as opposed to bodies. It recognises the intrinsic goodness of all human beings and teaches meditation to help each one rediscover their inner resources and strengths. Transcending markers associated with the body, such as race, nationality, religion, and gender, the Brahma Kumaris discourses strive to establish a global culture based on "soul-consciousness". Its educational wing -Brahmakumari and Ishwariya Vishwavidyalaya (BKIVV), disseminates pedagogies for a peaceful society that can relieve the human mind from the cobwebs and conflicts and infuse new code of conduct, lifestyle and visions (Sujata and Astige, 2014). The Brahma Kumaris, with its spiritual headquarters in Mount Abu, disseminates their value-based pedagogies through thousands of their centre in over 110 countries. As an international NGO, it has a General Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and was granted International Peace Messenger Initiative status for the Global Cooperation for a Better World campaign (Hinduism Today, 1995).

Similarly, Mata Amritanandamayi (1953-) accepts all religions' spiritual practices and prayers to purify the mind and heart (Kumar & Jacobsen, 2014). Endearingly addressed as Amma by her devotees, she was well admired for her intense compassion for the poor and the downtrodden, for whom she has initiated many welfare programs such as educational institutions, orphanages, hospitals, homes to the homeless and pensions to the poor. Ma Anandamayi (1896-1983) also created educational institutions for young girls in ancient Guru Kul traditions to train them in dhyana, Japa, yoga, and modern education.

Another popular addition to Hindu Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who promised to transform negative attitudes and bring peace ethos through transcendental meditation. Mahesh Yogi offered a Vedic technology through which a community of peace-creating experts would dissolve social stress and political, religious and ethnic tensions that fuel crime, terrorism and war. To disseminate his message of peace, Mahesh Yogi created a chain of disciples and educational institutions to radiate harmony and peacefulness through an underlying field of consciousness.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (1956-), a disciple of Mahesh Yogi and an exponent of Advaita Vedanta, has done remarkable peace work through the Art of Living Foundation. By

employing jñâna-yoga as a practical tool to relieve individual stress and societal violence, he has encouraged peaceful dialogue in various violence-torn regions, including Iraq, Sri Lanka, Columbia and many other conflict zones within and outside India. His peace mission, known as 'Action for Peace', conducts harmony and interfaith workshops in conflict zones wherein perpetrators and victims are treated equally. Drawing on Indian epithets, Sri Sri strives to alleviate the conflict-evoked stress and trauma to rejuvenate human values such as cooperation, responsibility, friendliness and a sense of belongingness. As a sense of inner peace prevails, feelings of hatred and revenge towards the perpetrators of violence are removed. The Art of Living Foundation and its allied organization, the International Association for Human Values (IAHV), has brought together people of different faiths and cultures to promote inter-faith understanding and harmony. For instance, a notable Arab-wide campaign in May 2011 entitled 'I Breathe' held Youth Empowerment & Skills (YES! +) workshops in six cities to inspire youth to live stress-free lives and develop positive attitudes to cope with local-global challenges peacefully. More recently, in September 2016, Sri Sri's contribution to the Columbian peace process was recognized at the signing ceremony of the peace agreement between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government in Cartagena de India. The Art of Living in Colombia is developing peace-building programs that will be adopted post-conflict (The Art of Living, 2016).

Many other globally recognised spiritual figures are disseminating the impulse of inner peace, endowing fresh dynamism to Hinduism. For instance, the Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev- a yogi, a mystic, and the founder of Isha, an all-volunteer organization has been engaged in large-scale humanitarian and environmental projects for social and community development, which has earned the foundation a special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. He is recently conferred with the Padma Vibhushan award by the Indian government for his contribution to humanity's well-being.

The philosophy and practice of Yoga promote harmony between the individual and universal consciousness and between the mind and body. Drawing from Vedic and Upanishadic traditions, Yoga offers a significant link between a sustainable lifestyle, social peace, and planetary concerns. The UN recognised the ethos and practice of yoga in 2014 when it declared 21st June as the International Day of Yoga.

Epilogue

Through the long millennia, the Indian community has continued to evolve and maintained its malleable character allowing its practitioners to adapt and live peacefully with several religious and cultural communities. With its intrinsic ability to be comfortable with multiple religious participation, numerous religious affiliations, and even multiple religious identities, Hinduism has been somewhat reluctant to adopt the notion of conversion and proselytization (Sharma, 2014). Although a dynamic religion, it has intersected and absorbed features and rituals of other religions and cultures without losing its plural character.

However, many historical and ideological contestations mould the contemporary discourse on Hinduism. There are valid critiques about the violent misuse of Hindu religious ideologies against untouchables, women and minorities. (Ilaiah, 1996; Jaffrelot, 1996; Tharu, 1996). However, the core philosophy of Hinduism has been transformative enough to counter-review and rectify its deviations and centre stage

its tolerant and inclusive character. This current is best exemplified in Gandhi's famous dictum: 'If I were asked to define the Hindu creed, I should say: Search after Truth through non-violent means. A man may not believe even in God and still call himself a Hindu. Hinduism is the most tolerant of all religions. It's a creed, is all. The ethos of interreligious understanding reflects quintessentially in the Gandhian idea of a Sanatani- an "orthodox Hindu" who is also a Muslim, Sikh, and Christian.' Radhakrishnan famously interpreted Hinduism as an amalgamation of the essence of all religions and declared that "Religion is a search for truth and peace, not power and plenty" (Radhakrishnan and Muirhead, 1958, p. 144).

Jawaharlal Nehru, who profoundly influenced the foundational visions of modern India, went a step further when he declared that Hinduism is "vague, amorphous, with multiple facades; everything for everyone. It is almost impossible to define it (Nehru, 1946. pp. 77-78). Nehru preferred a more flexible and inclusive form of Hinduism to buttress secularism in public life and accommodate wide-ranging cultural and religious diversities. However, Nehruvian visions came under criticism from many quarters. While Hindu nationalists blamed him for being uncharitable to Hinduism, many others contrasted his approach to Gandhi's preference for religious and ethical values in shaping public policies. Many, like Ashish Nandy, thought Nehruvian preference for secularism led to the erosion of the traditional ethos of coexistence and tolerant pluralism as practised by religious communities in the 'pre-modern past' (Joseph, 1997, p. 344). Pointing this out, Nandy finds that "Even now, Indian villages and small towns can take credit for largely having avoided communal riots" (Nandy, 1998, p.337).

The variance over the interpretation of Hinduism has sharpened with the political rise of Hindu nationalism amid the decline of Congress ideology. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which provides the intellectual foundation to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, swears by Hindu nationalism based on a structured understanding of Sanatana Dharma. The perceptual spectre of the Islamic onslaught and the long-drawn religious conversion of Hindus has consolidated such assertions to reinforce the Sanatana Dharma or the "eternal" and universal dharma on par with other major religions. The trend to evolve a more rigid understanding of Hinduism is undoubtedly rising amid the current global and national scenario. This, in turn, has led to the interrogation of the liberal precept of 'Sarva Dharma Samabhav' because such religious universalism has led to the loss of many of Hinduism's rich traditions (Shastri, 2013).

However, many Indians across a broad spectrum consider Hinduism a tolerant faith that readily engrosses and celebrates diversities. Amid the historic dislocations and deviations, the interminable streak of humanism and peaceful attitudes mostly appear to gain the upper hand in the Hindu way of life. Indeed, nurturing multiple streams of cultural and religious identities within pluralism and tolerance has long been the most distinctive marker of the contemporary Indian approach to peace.

References

Álvarez, J. E. (2014). Elicitive Conflict Mapping: A Practical Tool for Peacework. *Journal of Conflictology*, 5(2), pp. 58–71.

Arni, S.(2012). *Sita's Ramayana*. Tara Books.

Atharvaveda 12.1.120; 19.9.14

Aurobindo, S.(2006). *The Life Divine*. Twin Lakes, Lotus Press.

Banhatti, G. S.(1995). *Life and Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*. Atlantic Publishers

Bhagavad *Gita* 4.11; 7.21.22

Bharati, S.V.(2011). Shanti: An Indian Perspective. In Wolfgang Dietrich (Eds),*The Palgrave International Handbook of Peace Studies* (pp. 191-228). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bhawuk, D. P. S.(2012). India and the Culture of Peace: Beyond Ethnic, Religious, and Other Conflicts. In D. Landis & R. D. Albert(Eds), *Handbook of Ethnic Conflict: International Perspectives*. Springer.

Brihadârayaka Upanishad 1.4.14

Bulcke, C.(1950). *Ramkatha: Utpatti aur Vikas* (Hindi). Prayag: Hindi Parishad Prakashan.

Chapple, C. K. & Tucker, M.E. (2000). *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. Harvard University Press.

Chattopadhyaya, D. (1959). *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*. People's Publishing House.

Coney, J.(2000). New Religious Movements in the West Led by South Asians. In Raymond Brady Williams, H. Coward & J. R. Hinnells(Eds.), *South Asian Religious Diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States*. The State University of New York Press.

Dabhade, N.(2017). Dara Shukoh - Why is the Philosopher Prince invoked today? *Secular Perspective*.

Das, V.(2016). Trouble with Religious Tolerance. In Erin Taylor(Eds.), *Religion, Peace, and World Affairs: The Challenges Ahead*. Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, Georgetown University.

Davis, R. H.(2015). *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography*. Princeton University Press.

Dietrich, W.(2012). *Interpretations of Peace in History and Culture. Many Peaces*, Volume 1, J. Koppensteiner (trans.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Dietrich, W., Echavarria Alvarez, J., Esteva, G., Ingruber, D. & Koppensteiner, N. (eds). (2011). *The Palgrave International Handbook of Peace Studies: A Cultural Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Donais, T.(2009).Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes. *Peace & Change*. 34(1),pp.3-26

Doniger, W.(2014). War and Peace in the Bhagavad Gita. *The New York Review of Books*.http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/12/04/war-and-peace-bhagavad-gita/

Gandhi, M. K.(1959). *The Message of the Gita*.Navajivan Publishing House.

Kher,V.B.(Ed).(1962). *In Search of the Supreme*. Navajivan Press.

Hinduism Today.(1995). Brahma Kumaris: Conquering A Callous World with Purity. http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3415 (accessed 25 May 2017)

Ilaiah, K. (1996). *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Samya.

Jaffrelot, C. (1996). *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s: Strategies of Identity-Building, Implantation, and Mobilization*. Columbia University Press

Jayakar, P. (1995). *Fire in the Mind: Dialogues with J. Krishnamurti*. Penguin.

Joseph, S.(1997). Politics of Contemporary Indian Communitarianism. *Economic and Political Weekly* ,32(40),pp.2517-2523

Krishnamurti Foundation. (1996). *Questioning Krishnamurti: J. Krishnamurti in Dialogue*. Thorsons.

Krishnamurti, J.(1992). *Krishnamurti on Nature and Environment*. Gollancz

Kumar, S.S. & Jacobson, E.(2014). The Plurality of Peace, Non-Violence and Peace Works in India. In P. Upadhyaya and S.S. Kumar(Eds.). *Peace and Conflict: The South Asian Experience*. Cambridge University Press.pp.129-157

Lal, V.(2008). Hinduism'. InPeter N. Stearns(Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Modern World*.Oxford University Press. Vol. IV,pp. 10-16.

Lutgendorf, P. (1989). Ram's Story in Shiva's City: Public Arenas and Private Patronage. In Sandria B. Freitag (Eds.)*Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment, 1800-1980*. pp. 34-61. the University of California Press.

Maha Upanishad, Ch. 6, Verse 72

Malhotra, R. (2016). *Indra's Net: Defending Hinduism's Philosophical Unity*.HarperCollins Publishers India.

Modi, N. (2016). Knowledge is immortal and is relevant in every era. http://www.narendramodi.in/text-of-pm-s-address-at-the-international-convention-on-universal-message-of-simhasth-at-ujjain-451629 (accessed 25 May 2017)

Mysorekar, U. (2015). Hinduism, Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue. An address to the UN Special Event on *World Interfaith Harmony: Multi-religious Partnership for Sustainable Development,* March, http://regionalinterfaith.org.au/?p=388

Nandy, A. (1988). *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Oxford University Press.

Nandy, A. (1998). The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance. In Rajeev Bhargava(Eds.), *Secularism and Its Critics*. pp. 321-344. Oxford University Press.

Narasimhananda, S.(2012). *Vivekananda Reader*. Advaita Ashrama.

Narayan, R.(2015). So, who are the modern Hindus? Upanishads come right back in the colonial age, as the new and improved version of the Constitution, http://www.dailyo.in/arts/hinduism-upanishad-rig-veda-constitution-bhagavad-gita-mahabharata-secularism/story/1/6592.html (accessed 20 March 2017).

Nehru, J.(1946). *The Discovery of India*. Penguin India.

Pattanaik, D. (2013). *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*. Penguin Books

Pattanaik, D. (2016). Agree, Disagree, Argue. http://www.mid-day.com/articles/devdutt-pattanaik-agree-disagree-argue/16954167 (accessed 18 April 2017).

Radhakrishnan, S. (1993). *The Bhagavad-Gita*. HarperCollins Publishers.

Radhakrishnan, S. & Muirhead J.H. (eds). (1958). *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*.George Allen & Unwin. P 477.

Rig Veda 10:129

Rig Veda 8.58.2

Richman, P.(Ed.)1(991). *Many Ramayanas: The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia*. Univ of California Press.

Sanyal, S.(2014). The Architecture of Hinduism. *Swarajya*.https://swarajyamag.com/culture/the-logic-of-hinduism

Savarkar, V. D.(1989). *Hindutva*. Veer Savarkar Prakashan.

Sen, A.(2005). *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. Penguin.

Sharma, A. (2014). Hinduism and Conversion. In Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian(Eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*.Oxford University Press.

Shastri, V. (2013). Sarva Dharma Sambhava: Unity or Confusion of Religions*? Hindu Human Rights*. http://www.hinduhumanrights.info/sarva-dharma-sambhava-unity-or-confusion-of-religions/

Sri M.(2010). *Apprenticed to a Himalayan Master: A Yogi's Autobiography*. Magenta Press and Publication Pvt. Ltd.

Sujata, M. & Shantha B. Astige. (2014). Growth and Development of Brahma Kumari Movement in India. *Golden Research Thoughts* 3(12)

Thapar, R. (1989). Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity. *Modern Asian Studies*,23(2).

Tharu, S. (1996). A Critique of Hindutva-Brahminism. *Economic and Political Weekly,* 31(30),pp.2019–2021.

The Art of Living. 2016. 'Colombian President hails Sri Sri's role in the historic ending of the 52-year-old war between FARC-Colombian governments', https://www.artofliving.org/colombian-president-farc-hails-sri-sri-role-historic-end-war

Tripathi, A. (2017). *Sita - Warrior of Mithila*. Westland Publications Limited.

Upadhyaya, P. (2010). *Hinduism and peace education*. In J. Lin, E.J. Brantmeier and J.P. Miller, (Eds). *Spirituality, Religion and Peace Education*. Charlotte Information Age.

Mansouri(Eds). (2017). Inter-cultural Dialogue: Lineage and Practice in the Indian Subcontinent'. *Interculturalism at the Crossroads*. UNESCO Publishing. pp.195-212.