



## Religions and Development Research Programme

# Interactions between religion and development in India: values, organizations and social movements

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Central dimensions of the social and political links between religion and development in India include:

- religious organizations and their engagements with development policy and practice
- religious values in development and public life
- politics and the mobilization of religions.

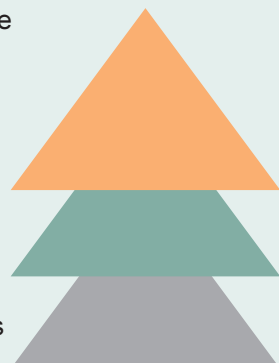
This paper provides an overview and synthesis of findings from ten studies carried out during a programme of research on these links and also identifies some of their potential implications for various development actors.

Religion has not been part of the Indian discourse on development, social inclusion and poverty reduction: instead analyses of social difference and policy to address disadvantage and discrimination have focused on caste. However, the 2006 Sachar Committee Report on the 'development deficit' experienced by Muslims in contemporary India changed the terms of the debate, and formed the context for this research. Along with religion, questions of caste and gender were prominent in several studies. Some of the research focussed on Hinduism, the majority religion in India, especially the concerns of Dalits, the lowest caste ex-untouchable communities. In addition, several of the studies focussed on religious minorities, including Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists, and their struggles for development and social justice.

The need to develop an understanding of development and religion from the perspective of the many actors concerned meant that the emphasis was on qualitative data collected through interviews and discussions with individuals and groups, rather than quantitative data, although some of the researchers carried out local surveys. Several of the studies focused on Punjab and Maharashtra, but some work was also undertaken in Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh.

Religious or faith-based organizations (FBOs) are mostly involved in the fields of education, health, emergency relief and community development. More recently, some have sought to empower marginalized social groups, including women. They vary widely with respect to the scale of their operations; their value orientation; and their conceptions of welfare, development and appropriate gender roles.

- The organizations' motives include the fostering of religious values and culture, sometimes implicitly linked to Hindu nationalism; a religiously justified commitment to philanthropic work; and empowerment of the poor and women. The class basis of their supporters varies. Religious motivations for engagement in educational activities are, therefore, intertwined with the class affiliation of the organizations concerned. As a result, the extent to which they challenge class (and caste) based advantage and disadvantage and women's traditional roles and social position varies, both between and within religious traditions.
- Although fewer than four per cent of Muslim children attend madrasas, both the central and state governments have since the early 1990s developed programmes designed to 'modernize' the curriculum in madrasas and improve the quality of education they offer. While many madrasas offering education equivalent to the primary and secondary levels have chosen to accept financial assistance, Muslim leaders tend to view the governments' motives with suspicion and there are numerous problems with the implementation of the scheme.
- Anti-Muslim violence is driven less by 'religious' differences or economic motivations than by a Hindu nationalist agenda – riots happen in some places and not others because they are deliberately engineered for political purposes. The priorities of Muslim victims



of inter-religious violence in Mumbai and Ahmedabad were similar: safety, shelter, the need to resume earning and a desire for their children to start attending school again. The sources of assistance varied depending on the context, with Muslims in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, seeking support from Muslim and secular organizations because of government complicity in the violence and the absence of a prosperous Muslim business community. Victims' rights to government compensation and justice for their attackers have not been realized

Religion is commonly assumed to be an important source of ideas about what it means to live well and the values that underpin behaviour.

- In development studies and policy, there are three key expectations of religion: that it is a form of social identity; that it is a source of community and social welfare; and that it provides a source of values and authority. However, the research throws doubt on all these assumptions: religion is just one of a number of identities that people have and, for most ordinary people in the Indian context, religious organizations do not seem to be important sources of welfare. Religion is about the moral order that underpins society and individual lives: it permeates everyday life, shapes people's notion of wellbeing, and is an important source of values. However, it is only one of many influences.
- Respondents largely agree that the high level of corruption is due to the non-implementation of existing rules and laws and that the main way to reduce it is therefore through enforcement of these codes of conduct and legal provisions. The potential for harnessing values imparted by religious ethical teaching for the fight against corruption is constrained by the perceived loss of moral authority by religious leaders and organizations.

The intertwining of religion and politics can be seen both in the working of democratic processes and in political mobilizations that have religious dimensions.

- Even in the Indian secular state, different processes are set in motion by electoral democracy: on the one hand, it allows the concerns of members of religious communities (such as socioeconomic disadvantage) to be forced onto the agenda of mainstream political actors; but it can also push even secular political parties into using a religious idiom when seeking support from religious sub-groups, thereby reinforcing religious identity politics.
- Dalit communities employ three key tactics in their quest for social recognition and improved wellbeing

- religious differentiation within Hinduism or Sikhism or through conversion, to forge a distinctive religious identity
- investment in social facilities serving not only members of the disadvantaged group itself, but often the broader community, to secure recognition of the group's achievements
- the fostering and use of transnational networks as a source of financial and social remittances.
- In addition, organizations such as the neo-Buddhist organizations supporting slum dwellers or members of Muslim women's networks seek to empower disadvantaged groups to achieve social change.

Some of the main implications of the research for development actors in India include:

- Religion should not be incorporated into development policy and practice without giving due consideration to wider social and political issues: engagement with religious groups and organizations needs to be handled with care, lest it fuel communal agendas and religious and caste tensions; governments at every level must take responsibility for protecting the citizenship rights of all.
- The exclusion of some groups within and between religious traditions and faith-based organizations must be recognized in any discussion of the relationships between religion, political participation and development.
- The assumption that religious organizations meet the needs of poor people and challenge social inequality must be assessed by examining the characteristics and affiliations of individual organizations.
- Religiously affiliated education providers operate on a relatively small scale, have particular value orientations and do not necessarily meet the needs of the poor, so they cannot be relied upon to make a major contribution to the aim of achieving access to education for all.
- Religion deals with the underlying moral order, while specific development programmes and projects affect only limited aspects of most people's lives, so development actors should be modest in their aims and particularly cautious about any attempt to harness religion to achieve development goals: it does not provide a magic recipe, which, if properly manipulated, can induce people to behave in particular ways.

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