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Gender, race and religion among Kenyan Hindus

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Abstract

Cross-creed interaction has become a matter of necessity in the contemporary world, largely due to the impact of globalization. Christianity and Hinduism share some commonness, at least in the history of their presence in the country. Yet, members of both faiths have – in the past- maintained cold relations between each other. In recent days, however, this trend appears to have changed as new opportunities for cross-faith interactions continue to present themselves courtesy of globalization. This paper examines some of these opportunities and how they have impacted on the Hindu-Christian relations in Kenya.

Keywords: *Inter-faith dialogue, xenophobia, identity, Christian, Hindu.*

1. Introduction

The relationship between Hindus of Indian descent and Christians of African descent in Kenya has been depicted in the past as largely antagonistic. Somjee (2000) decries the detached attitude with which the Indians in general and Indian Hindus in Kenya have maintained over their long history in this country. He believes that such a detachment has only helped in keeping Kenyans of Indian descent on the periphery of social-cultural and political change in this country. Rajan (2011) also appears to express concern over what he terms a ‘stranger mentality’ with

which most Indians approach their interactions with native African communities. They feel more less like brown people in a black man's land (Nazareth, 1981). Patel (2007) considers this xenophobia as an integral cause for the identity crisis the Indians have continued to struggle with to the present.

As part of the larger Indian diaspora in Kenya, Hindus cherish their continued presence in this country and in other parts of Africa (Patel, 2007; Warrach, 2000; Moywaywa & Ifedha 2015). They remember with pride the fact that they came to Kenya in dhows (Salvadori, 1997) in order to participate in Kenya's first major infrastructure projects, that is the construction of the Mombasa-Kisumu railway. The Hindus are happy that they have been part of Kenya's development – particularly railway construction, publication of educational materials and dukawarah (merchandizing) business (Moywaywa 2013). In her book 'through open doors', Salvadori (1989) analytically presents the currently prevailing situation among Kenyan Hindus whereby they express the need to adopt a more positive approach in their interaction with fellow Kenyans of native nationality. According to Salvadori, there is a renewal of interest among Hindus in which the latter feel indebted to open up and reach out to Christians and Africans in general to establish meaningful, durable and mutually-enriching relations with them. Salvadori does not, however, provide reasons for this change of tact.

2. Inter-racial relations among Kenyan Indians

The Hindu Christian relations could best be understood in the context of the general interactions of the wider Indian community with other communities in Kenya. It has been argued that the Indian society in Kenya is responsive to international conventions such as those that hinge on gender-related issues (Herzig, 2006). Herzig (2006) is, however quick to observe that there are some age-old traditions such as property inheritance practices, that still mar the otherwise favourable record of gender-responsiveness among Kenyan Indians. Property inheritance laws are deemed to favour the male child. This is, however true of Indian communities in other countries. Most Hindus prefer assigning male identity to their business names such as Samjee and sons.

Herzig also observes that the younger generation displays higher levels of willingness to relate with people from outside groups. In terms of inter-group relations, women generally show lower levels of engagement than men. This feat can perhaps be explained by two related factors; first is the cultural grounding whereby women are barred from engaging in cross-gender relations with persons other than their close family members. This practice is more pronounced among Hindus than other members of the immigrant Indian community. As a result of this requirement, most Indian women in Kenya do not venture outdoors, nor would they entertain male visitors at home in the absence of their husbands. Secondly (and probably due to these movement restrictions), most Hindu women in Kenya are not knowledgeable of local languages. They are only conversant of Indian dialects which are not popular among Kenyans. It is ironical that this challenge would present itself in a time like now when schools have brought together children from both Indian and African communities, thus exposing Indian girls to Kenyan dialects such as Kiswahili. This, however, does not work out that easily for Indian women. The majority of Kenyan Indian women would get married out of this country and most of the Kenyan men prefer picking spouses from beyond the borders of this country, meaning that their wives are unknowledgeable of the local dialects. And due to the movement restriction – earlier highlighted, these wives are unlikely to get ample opportunities to learn any of the local languages; thus diminishing their propensity for inter-group interactions. This reality notwithstanding, the younger crop of Hindu women is more open than their older counterparts.

In their interactions with Africans, most Hindu men of Indian descent are good in mastering the dialect of the community within which they do business or reside but such interactions are usually superficial. Hindus abhor inter-marriage with partners of African nationality, and those who defy risk being treated as outcasts.

Hinduism as a religion is structured in a manner that emphasizes individual spirituality. Among the orthodox Hindus in Kenya, communal worship at the temple is inconsequential and does not happen. Adherents are free to visit the temple and conduct their worship obligations at their own convenience but not in groups as happens in Islam and Christianity. As is the case with Christianity, Hindu women are also allowed to visit the temple and fulfill their religious obligations but only in their individual capacity. The majority of Hindu priests in Kenya are men, but Hinduism does not discourage women from aspiring for religious vocation.

Hindu parents are willing to send their female children to school just as they are in the case of male children. Furthermore, Hindu girls have less obstacles to accessing education than their African counterparts. Issues such as early marriages or Female Genital mutilation (FGM) that present a real challenge to most African female children are not practiced among the Hindus.

As a norm, Kenyan Hindus do not ascribe to the caste system but the mentality created by this religio-cultural practice has helped to serve as a stumbling block for Hindu followers to engage in gainful interaction with non-Hindu communities in Kenya. Mbiti (1990) points at the caste mentality as a possible detractor of Hindu conversions among Africans since the structure of the caste system does not have a provision for non-Indian nationalities. According to the caste system, the nobles or Brahmins are at the helm, followed by the warrior class or Kshatriyas, merchants/farmers or Vaishyas and lastly the labourers or Sudras. The question that begs, according to Mbiti, is what happens if an African was to convert ... in which category would he/she fall?

When viewed from a wider perspective, this mentality may be attributed to the tendency of Kenyan Hindus discouraging intermarriages with Africans.

3. Future projections

It is important to recognize the value of modern trends in information communication even as we gauge what the future heralds for the Hindu community in Kenya as far as gender and racial factors are concerned. The interplay between gender, race and religion are likely to influence the orientation of Kenyan Hindus especially in their interaction with fellow citizens – particularly those of African nationality.

Insofar as globalization continues to foster increased inter-group interactions, the Hindu community would open up to become more responsive to inter-racial relationships. It would be a useful progress if Hindu women join welfare groups that draw membership from across religious and racial barriers. Inter-racial marriages are gradually gaining acceptance among Kenyan Hindus. This is likely to increase as interfaith dialogue initiatives in schools and at grass-roots level gain momentum.

Inter-generational rivalry is likely to drive the younger generation into embracing inter-religious and inter-racial initiatives more favourably. The role of social media platforms is also projected to boost inter-racial and inter-religious interactions, especially among the younger generation.

4. Conclusion

The configuration of world demographics in contemporary times is rapidly evolving and it requires all of humanity to seek innovational ways of adapting in order to remain relevant. The inter-link between gender, race and religion can present enormous challenges but therein also lies the unlimited potential to provide useful solutions not only for the Kenyan Hindu community but for the whole Kenyan society.

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