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Mutual Perception and Relational Strategies of Hindus and Muslims in India

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Abstract

The present study examines mutual perception and relational strategies of the Hindu and Muslim groups in the cultural context of India by focusing on religion-based “othering.” A sample of 264 participants belonging to Hindu and Muslim groups was studied in Varanasi City. An instrument developed and used in an international project was adapted and given to participants (age range 20–60 years) for measuring their relational strategies, mutual perceptions and perceived discriminations. The findings revealed the ‘Coexistence’ relational strategy to be strongly placed in both Muslim and Hindu participants. Both ‘Integration’ and ‘Assimilation’ strategies were stronger in Muslim participants than in Hindu participants. Hindus preferred the ‘Separation’ strategy, perceived greater discrimination and held less positive views of Muslims. The findings are discussed along with their implications for dealing with the problem of Hindu-Muslim relationships in India.

Key words: Hindu, Muslim, relational strategies, mutual perception, intergroup relations

Mutual Perception and Relational Strategies of Hindus and Muslims in India

How to deal with cultural and religious diversity is a question that almost all societies of the world are seriously asking. The question is strongly debated, especially in societies that respect and promote cultural diversity. The plurality of culture and religion raises difficult questions when group positions are at stake and incompatible demands are involved. Several approaches have been proposed for dealing with cultural diversity. Multiculturalism is one approach that has been put to test both in research and practice. While many kinds of cultural groups exist in plural societies, their variety can be understood primarily in terms of three factors: mobility, voluntariness and permanence (Berry & Sam, 1997). Some groups face acculturation because of moving to a new culture (e.g., immigrants, refugees), while others stay in place (e.g., Indigenous or Native Peoples), and acculturation is brought on to them by people of other cultures. Similarly, some groups willingly participate in the acculturation process (e.g., immigrants), while others participate involuntarily (e.g., Native Peoples). Lastly, some groups and individuals settle permanently in the new culture (e.g., immigrants), whereas others stay there temporarily (e.g., sojourners).

In any case, cultural groups and their individual members have to essentially deal with the issue of how to acculturate. Two major issues are encountered by people while they negotiate daily lives in the new cultural contexts (Berry, 1976, 1980). These issues are related to (a) cultural maintenance (i.e., the extent to which individuals strive for the maintenance of their cultural identity), and (b) contact and participation (i.e., the extent to which individuals engage with members of other cultural groups). Strategies to deal with these issues are usually worked out.

Research indicates that all groups and individuals do not engage in intercultural relations in the same manner. In fact, there are large variations in how people seek to relate to each other in any society (Berry, 1980, 1990). Such variations in relationship orientations are also found in the cultural groups of Indian society (Mishra, Sinha, & Berry, 1996; Bano & Mishra, 2011; Mishra, Bano, & Tripathi, 2017). Depending on the degree to which there is a desire to maintain one's culture and identity, and the degree to which there is a desire to engage in daily interactions with other groups, four acculturation strategies have been identified (see Sam & Berry, 2016).

A positive or negative response to these issues presents us with four contrasting strategies: Integration, Assimilation, Separation, and Marginalisation (Berry, 1974). When there is an interest in maintaining one's original cultural identity while remaining in daily interactions with other groups, *Integration* is the option. When individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures, the *Assimilation* strategy is defined. In contrast, when individuals place value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others, the *Separation* alternative is defined. Finally, when there is little possibility or interest in maintenance of own culture, and little interest in having relations with others, *Marginalisation* is defined.

Research with the Adivasi Peoples in India has identified “co-existence” as another strategy of inter-group relationships (Mishra et al., 1996). This strategy has been regarded as a major strategy displayed by Indian people at large for dealing with other cultures (Sinha, 1988; Sinha & Tripathi, 1994). Coexistence involves the presence of distinct elements (e.g., values, traditions, customs and practices) of two or more cultures in the life of individuals belonging to different cultural groups. In this case, no attempt is made towards synthesis or assimilation of the cultural elements; instead, they are “enfolded” in the system and kept side by side with the pre-existing elements without involving any evaluation or standards of comparison in any context (Mishra et al., 1996; Tripathi & Mishra, 2016).

Berry (1990) has argued that these options cannot be viewed as independent of the nature of the society in which one is working on relationship issues. In societies where cultural diversity is valued, accepted, respected, tolerated and encouraged, the more likely options are Integration, Coexistence and Separation. In societies where individuals have expectations to reduce cultural diversity, people are more oriented toward Assimilation or Marginalisation (Berry, 1976; Sommerlad, 1967; Sommerlad & Berry, 1970; Mishra et al., 1996; Bano & Mishra, 2011; Mishra et al., 2017).

For a long time it was assumed that societies (in which intercultural relations are usually studied) are made up of two kinds of groups: a mainstream, and a number of minorities. There was also the assumption that the minorities would eventually be absorbed into the mainstream and disappear as distinct cultural groups. These beliefs have generated research interests in a unidirectional way. On the one hand, we find studies of ethnic relations, which examine stereotypes, attitudes, prejudice, and discrimination only among members of the mainstream. On the other hand, we find studies of acculturation, which focus only on the minorities. There is very little research that examines acculturation process and ethnic relations among minorities as well as among members of the mainstream society. Berry (2006) argues that the knowledge of the interrelationship of these two approaches is important for understanding intergroup relations in multicultural societies. In this paper, we have combined the approaches of acculturation and ethnic relations to understand certain issues related to the Hindu and Muslim relationship in India.

Hindu-Muslim Relationship in India

The Hindu-Muslim relationship in India has greatly puzzled social scientists. India is committed to “unity in diversity” as an ideal of a secular democratic republic. In practice, however, the linguistic, regional, ethnic and religious diversities have posed numerous problems concerning the relationships between groups. Hindu and Muslim contact dates back to more than 1,000 years, and the relationship between the two groups has generally been peaceful. Since ancient times, India has represented the mixing of races and cultures. Thapar (1989) points out four important and interrelated dimensions of the process of acculturation in ancient India: (1) diffusion of cultural traits and technology; (2) miscegenation; (3) Aryanization or Sanskritization; and (4) incorporation and assimilation of regional as well as foreign beliefs, rituals and customs. The last three centuries have witnessed a creative synthesis of Hindu and Islamic cultures. This tradition not only

manifested itself in syncretistic traditions of music, art, literature and architecture, but it also found expression in folklores, dressing patterns, food habits, names, and surnames.

In recent years, however, the relations between Hindus and Muslims have turned progressively negative and violent. The conflicts surfaced mainly due to the “policy of divide and rule” practiced by the British people (Thapar, Mukhia, & Chandra, 1981). As Tambiah (1997) observed, colonial support for dividing India on religious lines into two separate nations, India and Pakistan, deepened the divide between the Hindus and Muslims. A communal interpretation of Indian history by British historians (Thapar et al., 1981) and frequent communal riots after partition have further reinforced the communal identity of the Muslims (Engineer, 1991). This has resulted in a loss of the feeling of ‘oneness’ in spite of the fact that both groups still share a common territory in many parts of the country.

The Hindu and Muslim groups in India are often classified as “majority” and “minority” groups, respectively. At the national level, the majority group clearly represents Hindus. Although “minority” is largely used to refer to the Muslims in local contexts, the definition of majority and minority changes depending on which region of the country one is talking about. For example, in Jammu and Kashmir, Muslims are in majority and Hindus are in minority (Registrar General & Census of Commissioner, India, 2011). Tripathi and Mishra (2006) have pointed out that the nature and status of minority groups in India are not the same as in other parts of the world. They have shared resources with other groups for several hundred years now and have participated with other groups in creating the nation’s history. This is not so with respect to the relationship of ethno-cultural groups in other parts of the world. In light of this, we hope that the dynamics of the Hindu-Muslim relationship in India would be different from what has been reported in studies elsewhere.

In the present study, we have examined the mutual perception and relational strategies of Hindu and Muslim groups in the city of Varanasi, India. As an ancient city, Varanasi represents a syncretic culture where Hindus and Muslims are economically interdependent on each other in the weaving and trade of silk products (e.g., sarees and other garments). Thus, our expectation is that both Hindus and Muslims would have a positive perception of each other and would prefer to use Coexistence or Integration relational strategies over Assimilation, Separation or Marginalisation strategies.

Methods

Sample

The study was carried out in the city of Varanasi, which is situated in the northern part of India. Since ancient times, Varanasi has continued to be a seat of Hinduism. It is one of the seven important cities of Hindu pilgrimage (Dalmia, 1997). The sentimental feelings that the Hindus have for this city are similar to what Muslims have for Mecca, or the Jews for Palestine, or the Christians for Jerusalem or Rome (MacLeod, 1870; Nevill, 1909; Sherring, 1868). During the 17th and 18th centuries, people of diverse religious backgrounds came to the city (Kumar, 1988). Today, Varanasi is the home of Hindus (79.73%), Muslims (19.26%),

Christians (0.18%), Buddhists (0.10%), Sikhs (0.32%), Jains (0.11%) and people of other religious groups (0.30%) (Registrar General & Census of Commissioner, India, 2011). As the largest minority group, Muslims have earned a significant place in the society, culture and economy of the city. There are more than a thousand Hindu temples and about 300 mosques in the city. Since the last two decades, Varanasi has been presented as a sensitive site for politicization of the Hindu–Muslim relationship. In spite of this, the city is known as the confluence of Muslim and Hindu cultures. Metaphorically, it is referred to as “*Tana-Bana culture*.” The term refers to the production of silk in which threads of different colors and shades are intermixed to create a splendid fabric. At the social level, it symbolizes the interwoven, coexisting and interdependent nature of the life of Muslims (weavers) and Hindus (traders) in the production and sale of silk for which Varanasi is known world-wide. Another metaphor popularly used for this Hindu and Muslim relationship is “*Ganga-Jamuni culture*.” The term refers to two sacred rivers of India, which originate from different points, flow through different routes carrying water of white and bluish shades, but meet along their journey and flow together as one stream with water of a new tinge (see Mishra et al., 2017).

A sample of 264 participants belonging to Hindu ($N = 135$) and Muslim ($N = 129$) groups was selected. Both groups had 28% female respondents, and covered a wide age range (20–60 years, $M = 36.91$ years, $SD = 14.75$ years). In both groups, about 35% of the participants had low socio-economic status. Muslim participants had lived in the city for a longer period ($M = 53.4$ years) than the Hindu participants ($M = 36.2$ years).

Measures

An instrument developed and used in an international project (MIRIPS, of which we have been a part) was adapted and used for measuring the acculturation strategies of the Hindu and Muslim groups, including their mutual perception and perception of discrimination. The ‘mutual perception’ measure was created by aggregating participants’ scores on ‘tolerance’ and ‘attitude towards the out-group,’ measures, which had a high, positive correlation. The scales were translated and back-translated into Hindi and Urdu languages for use with the Hindu and Muslim participants, respectively. The alpha values of different measures were: Integration = .66, Assimilation = .47, Separation = .68, Marginalisation = .53, Coexistence = .64, perceived discrimination = .90, and Mutual perception = .80. Each variable was measured on a 5-point response scale through the rating of a number of statements related to each domain. Data collection was done by a Hindu and a Muslim investigator with prior consent obtained from the participants. Both of the investigators were trained in the process of interviewing. Sample items of the measures of relational strategies, perceived discrimination and mutual perception are given in Table 1.

Table 1.

Sample Items of the Relational Strategies, Perceived Discrimination and Mutual Perception Measures

1. Relational Strategies Integration I feel that Muslims should maintain their own cultural traditions but also adopt those of the Hindus. I feel that Hindus should maintain their own language but also learn the language of the Muslims.
Assimilation Muslims should engage in social activities that involve Hindus only. I prefer to make only Hindu friends.
Separation I feel that Hindus should maintain their own cultural traditions and not adapt to those of the Muslims. Muslims should engage in social activities that involve their own group members only.
Marginalization It is not important for a Hindu to be fluent either in the Hindi language or the Urdu language. Muslims should not engage in either their own group's social activities, or those of the Hindus.
Coexistence Muslims should maintain their own customs, but there is no harm in adopting the customs of the Hindus. It is important for me to be fluent in Hindi, but there is no harm to be also fluent in Urdu as well.
2. Mutual Perception Tolerance It is good to have people from different ethnic and racial groups living in the same country. We should promote equality among all groups, regardless of racial or ethnic origin. Attitude towards the out-group Please provide a number between 0 and 100 to indicate your attitude toward Hindus. Please provide a number between 0 and 100 to indicate your attitude toward Muslims.
3. Perceived discrimination I have been teased or insulted because of my religious (Hindu/Muslim) background. I have been threatened or attacked because of my religious (Hindu/Muslim) background.

Results

Table 2 presents the mean scores and the significance of difference between the mean scores of the Hindu and Muslim groups on the various measures. There was a significant difference between Hindus and Muslims on the measures of Integration, $t(262) = 5.56, p < .001$, Assimilation, $t(262) = 6.46, p < .001$, Separation, $t(262) = 6.60, p < .001$, perceived discrimination, $t(262) = 4.05, p < .001$, and mutual perception, $t(262) = 8.37, p < .001$. The difference between the two groups was not significant on the measures of Coexistence, $t(262) = 1.27, p = .20$, and Marginalisation, $t(262) = 0.72, p = .47$.

Regarding relational strategies, an ANOVA revealed a significant difference among the relational strategies of Hindus, $F(4, 131) = 232.03, p < .001$, and Muslims, $F(4, 125) = 179.79, p < .001$. The highest mean scores in the Hindu ($M = 14.35, SD = 4.09$) and Muslim ($M = 15.87, SD = 2.92$) groups were found on Coexistence and Integration, respectively. Hindus showed preference for Coexistence, followed by Integration, Separation, Marginalisation and Assimilation. Muslims preferred Integration, which was followed by their preference for Coexistence, Separation, Assimilation and Marginalisation. Muslims displayed stronger preference for Integration ($M = 15.87, SD = 2.92$) and Assimilation ($M = 7.42, SD = 2.33$) as compared to Hindus ($M = 13.40, SD = 4.18; M = 5.45, SD = 2.57$). Hindus, in contrast, displayed a significantly stronger preference for Separation ($M = 13.14, SD = 4.53$) than Muslims ($M = 9.83, SD = 3.53$). Hindus also perceived more discrimination ($M = 11.59, SD = 5.64$) as compared to Muslims ($M = 8.85, SD = 5.32$), which was against our expectation. While Muslims had a more positive perception of Hindus ($M = 89.87, SD = 21.04$), the Hindus had a less positive perception of Muslims ($M = 65.89, SD = 23.99$).

Table 2.

Mean Scores of Hindus and Muslims on Various Measures

Measures	Groups		t-values
	Hindus (n =135) <i>M (SD)</i>	Muslims (n = 129) <i>M (SD)</i>	
Integration	13.40 (4.18)	15.87 (2.92)	5.56***
Co-existence	14.35 (4.09)	14.90 (2.58)	1.27
Assimilation	5.45 (2.57)	7.42 (2.33)	6.46***
Separation	13.14 (4.53)	9.83 (3.53)	6.60***
Marginalisation	6.79 (2.78)	7.05 (3.02)	0.72
Perceived discrimination	11.59 (5.64)	8.85 (5.32)	4.05***
Mutual perception	65.89 (23.99)	89.87 (21.04)	8.37**

*** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the Coexistence strategy is strongly placed in Hindu and Muslim participants. Rather, Muslims are slightly higher in coexistence than are Hindus, although the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. Integration and Assimilation strategies were stronger in Muslim rather than Hindu participants. Hindus preferred the Separation strategy and had a less positive perception of Muslims. As compared to Muslims, they also perceived more discrimination.

These findings bring about a couple of issues that need some discussion in the multicultural context of India. One question is: why did the Hindus prefer the Separation strategy, have a less positive perception of Muslims, and perceive more discrimination as compared to Muslims even though they constitute the majority group in India? A probable answer is that they are infused with the notion of “purity” in all spheres of their life, including even the matters like dress and food (Bano & Mishra, 2011). In the Hindu tradition, everything, including people and groups, are ranked according to certain qualities. Those who behave like gods are considered “pure”; those who behave like demons are considered “impure.” God-like behavior involves not only treating people well and being careful about one’s food, dress and sexual behaviors, but also abstaining from mental, verbal and physical transactions that harm others. Those who do not follow these rules of conduct and behave otherwise are considered unclean, polluted or impure even if they are part of the Hindu society. Tripathi (1987) has pointed out that the idea of “purity” is germane to Hinduism and “...for a Hindu the journey of his life is a constant search for purity and refinement” (p. 238). All of the rites and rituals of Hindus from birth till death are associated with purification. For traditional Hindus, people who have not found refinement through “*samskaras*” (rites and rituals) are considered “impure.” In traditional Hindu families, non-vegetarian food is still considered impure and sinful and is observed as a social taboo. Bano and Mishra (2006, 2014) found that even the young Hindu children mentioned non-vegetarian food, which they believed was prevalent among Muslims, as one important reason for keeping distance from them. Relating to Muslims seemed to threaten their purity and put their Hindu identity at stake.

There are also suspected threats to the Hindu religion from Islam, evidenced by the sporadic incidences of conversion of Hindus to Islam in some parts of the country. The fact that Hindus’ perception of Muslims is affected by the “Islamophobia” (Green, 2015) that surrounds Muslims world-wide is also undeniable. To avoid potential dangers, some Hindus prefer to keep from Muslims as much distance as possible in spite of the fact that the overall preference is for Coexistence. In one study (Mishra et al., 2017), we have found that the Separation strategy, which was preferred over Assimilation, threatens cultural security, reduces out-group contact and mutual acceptance, and leads to perception of a higher level of discrimination.

Another interesting question is: why were the Integration and Assimilation strategies strongly placed among Muslims, and why did they show a more positive perception of Hindus, and perceive lesser discrimination than the Hindu participants? The answer lies in

the structure of the Indian society at the national level. As we have mentioned earlier, the constitution of India grants equal rights to Hindus and Muslims. With this provision, while Muslims have fundamental rights to maintain their identity and heritage culture, as a minority group they are also granted certain privileges, which are not available to Hindus. This national context provides them with a fairly secure environment and allows them to live without any suspected threat to the Muslim identity and culture.

Historical evidence suggests something beyond what we have said earlier. There is much evidence for “co-construction” (interdependence) of identities through a process of mutual respect and support, which has not happened anywhere else in the world (Tripathi & Mishra, 2016). The process does not necessarily involve conflict between personal and social identities, often pointed out in social-psychological literature. For example, in the state of Punjab, one may find a considerable number of evidences where one brother is Hindu, while another is Sikh, or in the western part of Uttar Pradesh, where one brother is Hindu and another is a Muslim. These faith-related differences do not come in the way of family or group relationships.

Our findings revealed Coexistence to be a strong relational strategy of Hindu as well as Muslim groups. It is to be noted that the study was conducted in Varanasi City where the Hindu-Muslim relationship is nurtured somewhat differently. The silk industry has allowed Hindus and Muslims to maintain an economically interdependent relationship. It forms a solid basis for the nurturance of the “*Tana-Bana*” or “*Ganga-Jamuni*” culture in Varanasi. Other studies (Bano & Mishra, 2011; Mishra et al., 2017) have also found Coexistence to be a strongly preferred relational strategy of other groups in India, including the Adivasi groups (Mishra et al., 1996).

The findings of this study allow us to conclude that Coexistence and Integration are highly preferred relational strategies of Hindu and Muslim groups. The Separation strategy is more preferred by Hindus than Muslims. Muslims’ perception of Hindus is more positive than the Hindus’ perception of Muslims. In the case of Assimilation and Marginalization strategies, since the alphas values were not optimal, the results may suffer from measurement error and should be taken with caution. On the other hand, these strategies are also the least preferred relational strategies and hence not a matter of serious concern. Despite being a majority group, Hindus perceive greater discrimination from Muslims than do the Muslims from Hindus. There is still a need to understand domain-specific relational strategies and their dynamics in order to manage inter-group relationship more effectively in the pluralistic context of India than what is obtained at the present time.

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