

Prophetic Teachings and Religious Pluralism: Constructing a Coexistence Framework for Indian Muslim Community

Dr. K. Sajad Ahmad

Former Research Scholar, BGSB University, Rajouri, J&K

Abstract

The study explores the role of Prophetic teachings in fostering religious pluralism and constructing a framework for peaceful coexistence within the Indian Muslim community. The study is grounded in the diverse and complex religious landscape of India, where Muslims have historically lived alongside a multitude of religious traditions. By examining key principles from the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, such as justice, tolerance, mutual respect, and the protection of religious minorities, this paper seeks to develop a model of coexistence that resonates with the contemporary challenges faced by Indian Muslims. The study delves into the historical context of the Prophet's ﷺ interactions with non-Muslim communities, highlighting the ethical and legal precedents set by the Mithaq-e-Madinah and Suleh Hudaybiyyah as pioneering examples of a pluralistic society. Through this analysis, the study identifies core Prophetic values that can be adapted to address current issues of religious intolerance, sectarian conflict, and social fragmentation within India.

In constructing a coexistence framework, the study emphasizes the importance of dialogue, inclusive governance, and community engagement, drawing parallels between Prophetic practices and the Indian constitutional commitment to secularism and religious freedom. The proposed framework is designed to empower the Indian Muslim community to navigate their religious identity while contributing to the broader social fabric of India in a manner that promotes harmony and mutual understanding. It also contributes to the discourse on religious pluralism by offering a practical and theologically comprehensive model that aligns with both Islamic teachings and the pluralistic ethos of Indian society. It aims to provide a roadmap for policymakers, religious leaders, and community members seeking to foster a more inclusive and peaceful coexistence among India's diverse religious communities.

Key Words: *Prophetic Teachings, Religious Pluralism, Coexistence Framework, Mithaq-e-Madinah & Suleh Hudabiyah, Indian Muslims, Tolerance*

Introduction

India, with its multifaceted cultural, linguistic and religious history, stands as one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world. The country is home to various religious traditions that have coexisted for millennia, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and numerous indigenous belief systems. This complex religious landscape is not only a testament to India's pluralistic nature but also presents challenges, as the coexistence of multiple faiths has not always been harmonious. Throughout history, religious communities in India have experienced periods of cooperation and mutual respect, as well as times of conflict and division. In this diverse and sometimes volatile environment, the role of Indian Muslims who constitute approximately 14% of the population becomes both significant and necessary in promoting religious pluralism and fostering peaceful coexistence.

Since the thousand year history, Indian Muslims have contributed to the cultural, intellectual, and social fabric of the nation, engaging in cross-religious dialogue and creating spaces of shared understanding. Yet, contemporary India is witnessing an escalation in religious polarization, where communal tensions and religious intolerance are increasingly prevalent. In this context, it is essential for Indian Muslims to look to their religious heritage for guidance on how to navigate these challenges, particularly through the teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, who advocated for justice, tolerance, and mutual respect.

The study aims to explore the endure relevance of Prophetic teachings in fostering religious pluralism and peaceful coexistence in India's current socio-religious climate. Central to Islamic thought, as conveyed by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, is the principle of Adl (justice) which is foundational to any society that seeks to promote peace and equality, and it is directly applicable to the challenges Indian Muslims face today. Moreover, the Prophet ﷺ consistently demonstrated a deep commitment to religious pluralism through his interactions with non-Muslim communities. His life presents numerous examples where religious tolerance and respect for others' beliefs were pivotal in maintaining peaceful relations. The Mithaq-e-Madinah (Constitution of Medina) is an exemplary document that underscores the Prophet's ﷺ ability to create a framework for pluralistic governance. This agreement, signed between Muslims, Jews, and pagan

tribes in Medina, ensured mutual protection and equal rights for all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliations. The Treaty of Hudaibiyyah is another critical historical event that highlights the Prophet's ﷺ strategic approach to maintaining peace, even when the terms may seem disadvantageous. The peace treaty, signed between Muslims and the Quraysh tribe, fostered long-term stability despite initial opposition from some within the Muslim community. This lesson in diplomacy and foresight underscores the importance of prioritizing peace and coexistence over short-term gains, a principle Indian Muslims can adopt in the face of contemporary sectarian divisions and religious intolerance.

Through an analysis of the key moments in the life of the Prophet ﷺ, the study aims to construct a coexistence framework for Indian Muslims that not only draws from the ethical and legal foundations of Islam but also resonates with the pluralistic ethos enshrined in India's constitution. India's secular constitution guarantees the right to religious freedom and equality before the law for all its citizens, irrespective of their religious identity. This aligns well with Islamic teachings on justice, tolerance, and respect for others' rights. Indian Muslims are, therefore, in a unique position to embody these dual commitments: adherence to their religious values while embracing the constitutional promise of secularism. By applying these principles, Indian Muslims can contribute to creating a society where religious diversity is not merely tolerated but celebrated, thus fostering a peaceful coexistence with their fellow citizens.

Historical Roots of Religious Pluralism in in Prophetic Traditions

Religious pluralism is deeply rooted the verses of the Quran and in the actions and teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The Prophet's ﷺ approach to religious diversity, justice, and coexistence laid the groundwork for a comprehensive and pragmatic understanding of pluralism, which can serve as a model for societies navigating complex interfaith dynamics. Two critical events in the Prophet's ﷺ life—the Mithaq-e-Madinah (Constitution of Medina) and Suleh Hudaibiyyah (Treaty of Hudaibiyyah)—demonstrate his commitment to establishing peaceful relations with non-Muslim communities and creating a harmonious society where different faiths could coexist. These precedents provide valuable insights into how religious pluralism can be actualized within a framework of Islamic principles. Additionally, other historical instances, such as the Prophet's ﷺ role in Hilf al-Fudhul and the migration of early Muslims to Abyssinia, further illustrate his dedication to justice, tolerance, and pluralism.

Hilf al-Fudhul

The Prophet's ﷺ commitment to justice and cooperation across religious boundaries was evident even before his Prophethood. One of the most significant examples of this is his participation in Hilf al-Fudhul, an alliance formed to uphold justice and protect the rights of the oppressed in Makkah. The alliance, which included members of various tribes, including non-Muslims, was convened to address instances of injustice and ensure that no one, regardless of their tribal or religious affiliation, would be wronged in Makkah. Even after the prophethood, the Prophet ﷺ praised the alliance, stating that he would stand by likewise alliances in today's time as well. This early involvement in an interfaith, intertribal pact reflects the Prophet's ﷺ belief in the universal values of justice, fairness, and the protection of human dignity—principles that transcend religious boundaries. Hilf al-Fudhul can be seen as a precursor to the later pluralistic agreements such as the Mithaq-e-Madinah, and offers valuable lessons for contemporary Muslims on the importance of interfaith solidarity in addressing societal challenges.

The Migration to Abyssinia

Another crucial event in the early history of Islam that highlights the Prophet's ﷺ approach to religious pluralism is the migration of a group of early Muslims to Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia). Faced with severe persecution in Makkah, the Prophet ﷺ advised some of his followers to seek refuge in Abyssinia, where they were granted protection by a Christian ruler-Negus (Najashi). The Prophet's ﷺ decision to send his followers to a non-Muslim land under the protection of a Christian king speaks volumes about the possibilities of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between religious communities. Negus, upon hearing the Muslims' recitation of the Qur'an and learning about their beliefs, provided them with sanctuary, refusing to hand them over to their persecutors. This event is a significant example of interreligious cooperation and mutual respect, demonstrating that religious pluralism is not merely about coexistence but also about supporting one another in times of need.

The Mithaq-e-Madinah (Constitution of Medina)

The Mithaq-e-Madinah, established shortly after the Prophet's ﷺ arrival at Medina, is one of the earliest examples of a written constitution in human history and is pivotal in understanding the Islamic model of religious pluralism. This document was not only a political agreement but also a social contract between Muslims and non-Muslims, including Jewish tribes and pagan inhabitants of Medina. It guaranteed mutual rights and protection to all parties, regardless of their religious affiliations. The

constitution is significant for its recognition of the religious and cultural differences within the city, yet it emphasized a collective responsibility to safeguard the common good of all inhabitants.

The Mithaq outlined that all groups within Medina were part of a single community (Ummah), while allowing each group to retain its religious practices and customs. One key article of the constitution states: “The Jews of Banu Awf are one community with the believers, To the Jews their religion and to the Muslims their religion.” This clause, among others, underscores the Prophet’s ﷺ commitment to religious freedom, mutual respect, and the coexistence of diverse communities under a shared legal and ethical framework. By ensuring the protection of religious minorities and their rights, the Mithaq-e-Madinah laid the foundation for a pluralistic society based on justice and cooperation, rather than coercion or dominance.

Suleh Hudaybiyyah (Treaty of Hudaybiyyah)

Another pivotal moment in Islamic history that demonstrates the Prophet’s ﷺ commitment to peaceful coexistence is the Suleh Hudaybiyyah (Treaty of Hudaybiyyah), signed in 628 CE between the Muslims of Medina and the Quraysh tribe of Makkah. The treaty, on the surface, appeared to be unfavourable to the Muslims, as it imposed several restrictions on them, including a prevention of performing the pilgrimage to Makkah that year. Despite the immediate disadvantages, the Prophet ﷺ recognized the long-term benefits of establishing peace and stability through diplomatic means. The treaty allowed both parties to cease hostilities for a period of ten years, creating an environment in which both Muslims and non-Muslims could live in relative peace. This diplomatic move demonstrated the Prophet’s ﷺ pragmatism and his willingness to make temporary concessions for the greater good of securing peace and avoiding unnecessary conflict. The Suleh Hudaybiyyah not only provided Muslims with the breathing room to strengthen their community but also fostered conditions for greater interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, ultimately leading to the peaceful conquest of Makkah two years later.

The historical examples of the Hilf al-Fudhul, the migration of Muslims to Abyssinia, Mithaq-e-Madinah and Suleh Hudaybiyyah illustrate the Prophet Muhammad’s ﷺ comprehensive approach to religious pluralism. These events highlight his emphasis on justice, respect for religious diversity, and the importance of peaceful coexistence. By drawing on these precedents, contemporary Indian Muslims can construct a framework for interfaith harmony that aligns with both Islamic teachings and the pluralistic ethos of Indian society. These models of coexistence are not only relevant to the historical context in which they were enacted but also offer

timeless lessons for navigating the challenges of religious pluralism in modern India.

Prophetic Teachings on Tolerance and Justice

The teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ on tolerance and justice offer a profound ethical framework that transcends religious boundaries and fosters a harmonious coexistence among diverse communities. These teachings, deeply rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, lay the foundation for a society where justice, fairness, and respect for human dignity are paramount.

The Principle of Justice

Justice ('Adl) is one of the most emphasized values in the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The Qur'an, in Surah An-Nisa (4:135), commands believers to stand firmly for justice: "O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives." This verse emphasizes that justice is a universal principle that must be upheld, regardless of personal interests or affiliations. The directive does not limit justice to Muslims but extends it to all people, regardless of their faith or social status. In the life of the Prophet ﷺ, this commitment to justice was evident in numerous instances. The Prophet ﷺ ensured that justice was served impartially, even when it involved conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, in the case of a Jewish man wrongfully accused of theft, the Prophet ﷺ exonerated him based on evidence, despite the pressure from some Muslims to favour their co-religionist. This decision underscores the Prophet's ﷺ commitment to upholding justice, even in the face of communal bias, reflecting the Qur'anic injunction that justice must be served equitably and without prejudice.

Conduct with Non-Muslim Citizens

The Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ conduct with non-Muslim citizens provides a powerful model for religious pluralism within an Islamic governance system. The Dhimmah system, under which non-Muslims (known as Dhimmis) were granted protection and freedom to practice their religion in Islamic states, is a testament to the Prophet's ﷺ insistence on justice and fairness. Dhimmis living under Muslim rule were entitled to safety, protection, and religious autonomy, in return for paying a tax called Jizya, which substituted for the military service required of Muslims. The rights and protections afforded to Dhimmis were not mere formalities but were actively enforced by the Prophet ﷺ and his successors. In one of his sayings, the Prophet ﷺ explicitly stated: "Whoever harms a Dhimmi, I

shall be his prosecutor on the Day of Judgment.” . Such pronouncements reflect the Prophet’s ﷺ commitment to protecting the dignity and rights of all citizens, irrespective of their religious affiliation. This practice of safeguarding minority rights aligns with the broader Islamic principle of Maqasid al-Shariah (the objectives of Islamic law), which prioritizes the preservation of life, religion, intellect, lineage, and property.

Religious Tolerance in Prophetic Governance

The principle of religious tolerance is one of the hallmarks of the governance system instituted by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The Mithaq-e-Madinah (Constitution of Medina), drafted after the Prophet’s ﷺ migration to Medina, is one of the earliest documented constitutions in history that laid the groundwork for a pluralistic society. It established a multi-religious community where Muslims, Jews, and other tribes were united by a social contract that guaranteed mutual rights, responsibilities, and protection. The document is a testament to the Prophet’s ﷺ vision of a society where people of different faiths could coexist peacefully while maintaining their religious identities.

Another significant example of the Prophet’s ﷺ tolerance is found in the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, a peace agreement made between the Muslims and the Quraysh tribe of Makkah. Although the terms of the treaty seemed to favour the Quraysh, the Prophet ﷺ agreed to it, demonstrating his commitment to peace and dialogue over conflict. The treaty was a pragmatic solution that helped establish a period of peace, during which Islam spread rapidly. This diplomatic approach showed that religious co-existence and tolerance were preferable to war and conflict, even when immediate circumstances seemed unfavourable to the Muslims.

Equality in Prophetic Teachings

In addition to promoting tolerance, the Prophet ﷺ also championed the idea of equality, a concept that was radical for the tribal society of 7th-century Arabia. He abolished various forms of social discrimination, including racial and ethnic divisions. His famous last sermon at the Farewell Pilgrimage emphasized this point: “All mankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab. A white has no superiority over a black, nor does a black have any superiority over a white, except by piety and good action.” This declaration reflects the universal and egalitarian ethos of Islam, which views all humans as equal before God, regardless of their social, ethnic, or religious background. The Prophet ﷺ never imposed Islam by force, recognizing that faith must be entered into willingly. The Qur’an states, “There is no compulsion in religion” , a verse that

the Prophet ﷺ upheld in his interactions with other religious communities. This principle was applied in Medina, where non-Muslim tribes were allowed to practice their faith freely, as long as they adhered to the terms of the constitution.

Constructing a Coexistence Framework: Key Principles

The teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provide a comprehensive and ethically grounded model for coexistence in multi-religious societies. For Indian Muslims, who are part of a diverse and pluralistic country, drawing upon these teachings can help address contemporary challenges of religious intolerance, communal tensions, and social fragmentation. A coexistence framework built on the Prophet's ﷺ life and teachings emphasizes justice, interfaith dialogue, minority rights, mutual respect, and civic engagement. Each of these principles can be applied to foster a more harmonious society in India.

Justice as a Universal Value

Justice is a central tenet of both the Qur'an and the Sunnah, forming the foundation for any peaceful and harmonious society. The Qur'an explicitly commands Muslims to "be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives". This imperative transcends religious and ethnic boundaries, calling on Muslims to uphold justice for all. Indian Muslims must therefore commit to ensuring that justice is served for all citizens, regardless of religious identity. This includes advocating for fair treatment in courts, equal access to social and economic resources, and standing against all forms of oppression and inequality. Justice is not only a matter of legal fairness but also of social equity. Muslims in India, while advocating for their own rights, must equally support the rights of others, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and societal harmony.

Promotion of Interfaith Dialogue

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ engaged with people of different faiths, including Jews, Christians, and pagans, through dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation. The Mithaq-e-Madinah (Constitution of Medina) is a prime example of his efforts to establish a pluralistic society based on interfaith collaboration and respect for religious diversity. Similarly, Indian Muslims can play a vital role in promoting interfaith initiatives that aim to bridge gaps between religious communities. Through dialogue, common misconceptions about Islam and other religions can be addressed, which in turn can help reduce communal tensions. Regular interactions between

religious leaders, scholars, and community members can foster trust and solidarity. These efforts are vital in building a society where differences are embraced rather than feared, and where religious coexistence is seen as strength rather than a source of conflict.

Protection of Minority Rights

One of the hallmarks of Islamic governance during the time of the Prophet ﷺ was the protection of religious minorities. The Dhimmah system under Islamic rule ensured that non-Muslims were granted protection and freedom to practice their faith. The Prophet ﷺ himself famously declared, “Whoever harms a Dhimmi, I shall be his prosecutor on the Day of Judgment”. For Indian Muslims, this means not only seeking protection for their own community but also actively advocating for the rights of all religious minorities in the country. This is especially pertinent in India, where numerous religious minorities exist. By standing in solidarity with other marginalized communities, Indian Muslims can embody the principles of inclusivity and fairness that are deeply rooted in Islamic teachings.

Mutual Respect and Cooperation

The Prophet’s ﷺ relationships with non-Muslim communities were based on mutual respect, cooperation, and a shared commitment to the common good. Indian Muslims can draw from this example to build a more inclusive society, where religious differences are respected and cooperation is fostered for the greater social welfare. This mutual respect goes beyond mere tolerance and extends into active cooperation in areas of common concern, such as poverty alleviation, education, and public health. The Prophet’s ﷺ own example of working with various religious and tribal groups during his time in Medina shows that such cooperation is not only possible but also beneficial for the entire society.

Engagement in Civic Life

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ emphasized active participation in the welfare of society. Muslims are not only called to be concerned with their own communities but also with the broader society in which they live. Civic engagement is essential for building a just and equitable society. Indian Muslims can contribute positively to their local and national communities by participating in civic responsibilities, such as volunteering and working in community-driven initiatives. The Prophet’s ﷺ legacy of being a community leader and a social reformer can serve as a guiding principle for Indian Muslims today. By engaging in efforts that promote education, poverty mitigation, and social justice, Muslims in India can not only improve their own communities but also contribute to the broader development and harmony of the nation.

So, the ideals drawn from the teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, offer a healthy framework for religious coexistence. For Indian Muslims, these principles provide both an ethical and practical roadmap for addressing the challenges of religious pluralism in a diverse society. By embodying these values, Indian Muslims can contribute to the creation of a more just, inclusive, and harmonious India..

Opportunities and Challenges for Indian Muslims

The teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ present a valuable framework for fostering religious pluralism and justice in multi-religious societies, such as India. However, applying these teachings in the contemporary Indian context presents both opportunities and challenges. Indian Muslims, who constitute a significant minority, face unique obstacles, including sectarianism, political marginalization, and social prejudices. At the same time, the rich heritage of Prophetic guidance offers a roadmap to promote unity, tolerance, and justice, aligning Islamic principles with India's constitutional values.

Challenges: Sectarianism and Political Marginalization

One of the major challenges for Indian Muslims in implementing Prophetic teachings is the internal sectarianism within the community itself. Divergent theological schools of thought and historical divisions have at times hindered the cohesion necessary to present a unified front in promoting pluralism. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ emphasized the importance of unity within the Muslim Ummah, urging believers to avoid division. However, sectarian divides weaken the collective ability of Indian Muslims to contribute effectively to interfaith dialogue and social harmony. Furthermore, the political marginalization of Muslims in India presents another significant challenge. The rise of majoritarian politics and instances of communal violence have often left Muslims feeling excluded from the national political discourse. This sense of alienation is aggravated by economic underdevelopment and underrepresentation in political institutions, which complicates the ability of Indian Muslims to engage meaningfully in civic life. Despite India's constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and equality, many Muslims face systemic discrimination in sectors like employment, education, and housing. These structural issues must be addressed to fully actualize the Prophet's ﷺ teachings on justice and fairness in the Indian context.

Opportunities: Embracing Prophetic Teachings for Social Harmony

Despite these challenges, significant opportunities exist for Indian Muslims to apply the teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in building a more inclusive society. One of the key opportunities lies in promoting interfaith

dialogue. Following the example of the Prophet ﷺ, Indian Muslims can foster initiatives that bridge the gap between religious communities. Interfaith programs and social platforms that focus on shared values such as justice, compassion, and mutual respect can be a powerful tool for reducing religious tensions and promoting coexistence. Additionally, the Prophetic model emphasizes the protection of minority rights, so the Indian Muslims, while advocating for their own community, can also champion the rights of other marginalized groups. This commitment to justice can strengthen alliances with other minority communities, helping to build a broader coalition for social change.

Conclusion

Prophetic teachings offer an enduring blueprint for religious pluralism, justice, and peaceful coexistence, principles that are particularly relevant in the complex and diverse context of India. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, through his interactions with non-Muslim communities, demonstrated that tolerance, mutual respect, and justice are not just ethical values but foundational pillars for building harmonious societies. Indian Muslims, by embracing these teachings, can contribute significantly to fostering interfaith dialogue and addressing the challenges of religious intolerance and social fragmentation in contemporary India. The framework derived from Prophetic teachings encourages Indian Muslims to not only seek justice for their community but also to protect and advocate for the rights of all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation. This approach aligns with the secular values enshrined in the Indian Constitution, providing a bridge between Islamic ethics and modern democratic principles. By engaging in civic life, promoting interfaith dialogue, and ensuring the fair treatment of all, Indian Muslims can play a vital role in strengthening India's pluralistic fabric.

Ultimately, this coexistence model, rooted in Prophetic values, provides practical solutions for overcoming social divisions and fostering a more inclusive society. It serves as a reminder that the teachings of Islam, when applied thoughtfully, offer timeless guidance for building a just and peaceful world, where diversity is celebrated rather than feared.

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