

# When Religions Claim Superiority\*

## Preconditions for Genuine Interfaith Harmony

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Throughout this year's World Parliament of Religions, I heard speaker after speaker reiterate the importance of cultivating a spirit of tolerance in individuals, about teaching them to rise above narrow creeds and to learn to love and respect people of diverse faiths. Even in India, most of those working to promote interfaith harmony tend to take this approach. Individual transformation has an important place in building tolerant societies. However, we cannot expect each and every person to become a little saint or a model of virtue in order for us to build a world in which people of different faiths can live together in harmony. Some forms of hatred and prejudice cannot be banned; they can at best be kept under check and control.

Individuals pick up cues from and are heavily influenced by social institutions. It is only when individuals and groups interested in peaceful co-living among various religious communities succeed in creating a broad based consensus in their respective societies and persuade their societies to institutionalise fair and just norms for

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determining the rights of various groups irrespective of power, status, class, nation, race, caste, color, gender, language or religion that they create essential prerequisites for imparting interfaith education in a meaningful way. If people are not convinced about the intrinsic equality of all human beings, they are not likely to want to learn about their faiths with a spirit of respect.

### Learning from Past

Learning about other people's faith is made easier if we see it first and foremost as an attempt to learn about their culture, values and collective aspirations. In pre modern times, the task of interfaith learning and bridge building between diverse groups happened mainly through the following routes:

① Occasionally, a few special individuals undertook long travels

across major cultural and geographical boundaries, immersing themselves in the culture of other communities and becoming two-way bridges of spiritual communication between distant peoples. Many of India's spiritual leaders were either roving preachers or took to preaching only after they travelled far and wide. For example, Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, travelled extensively not only within the sub-continent, including remote regions, but also to the holy sites in the Middle East before he began expounding his spiritual worldview. Not surprisingly, his following transcended religious and caste divides and he came to act as a bridge between the monotheistic Islam and polytheistic Hindu faiths. His followers too came from different faiths and sects. The holy book of the Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib, contains hymns composed by people of diverse faiths, castes and creeds.

② Most ordinary people learnt about each other's religion through direct contact with neighbours and by participating in their festivals, important life rituals and coming together to celebrate each others' occasions of joy and share moments of loss and sorrow.

The Indian sub-continent witnessed repeated invasions from the Northwest by various Central Asian peoples of the Islamic faith, and cataclysmic regime changes for a whole millennium. And yet over

centuries of co-living, the vast majority of Hindus, Muslims and other religious communities evolved humane and dignified norms for co-existing, that included joining in the celebration of each other's festivals, and having common shrines of worship as well as saintly figures whose followings transcended religious divides.

In the Indic universe there was no centralized religious authority issuing dictates regarding how one should relate to people of different faiths. People learnt how to act on the basis of their lived experience and enlightened self interest. They realized that, if they want safer lives, it is best not to provoke too much strife and hatred among one's neighbours. They did not need to study or be taught the religious traditions of others because they saw them practiced around them every day and often even participated in at least some part of those observances.

### **Bonding Despite Differences**

Such bonding was facilitated by a deep-rooted belief shared by people of different faiths and religions that, among many other social responsibilities, *padosi dharm* (that is, the moral responsibility towards one's neighbours or fellow villagers) is no less sacred than responsibility towards one's family or caste members. For example, a woman born in a particular village was and is still expected to be treated as a daughter of the village by the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs alike of that village who were and are still expected to feel equally responsible for her safety.

This pact is not likely to have been observed uniformly in its pristine form by everyone in the entire sub-continent. But, that it constitutes the desirable moral code, transcending all religious divides in the Indic universe, is suggested by the fact that, starting from the early days of Indian cinema, an overwhelming majority of

Bollywood films depict idyllic inter-community bonds on the basis of neighbourhood ties and personal friendship between people of different religions. They repeatedly tell stories of Hindus, Muslims, Christians or Sikhs, living together with exemplary affection and camaraderie, which includes exceptional respect for the other and even making enormous sacrifices, including that of their own lives, to protect their neighbours or friends in times of trouble. Bollywood films never tire of showing a Hindu or a Muslim woman adopting a man of a different religious affiliation as her *rakhi* brother and the man chosen for this honour willing to lay down his own life for the protection and well being of his adopted sister.

The claims of neighborhood, the bonds of friendship and affection are depicted as being at least equal, if not higher than that of blood ties. This is an important reason why Bollywood melodramas have come to be far more popular in the non-European world, especially in Muslim countries, than Hollywood films. In such a moral universe, care for each other's religious sensibilities comes spontaneously. For example, it has been a common practice for Hindu and Muslim neighbours to exchange food gifts on important festivals of both

communities. However, Muslims take care to send only uncooked dry food to their Hindu neighbours out of respect for their taboos. Likewise, no Hindu family would offer a non-vegetarian dish to a Muslim neighbour, which is not made with *halaal* meat. For weddings and other feasts, traditional Muslims living in mixed neighbourhoods employ Hindu cooks to prepare separate food for their Hindu neighbours and vice versa. One can cite innumerable such examples of spontaneous and graceful mutual accommodation whereby differences in religion or caste based taboos were not and are not perceived as a cause of hurt or conflict. Unfortunately, many modern secularists who insist that inter-community harmony can be built only when everyone gives up all their religious taboos, end up creating more strife than harmony.

### **When Freedom Causes Hurt**

Currently, formal interfaith learning is mostly the domain of a small group of scholars. However, those who are academically knowledgeable about diverse religious faiths are peripheral, rather than central figures, in the raging controversies and confrontations in the political, social and personal spheres. And yet, it is not uncommon for scholars of religion to trigger off inter-faith hostilities because their writings may be perceived as being "hurtful" or "insulting" to the believers of that faith. In India, we have been besieged by several such controversies over the past few years. Some of these involve Western scholars studying Indic religions and cultures. For example, a book on the Hindu god of auspicious beginnings, Ganesh, by an American scholar Paul Courtright, caused a major uproar last year because the author used Freudian analysis to interpret the mystery of Ganesh's elephant head and trunk which was interpreted as symbolising



a limp phallus so that Ganesh is unable to compete with his father, Lord Shiva, for his mother Parvati's love. Shiva is described as a notorious womanizer. Ganesh's broken tusk was described as a symbol of castration, his love of *ladoos* (an Indian sweet specially used on auspicious occasions) interpreted as a symbol of satisfying his erotic hunger through oral sex. Those Hindus who led the campaign against this book saw it as part of a deep-rooted bias in Western academia, part of a tendency to trivialise or demonise Indic religions and cultures. The book is undoubtedly the product of painstaking research carried out by the author over several years. Courtright can genuinely claim to know more about the stories, myths and legends surrounding Ganesh and has studied more traditional texts of Hindu mythology than most believing and practicing Hindus. What offended believers was not a lack of knowledge but his use of a totally alien and inappropriate tool of analysis to deal with the belief system and iconography of a faith that does not at all lend itself to the Freudian worldview.

This is a classic example of conflicts arising not out of ignorance but surfeit of knowledge combined with the unconsciously imbibed arrogance of Western academia which assumes that its tools of analysis and value systems enable them to understand and pass judgement on the experiences and heritage of all human beings including those who operate with very different world views. Instead of dealing with the criticism leveled at their intellectual tools, many Western Indologists treated the conflict as a case of "academic freedom" versus the intolerance of Hindu community leaders, thus leading to a bitter stalemate. This despite the fact that Paul Courtright himself showed

willingness to discuss the issue and refrained from assuming an aggressive posture.

There is indeed a conflict between the demands of academic freedom and the right of every community to be treated with respect. Those of us interested in interfaith harmony need to consider seriously how we can reconcile these two conflicting claims, and evolve tools of analysis that can encompass and deal with the experiences and value systems of the diverse peoples inhabiting our planet.

### **Western Vision Predominates**

The problem is further compounded by the fact that the study of other religions and cultures is largely a one-way process. While Western universities have any number of departments, centres and courses for studying and teaching religions and cultures of non-Western societies, as well as their own, most non-Western countries are not engaged in similar studies of Western faith systems or even their own. Thus, for a serious scholarly study or teaching of Hinduism, Indians end up going to American, British or Australian universities because there are hardly any opportunities available for such study within India. So deep is the prejudice against religious studies among the intellectually colonised secular intelligentsia of India that many of them think such education or research would only lead to strengthening obscurantism and communal prejudices.

When I organized the First International Conference on Indic Religions through the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in December 2003, many activists and academics let loose a defamation campaign arguing that this was a Hindutva inspired initiative and therefore, ought to be shunned. Fortunately, very few people believed this slander, given the track record of CSDS and MANUSHI on the issue of

minority rights. But it did frighten several scholars who stayed away from the First Conference lest they be forever tainted.\*\*

Such blind targeting and hate campaigns have meant that only politicians from the extreme right articulate religious concerns, while serious scholars who do not trash the religious and cultural traditions of India or do not join partisan campaigns on behalf of left leaning political parties run the risk of being dumped in the RSS-VHP camp and are assumed to be responsible for everything from the Gujarat riots to the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

Thus, most of the serious scholarship ends up being processed in Western universities with the inevitable inbuilt biases. This is not to deny that works of great scholarship have also been produced in these universities which have made knowledge of distant cultures accessible to people educated through the English language. But such insightful studies are small in number and remain confined to a very tiny intellectual elite.

Today, most people know the faiths of others through brief exposure to superficial descriptions on TV, in newspapers, films and other mass media. The dominant forms of international mass media have deeply imbibed a distorted Eurocentric worldview, with its tendency to see the cultures and faiths of non-European peoples as intrinsically inferior and backward, as mainly of anthropological interest, existing as a curious hangover of a lower stage in the evolution of human kind.

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\*\* *The Second Conference on Religions and Cultures in the Indic Civilisation will be held from December 17-20, 2005. Those interested in registering may do so through our website [www.indicstudies.org](http://www.indicstudies.org).*

Therefore, instead of leading to greater understanding, fleeting mass media images of alien practices, when viewed in very different cultures, have so far tended to increase divisions, strengthen prejudices and negative stereotypes.

### **Exclusivist Claims Hinder**

We cannot provide meaningful interfaith education without effectively combating the culture of intolerance derived from the belief in the inherent superiority of an exclusivist, hierarchical, jealous God, and without connecting such views to the power imbalances that came to define the economics and politics of our planet during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is important to recognise that there are strong connections between authoritarian ways of thinking and tendencies to see God as an intolerant, jealous and tyrannical authority figure that punishes those who do not do His bidding.

Monotheistic faiths have consistently claimed that the commandments of their Gods are somehow more superior and justified than those of other faiths. But this attitude is not confined to them. For instance, the historic clashes between Shaivites and Vaishnavites in India would not have occurred if superior claims were limited to monotheistic traditions. Similarly, superior claims do not necessarily lead to violent attacks. The followers of various Hindu sects do believe that their own faith tradition is the best but that does not usually lead them to hate or attack others. Most believing Jews do hold that Judaism is the only true religion. But from the onset of the diaspora until the founding of the state of Israel, Jews were not usually known to have instigated violent clashes with other faiths. They were almost always at the receiving end.

Riots, massacres and genocidal attacks are almost always linked to conflicts over economic and political

power. In such charged situations, religion often becomes the match to light the tinder. This is an important reason why politicians co-opt both the ideology and the articulators of claims of religious superiority in their battles with rival communities.

### **The Colonial Dimension**

The historical process of military, political and economic colonisation witnessed very aggressive onslaughts on the cultures, faiths and value systems of colonised people. They were urged to believe that the reason they were subordinated was that their gods were false and their



faith systems not just flawed but outright inferior and even evil. Not surprisingly, the rise of anti-colonial national movements simultaneously gave rise to religious and social reform movements during which the colonised peoples tried to defend their faith systems, family organisation and cultural values from the rulers' onslaughts.

At first, many important religious reformers in colonised countries tried to *re-form* their faiths in ways that would make them conform to the high prestige ideas of religion current in the West for the last few centuries. The reformers often pretended to be able to "purge" their religions and faiths

of supposed evils such as the worship of images and idols and the belief in many different forms of gods and goddesses. In India, the Western educated reformers endeavoured to prove to their colonial masters that their value systems were not really different from that of the supposedly superior West by dismissing polytheism as a lower form of Hinduism meant to aid the illiterate masses and by claiming to worship a 'higher' spirit, in the naive belief that the Vedantic conception of the Divine adopted by the colonial Hindu elite was not very different from the Christian belief in the one and only one all-supreme God. The Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj are prime examples of such reform efforts, which attacked expressions of Hindu polytheism with no less vigour than did Christian missionaries.

Consequently, religious practices and religious organisational structures of various indigenous elite groups in colonised societies went through drastic transformations to conform more with what the West considered higher spirituality, and their self-view came to be heavily influenced by their desire to have the dominant Westerners view them with respect and approval. As a result, this elite stratum became increasingly ignorant about their own culture and faith. The compulsion to view their faith through the perspective of their oppressors first created the apologists who refashioned a new version of their traditional faith. The sense of humiliation and self-loathing encouraged by colonial education created whole new generations of confused people with a fragile sense of selfhood. Many among the educated elite in India spoke with gusto about the "evils" of Hinduism in the same tone and tenor as that of their colonial masters. That legacy of self-contempt remains alive even today. A few astute people like Mahatma Gandhi recognised that in



most cases such reform efforts by culturally uprooted elite groups only served to further alienate them from the religious beliefs and practices of their own people, while not ending the humiliations they continued to suffer for not wholly jettisoning their faith.

This did not however prevent the intellectually colonised elite from asserting their hybrid religious/ethnic identity as representing modernity and progress. They convinced themselves that they deserve to be the true inheritors of societal power in post-colonial India.

### **Poison of Ethnic Nationalism**

With the growth of ethnic nationalism, we witnessed vigorous and aggressive counter movements of religious-ethnic nationalists antagonistic to the apologists. They reinterpreted religious beliefs to salve their own resentments as well as to facilitate their own struggles for power and influence. Once the more obvious and direct forms of rule by imperialist powers diminished or came to an end, most societies with a long history of colonisation transferred the same aggressive assertion of identities that were used in the struggle against their foreign rulers into internalised assertions of a variety of religious identities and unleashed deadly purifying tendencies within each community. For example, the Muslims of India began to be urged to become 'pure' Muslims and Hindus told to make their Hinduism more pristine. Those Muslims like Jinnah and Iqbal whose families had converted to Islam a mere generation or two earlier began to assert their separateness with much greater vigour than Muslims claiming Turkish, Persian, Afghan or other foreign ancestry. Not surprisingly, such leaders became the most insistent proponents of a separate homeland for Muslims.

Thus, the process of sharing, learning and allowing their commonalities to find appropriate

space for assertion got disrupted. Volatile prejudice came to replace easy acceptance of differences in India. Newly ossified identities then came to be used as weapons in the inter community political power struggles for domination. In many societies, contentious religious issues are raised mainly by politicians who are often able to mobilise select groups of politically partisan scholars and religious figures to lend legitimacy to their divisive causes.

The corrosive power of religious nationalism led to the bloody Partition of the sub-continent in 1947. In this process, a key role was played by the divide and rule politics of colonial rulers, who had shattered the many sophisticated and humane arrangements for co-living that had been evolved by various religious communities over centuries. Not surprisingly, large sections of Hindus and Muslims in post independence India have grown to be not only deeply estranged but also increasingly ignorant about each other.

### **Distance Strengthens Fears**

This ignorance grew fast because of mutual fear. Most Hindus who were pushed out of Pakistan through violence were too afraid to stay in mixed neighbourhoods. Most Muslims who stayed back also felt nervous about living in mixed neighbourhoods for fear of rejection and retaliation. The consequent tendency of the Muslims to huddle together in neighbourhoods dominated by their own community means that Hindus and Muslims of the post-independence generation know less about each other than their forefathers and mothers.

However, this divide has been bridged to some extent by Bollywood films, which steadfastly continue to portray Hindu-Muslim relations through positive stereotypes and emphasizes the essential oneness of

all human beings. This indicates that ordinary people prefer to hear this message rather than divisive ones. The theme of one of the big Bollywood hits of the 1970s *Amar Akbar Anthony* is a typical example of the message of the quintessential oneness of people of different faiths as represented by the Hindu Amar, Muslim Akbar and Christian Anthony. (I have provided a detailed analysis of this theme in my paper, soon to be published in the *Journal of American Association of Religions*). Bombay films have persisted with this message no matter how turbulent the times. Therefore, they have come to be an effective source of interfaith dialogue and education at the mass level, though less so for the intellectual and political elite.

### **Importance of Self Knowledge**

The big challenge for intellectual leaders in postcolonial societies is to generate adequate self-knowledge about the religious and cultural traditions of their own communities without which it is far more difficult for people to get to understand others. Interfaith learning is like language learning. A person who is not in command of his or her own language will find it difficult to learn alien languages and certainly will not be able to understand their nuances. In a similar manner, it is more likely that those who are deeply rooted in their own faith and belief system will find it easier to understand that of others.

Those of us committed to interfaith education need to listen carefully and with respect to the living traditions within our own faith community. We need to become a living part of its own internal ever-transforming traditions and beliefs. Out of such a secure relationship with the vital elements of one's own faith, a relationship that does not need to look over its shoulder for some sort of stamp of approval from outsiders

as a sign of its own legitimacy, or from those claiming exclusive authority over that tradition, each of us can then better identify those elements of it that need to be explained to others and thereby make a better contribution to interfaith harmony.

When approaching interfaith education, we have a lot to learn from Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest modern day prophet and practitioner of inter community harmony. He was very adverse to the use of the word “tolerance” as the basis for such understanding because he believed that: “Tolerance may imply a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one’s own, whereas *Ahimsa* teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faith of others as we accord our own, thus admitting the imperfection of the latter. If we had attained the full vision of Truth, we would no longer be mere seekers, but have become one with God, for God is Truth...Reverence for other faiths need not blind us to their faults. We must be keenly alive to the defects of our own faith also, yet not leave it on that account, but try to overcome those defects. Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we would not only not hesitate, but would think it our duty, to blend into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths”. Thus Gandhi’s *dharma* encompasses the good in all religions, including his own, without being hostile to any. He also recognised the limitations and imperfections of all, including his own, and yet remained deeply and happily rooted in Hinduism.

### Living Vs Ossified Tradition

It is futile to base interfaith learning on the premise of teaching “true Hinduism”, “true principles of Christianity” or “true tenets of Islam”. Religions cannot be known or understood through their tenets alone but are best grasped through understanding how and why

individuals, at different times, interpret, practice, modify or reject those tenets in their daily lives and seek spiritual solace in a variety of ways that do not always conform to its tenets. Believers and apologists often tend to overlook the way the religion is actually practiced by most believers. The tendency to dismiss those practices we don’t like as being “unIslamic”, “unChristian” or “corrupt Hinduism” leads to only more conflict. Interfaith education should make people aware of the diverse interpretations and practices within the same religious group rather than merely attempt to teach the official principles of each faith.

Along with interfaith learning that teaches us the lived particulars of each faith we want to relate to, what we need is a broad based consensus on the following basic behavioural principles and institutional arrangements that are just plain common sense:

- ❶ Persuade the believers in hierarchical exclusivist monotheistic religions to comprehend the limitations of their belief that their God is the only true God and all others are false.
- ❷ Institutionalise ways to prevent hate speech and hate literature in religious preaching, even while people should be free to expound the virtues of their own religion.
- ❸ Combat the growing culture of hatred promoted by the adherents of the new religions of revenge, who have chosen the path of violence and manipulation of state power in a desperate attempt to compensate for the historic humiliations and exploitation they have suffered at the hands of the dominant Eurocentric powers.
- ❹ Build a broad based consensus, supported by institutional arrangements, that ensures that no group will be allowed to use violence or the brutal might of the state power in settling

disputes with other groups.

- ❺ Build effective redressal mechanisms to mediate genuine grievances among religious communities as they arise so that people are not compelled to resort to violence to get a hearing.
  - ❻ Ensure that minority religious communities are not ghettoised out of fear or compulsion and that the majority community does not isolate itself from others.
  - ❼ Pre-empt the more powerful of the majority religious communities from using the power of the state machinery to demand special privileges for themselves and have a clearly spelt out minority rights policy in place.
  - ❽ Keep politicians out of religious issues and religious institutions, which should remain under the charge of representative spiritual leaders.
  - ❾ Pre-empt the attempts by politicians to erase the multi-layered identities of people in favour of a monolithic ethnic identity based on religion. For instance, in India it is only when political leaders try to insist that all Hindus, or all Muslims, have identical sets of interests – no matter whether they are from, Kerala or Maharashtra, whether peasants or artisans, Urdu speaking or Tamil speaking, rich or poor, Sunni or Shia, lower caste or higher caste – that they can be pitched against each other as permanently hostile monoliths.
- As long as Muslims and Hindus can come together to safeguard their economic interests as farmers or traders, vendors or peasants, Gujaratis or Kashmiris, to assert their various linguistic, economic or regional identities, or acknowledge bonds of commonality on account of being from the same village or neighbourhood, they cannot easily be pitched against each other as hostile warring groups on an all-India basis by letting their religious identity overwhelm all other identities. In the process of asserting their multi-layered identities, people of different religious faiths who cohabit within a particular region tend to learn about

differences in each other's faiths very spontaneously as well as evolve areas of commonality in their cultures.

### **Evolving Common Bonds**

I would like to conclude by sharing some of our own recent experiences of strengthening such common bonds between Hindus and Muslims in Delhi. It all started with MANUSHI'S

attempt to protect street vendors from routine human rights abuses, humiliation, assaults on their livelihood and huge extortion rackets organised by our corrupt officialdom and a tyrannical police force. During our sustained campaign to attempt to get all those laws and regulations changed or removed that facilitate such extortion, we also undertook the challenge of combating the prejudices against vendors among officialdom and influential citizens who see them as sources of squalor and chaos in the city. In that process, we began organising the vendors to take responsibility for maintaining cleanliness and observe exemplary civic discipline.

To drive home the message that cleaning one's physical environment is as sacred a duty of every citizen as cleansing our system of governance of corruption and abuse of power, we began the practice of worshipping the humble broom with all the rituals that go with worshipping regular deities. Our broom deity slowly acquired a human form. We named her *Manushi Swacchnarayani*. Its literal translation would mean the Goddess of Cleanliness but she represents many more qualities. She incorporates the qualities of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, Durga the warrior goddess who restores justice and destroys evil, and Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom and learning.

However, we added some special attributes to her. The symbols of power put in the hands of our new ten-armed



goddess are a broom to symbolise our respect for cleanliness of the physical environment as well as our resolve to cleanse the government machinery of corruption; a weighing balance symbolising our commitment to social justice; a movie camera, because a large part of the success of our campaign for policy and law reform for street vendors was due to our showing on videotape these human rights violations and using the documentary film for campaigns and lobbying; a *diya* (earthen lamp) to symbolise the dispelling of darkness and bringing hope for the poor and vulnerable; a pen and account book as symbols of the goddess of learning and our honest account keeping; a conch shell symbolising purity and transparency as well as a clarion call for self organisation; *Sudershan Chakra* as Vishnu's weapon for defeating evil doers; a stalk of barley to symbolise multiplication of wealth as well as the spread of our message since one seed can produce unlimited number of grains; the tenth hand shows money pouring from the palm of the goddess held in *abhay mudra* to communicate our hope that citizens be able to earn a dignified livelihood without fear, harassment and extortion. The goddess stands on a lotus flower to convey how we are attempting to create beauty out of squalor.

All our vendor members, whether they are Hindus or Muslims, upper caste or lower caste, enthusiastically join in the rituals honouring our broom

wielding deity with prayers from their respective faith traditions because they see clearly that *Swacchnarayani* increases their self respect as well as strengthens their solidarity with fellow vendors for secular causes and lends vigour to their resolve to fight for their right to a dignified livelihood.

As the power of those politicians who run extortion rackets that victimise street vendors gets progressively challenged, they are making all possible attempts to weaken the organisational solidarity of our members. Some local politicians have also tried to make our ritual worship of the broom and camera wielding goddess into a contentious religious issue. But so far, they have not succeeded since the vendors of the area have happily accepted some of our Muslim members as local leaders on account of their organisational qualities, even though Muslims are in a minority. Far from acting as a divisive ritual our broom worship has succeeded in making members collectively aware of the need to make their market a model of civic discipline and clean politics.

This is just one of the numerous examples I can cite of how simple, everyday, live interaction on the basis of shared interests leads to far more spontaneous inter-faith learning and common cultural bonds than is possible through mere classroom teaching or academic dialogues. When live interaction becomes routine, interfaith learning through the formal education system becomes more easy, meaningful and likely to lead to the moral, spiritual and cultural enhancement of all those who imbibe it. Without these pre-conditions being met, it might even create more discord. □

*The illustrations accompanying this article are by Vishwajyoti Ghosh*