India is the cradle of four world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. Two other world religions, namely Christianity and Islam came to this country in the first century of their existence. For centuries Christians were living in India side by side with the vast majority of non-Christians, mainly Hindus. Though known for centuries as a land of religious tolerance and non-violence, in India communal disharmony, religious intolerance, fundamentalism, and all kinds of violence are on the increase. Why this paradigm shift in the attitude of the Indian people? This short article is an attempt to understand some of the new trends in the realm of communal harmony in India.

A Democratic Republic

The question of religious tolerance or intolerance depends very much on the encounter between the different religions that co-exist in the same land. For centuries Indians have lived in a religiously pluralistic society. Though all the major religions of the world have their followers in India, Hinduism is the most dominant religion of India with about 80% of the whole population of about 950 million. Yet one has to acknowledge the fact that the Indian nation is not constitutionally Hindu nation like the numerous Islamic or Christian nations of the world. Constitutionally India remains a democratic sovereign republic where all religions are of equal status. Moreover, the so-called minority communities (religions) do enjoy certain constitutionally granted privileges.

Attitude of Tolerance

The traditional Hindu attitude to Christianity and Islam was one of tolerance. The existence of the small community of Christians in South India from the very first century of Christianity is the best proof for this attitude of tolerance in Hinduism.

Hinduism, which is considered to be the oldest of the world’s existing faith can hardly be called a religion as Christianity. It actually is a bundle of
religious traditions. Anybody, whether theist or atheist, sceptic or agnostic can find a place in Hinduism. It is a complex mass of religious, philosophic and social systems loaded with the traditions and myths of all the peoples that at various times entered its fold. We call it a parliament of religions held together by certain common beliefs and practices.¹

It is all-embracing and its accommodating spirit is well known. It may even embrace beliefs and practices opposed to or contradicting each other. Yet as the veteran Indian statesman Jawaharlal Nehru notes “its essential spirit seems to be live and let-live”.² Religion for the Hindu is an experience or attitude of mind, observes the Indian philosopher-statesman S. Radhakrishnan. He continues: “it is not an idea but a power, not an intellectual proposition but a life of conviction. Religion is consciousness of ultimate reality, not a theory”.³

Hinduism acknowledges the all pervading presence of God. Hence for a Hindu the sense of holy or sacred is something pervading the whole order of nature. For a Hindu everything in the universe is sacred: the earth and the sky, the mountains and the trees, the rivers and above all human beings. The Hindu believer has never lost the sense of the sacred and is not an idolater in the ordinary sense of the word. He sees the universe as charged with the Being of God; hence everything is worthy of veneration.⁴ It is this fundamental vision that has actually created in the Hindu mind basic attitudes such as toleration (religious and cultural) non-violence, vegetarian diet etc.

For the Hindu every God is but a manifestation of the one and eternal absolute Being and every idol is but the sacramental presence of the one infinite spirit. One can easily find texts in Hindu scriptures supporting polytheism, monotheism and pantheism as well as belief in demons, heroes and ancestors.⁵ God is manifested in every form in the universe. Hence it is possible to worship him under the form of an animal or a tree. The whole of India itself is a sacred land (punya-bhumi), an object of reverence for the Indians. The holy rivers and places are all famous pilgrim centres. Religious practices of pilgrimages, reading of the holy scriptures, worshipping of Gods in holy places are all still extant in India. Indian culture and Hindu religion are closely related. We can distinguish them, of-course with some difficulty.

Religions are “nothing but as many roads leading to one and the same goal”. All important Hindu Scriptures teach that there are several pathways to God. Christianity too is one of the many ways to God. So, they have only