Chapter 6

Survey and Conclusion

The title of this work, “Inter-religious Dialogue: an Instrument to Curb Religious Violence,” in itself indicates that there are two distinct phenomena – inter-religious dialogue and religious violence, as well as that violence is the problem and dialogue a probable solution. Therefore, problem part was taken first and solution part subsequently. Religious violence is a phenomenon much older than this phrase which is found in scant usage since eighteenth century, though in a different sense. Its usage in the sense of violence related to religion is not older than mid-twentieth century; still it is yet to find an independent entry in the available dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Religious violence is simply violence pertaining to religion; therefore, defining it involves defining of both violence and religion.

While examining the concept of violence it has been found that its meaning is not limited to “what happens” only as there can not be a monolithic concept of violence with a clear cut single meaning, as it is found having many layers and intermingled strands which can be understood through certain questions such as: Who exercises violence – the perpetrators and whether they are individuals, groups, institutions or structures; What happens when violence is exercised (its phenomenology) such as injury, harm or other effects on people and/or objects on the basis of its spread, scale and intensity with role of third parties or bystanders; How violence is exercised (the ways) which includes not only the means but circumstances also and whether the means are physical, psychological, symbolic or communicative; Who are the objects of violence i.e., the victims and whether they are people or objects including symbols; Why it is exercised i.e., causes and reasons such as interests, possibilities and contingency, and the forms of its justification, interestingly,
whether it is end in itself for it may occur irrationally also; Why or for what goals and motives it is exercised i.e., whether: it is situational and thus unique or rational as a means to an end, or it has expressive and communicative dimensions? Why it is exercised i.e., what is its justification or whether it is deviating from or corresponding to norms – whether it is legal or illegal, or legitimate or illegitimate, but all this depends upon prevailing norms of a given society. With three why(s), two who(s) and one each what and how, we get a complex picture which gets more entangled if we add which- subjects (first who) perpetrator it for which- objects (the second who) and there is a third who - the third party. Violence is not something that just happens but it is something that people do and do within a social context. The question of good or bad violence relates it to ideals, to ethics, even persons like Mahatma Gandhi preferred violence to cowardice. Then there is question of self defence and further, when that question arises – when one is just to be attacked or the perpetrator is preparing or the would be victim thinks he may be attacked? All these are relative questions and sometimes hegemonic also like the old wolf and lamb story.

Defining religion is also no less complex and here also no single definition suffices, its being about mystery, “the Wholly Other” or Absolute, the transcendental realities, other worldliness and the human spirit but it is not the gods but the adherents who make a religion and who draw boundaries and make truth claims and to defend them steadfastly. There is nothing like the generic concept – religion, rather there are religions, all very dynamic and ever developing, some buried in the depths of history, some of pre historic origins, some having born recently, some still, struggling to get recognition to their claims and persecution of their adherents, and others yet to come on the horizon of human civilization. Trend to use terms such as faith and belief indiscriminately add more confusion. Every religion claims to be the last and final entrant on the scene; no anymore need and space left, and above all being the
universal truth, but the universal truths are mostly in competition; there is a claim of having the spirit created by the distinctness, and special bond, actual or perceived with the godhead or the founder /prophet/reformist or the central principle(s) or something else. It operates through creating collective identities – of “us” and of “other(s)”. It unite human beings in such groups that the individual existence is left behind and such cohesiveness is reinforced and maintained for millennia and generations through highly esteemed symbols, metaphors, and practices but it also divides humanity into competing tribal like identities, defined over and against one another, often leading to conflict, and there are intra-communal conflicts also which result into splits. No two sects have ever come together after splitting. Religion or rather religions have been there since time immemorial and will be there till last as their existence is endorsed not only by the adherents but even by atheists if not because of the presence of the transcendental “Other” but at least due to that of the immanent “other.”

Religious violence for this research has been defined as all those phenomena where the religious identity and affiliation of the subject(s) or object(s) is the reason behind individual or collective violent behaviour and it may include violence by religiously affiliated individuals, groups and institutions against objects of any kind i.e., adherent(s) and/or their property, institutions, buildings and sites etc. of the same or any other religion or secular, as well as, violence by individuals or any group whether affiliated to any religious tradition or not, against objects that are explicatory religious including adherent(s) and/or their property, institutions, buildings and sites etc. and which has express or latent sanction from the religious authorities. Religious violence can be pure ritual violence in the form of sacrifice or like, or some just like any other violence we see around and may be in any form physical, psychological or structural. Out of ritual or self inflicted violence, symbolic violence, sporadic
violence between individuals and collective religious violence, our concern in the present research has been the collective religious violence which is perpetrated within the context of society and is legitimated at least by a subset of society or some religious authority and always has some expressed or latent political dimension.

The ritual and/or symbolic violence has been examined to the extent it provides ideological support to the religious violence. Therefore, though ritual violence is not the manifest part of this study, however, rituals like sacrifice paved the way for the biggest sacrifice, the sacrifice of the self (perhaps) developing into martyrdom as to offer homage to the deity by burning the oblation or killing the sacrificial victim which included animals and even human beings (rarely) was set in the social milieu which provided sanctity to such acts. Martyrs are persons who instead of compromising their religious and ethical convictions, prefer death and torture and are found almost in all traditions and cultures. We can not equate all the martyrs as the traditional willingness to suffer and die voluntarily has added a new dimension – die but also kill. Suicide bombers active since 1982 in various traditions have got open sanction and recognition as martyrs from the religious authorities in many traditions including Sikhism. Similarly, circumcision is an initiation rite which provides an immutable identity to the males who have hegemonic control over the female, thus provide distinctiveness to the group vis-à-vis the differentiated “other(s).”

Religious communities often produce people of extraordinary kindness and courageous commitment to justice, which is in tune with their concept of God as compassionate and judicious and the ethics emanating from such conception. The commitment to justice makes it obligatory to right the wrongs even by use of force. Therefore, wars waged by the followers of various religious traditions, be it Holy-War in Judaism, Crusade in Christianity, Jihad in Islam or Dharma-yudh in Indian
traditions such as Hinduism and Sikhism, have always been claimed to be just and divinely ordained. In the west concept of ‘just-war’ has been considered closely associated with Christian thinking involving questions relating to resort to and conduct of war, but all the world’s major religions including Buddhism have addressed the issues associated with warfare and have contributed to the development of notions of restraint and discrimination. A holy or religious war is not the same operation as just war, but it has to have all the attributes of such war as the holy war has to be just war, but one religiously and theologically oriented.

All religions have their respective traditions and fundamentals which continue from generation to generation with some parts dying and others being added in a very slow process which like earth’s movements appears to be static. The concepts of modernity and modernisation have given rise to traditionalism which is insistence for adherence to tradition only for religious authority and fundamentalism which call for returning to the fundamentals of the religion which have been corrupted with the passage of time and external factors, and the adherents find little being offered by the contemporary surroundings. However, as to what the tradition was and what the real fundamentals were, is defined in narrow and arbitrary way and some times even invented; as the persons propagating such ideology insist on their versions of tradition and fundamentals as true and authentic ones, therefore, these words have become synonym of narrowness and bigotry. These concepts give ideological support to not only mutual animosity among religious communities but to extremist views sometimes, resulting into terrorism which is a tool of psychological attack through fear psychosis among the targeted group who starts believing that any threat can be translated into reality, thus creating a perpetual and real danger. But terrorism is also a value laden concept – one person’s terrorist may be other person’s patriot and definition, most of the times, is hegemonic. Communalism is another ideology
prevalent in many parts of the world but termed so mostly in the Indian sub-continent (elsewhere it may be sectarianism), based on the assumption that society is divided on religious lines into monolithic religio-political communities who have not only antagonistic religious interests but political, social, economic and cultural interests also and this ideology gives rise to sporadic communal violence.

Religious violence is not all of a piece but rather, there are patterns of timing, targeting and location which are determined not only by religious factors though the religious beliefs and convictions often spur the beginning as well as the intensification of conflict which otherwise turn to the political, economic and social factors and conversely, the secular issues relating to political, social and economic factors get religious hues. There has not been unanimity in answering the question – as to why do people resort to violence in general and religious violence in particular and more so, when almost all the religions claim to spread peace. Generally, there is something which has been smouldering since long and which flares up instantaneously. It is here that the political, economic and social aspects of the conflict seem to play their roles along with the religious factors which give façade to the whole structure of conflict. There are certain theories to explain violent and aggressive behaviour and one such theory, social interactionist theory ascribes coercive behaviour to three motives – social control, justice and identity. Religions provide identity as well as the ideological basis which not only attempt to rationalise but also naturalise and universalise their claims to be true for all times and all places. Such claims create hegemonic relations which lead to conflicts, most of which are violent ones.

Human beings are not born with instinctual behaviour like other animals; rather they have to learn everything, except some basic biological functions, from the culture of the society they are born in. The human beings are always after the control
of scarce resources, be it territory, political power, natural resources or perceived due recognition in the social scale arisen out of the sharp specificity of group identity based on culturally recognised ethnic factors – common origins and shared cultural traditions. In the social hierarchical factors, foremost is caste system which is though present in Japan and Africa also, is visible in its most stringent form in the Indian society. It is present not only in Hinduism, but in Jainism and among some Muslims and Sikhs also. The depravity on one hand and identity crisis on the other, often lead to conflicts which assume a religious shroud. Whereas caste is a social construction, race is only a claimed biological category where purity of blood of one group is put in contrast to the impurity of the others’. The Holocaust is cited as the extreme case of racism and Islamophobia is the latest addition. Ethnocentrism covers the other factors through which minority and marginal groups are discriminated against. Ethnocentrism generally refers to the process by which values and ways of seeing the world that are founded in one culture are used to comprehend and judge another. Ethnocentrism therefore asserts the centrality and implied superiority of a particular cultural identity over others. Ethnic cleansing is on the borderline of social and political.

Some times political claims are made for a authentic and true community for continuation of relations of social domination and exploitation wherein monolith conception of the other is made in such a way that justification of rapid action in place of long bureaucratic way is justified, the only goal is to get hold of political power. Here the concept of nation, nationalism and regionalism play vital role. Use of religion by sharpening religious identities through riots and violence for political ends has been prevalent in Indian politics. The European colonialists used religion with impunity to advance their economic interests. The Arab-American relations including Iraq war and toppling of Libyan government, all were more influenced by the
American appetite for oil, than any love for democracy. The Punjab Problem during
the last two decades of twentieth century had more to do with economic and political
factors than purely religious ones, but religion provided not only a catalytic effect but
also helped in sharpening the specificities of identities. But we can say that no single
factor alone can lead to complex conflicts resulting into religious violence. Moreover,
the causes may be real as well as perceived, memory plays a vital role and some times
memory is also constructed as in the case of past history when the parties in conflict
may tell and interpret it, as suits best to serve their purpose. We can not become too
regressive to ignore the religious factors and motivations. It is true that all actions by
religious actors, especially the actions involving violence against the “Other” are
perpetrated in the back-drop of socio-politico-economic cultural milieu, therefore,
religious violence is a complex admixture of the above factors, some times so
entangled that the reality becomes illusive to the human ken.

Coming to ways to control (if not to end) violence, it has been found that
among the methods to curb or quell violence, counter violence or war has been the
most common method during almost all times and in all parts of the globe. Not
limiting to the proverbial “eye for an eye,” the thrust is put on the maximum damage
if not total annihilation to the adversary, which is now possible with remote
controlled weapons of mass destruction. Here violence is used as discourse as nearly
institutionalised image of the enemy prevail and dominate perception. Total scenario
in Punjab during 1980s and early nineties, Sri Lanka in 2009, America with her allies
against Taliban and other terrorist outfits, are some of such recent examples and the
result is mass destruction and always a fear of revival of a movement or adversary.

Negotiation involves transferring conflict from battlefield to conference table. When
battles fail to decide the contentious issues, and some times it is other way round and
failure in negotiations leads to battles. Negotiation involves bargaining which is also
used as synonym of negotiation and as in commercial bargain the aim remains to get more by paying less but here mutual trust building is very important. There are certain approaches and models like the Prisoner’s Dilemma and Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA) developed by various scholars. The role of spoilers and sceptics is very important in the process. Judicial settlement involves settlement by a third agency through codified law and legal system, it is an institutionalised social control involving a very long process which may further linger on in higher courts; moreover, it fails to reconcile the antagonising parties. In religious violence, court cases pertain to criminal proceedings for trial of perpetrators of such violence. Arbitration is a sort of private adjudication with cost savings, shorter resolution times, a more satisfactory process, expert decision makers, privacy and confidentiality, and relative finality but it is used mostly in the commercial disputes and in small religious disputes. Mediation involves one or more third party/parties who suggest(s) compromise through an agreement or reconciliation. Mediation is part of the process to sort out a conflict; in itself it is not solution and is used in such situations when the conflicting parties do not want face to face meeting, such process is termed as proximity talks or shuttle diplomacy Its use was found in Sikh-dera conflict in May 2007. Conciliation involves intermediary efforts to encourage the parties to move towards negotiations. Here sometimes external intervention on any side may prove detrimental to the efforts. In good offices, a party or person in position with influence may bring the opposing parties to dialogue or negotiation. But that agency should be willing to intervene. Humanitarian intervention works under the assumption that states have an ethical and legal responsibility to protect their people against genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing, but if a state is unable or unwilling to do so, that responsibility falls to the international community, which may intervene militarily in extreme cases. Here diplomatic vocabulary like Track-I, Track-
II and Track-III etc is used. When the conditions are very harsh and the normal way to resolve conflict fail, then the civil society actors engage in dialogue processes capable of working through differences, developing common ground, and transforming perceptions distorted by fear, misunderstanding and fear. Gandhian way of Satyagraha involves recognise the truthful and untruthful elements in each side, then put the truthful elements from each side together, then form a new side and adopt it while struggling with your opponent, then revise the new side even as the fight continues; and at last, end the struggle only when both sides agree to occupy the same side; despite his best efforts, Gandhi failed in dousing the communal fire in the pre-partition and partition period.

All the above methods of resolving conflicts and disputes stumble against various blocks. Every method involves some sort of communication but suffers from the “problem of communication” that is try to tell the other what is known to him/her but hear the other through a screen of his/her own thoughts thus defending and retaining them irrespective of the truth or coherence in them. There is need to remove the “blocks” so that meaningful communication is possible, though we have everyday phatic communication between members of various religious communities living together, but the same evaporates during the periods of strife. And hen there is dialogue which is neither negotiation nor debate nor disputation nor parallel monologue, nor practical cooperation nor proselytizing nor mutual accommodations, nor merger nor involuntary exchange of ideas nor antagonistic confrontation; rather it is a method, a path, a way, by which one person or group relates to another. It is not mitigation of differences and convictions; rather it is exchange of experience and understanding with language and praxis being the most basic pillars. Dialogue is not merely telling, it is listening to the other, the first and foremost requirement for which is recognising the other.
Globalisation and revolution in the means of communication and travel have created pluralistic societies in most parts of the world and a new concept of pluralism has been coined which means not only diversity but energetic engagement with diversity; it is not just tolerance but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference; it is not relativism but the encounter of commitments; and it is based on dialogue. But in a country like India, there have been almost all the major religious traditions since very long, and here not only active engagement among them has been a fact but religious dialogue has also been there. That is why, some scholars have reservation about the use of these western concepts and claim that even in interreligious matters, specific tradition based methods/ models should be used.

The followers of various religious traditions claim that dialogue has been part and parcel of their tradition, but most of what is claimed to be dialogue by them was rhetoric or debate just to establish the dominance of their respective traditions. But can there be a genuine dialogue? There is much literature prescribing dos and don’ts for genuine dialogue most of which was produced in the second half of the twentieth century. The problem is not of prescriptions but of practice. The basic condition for dialogue is said to be openness but tension and conflicts are not to be avoided but are part of the process, because if there are no difference in views and convictions there can not be genuine dialogue. But it is not mere tolerance of the other.

To evaluate the contribution of the dialogical process in curbing violent conflicts, the same has been examined on both, the macro as well as micro levels. The first organised and extensive effort to bring various religions together for dialogue is said to be the Parliament of World’s Religions 1893 at Chicago, America in which representatives of ten major religions participated, though the allegations of its being an effort towards missionary endeavour by the Christian denominations are not fully untrue. How much it was successful in that motive is questionable, but it paved way
for the beginning of modern Hindu mission to the West. There was no such Parliament during next hundred years. In 1993, it was revived and its centenary was celebrated by holding an event more grandiose with more participants and thereafter regular Parliaments are being held – in 1999 at Cape Town, 2004 at Barcelona, 2009 at Melbourne and 2014 being held at Brussels. The number of participants has increased, so has the scope as more and more issues which are of concern for the survival of humanity are discussed. Some other forums such as the World Congress of Faiths, Elijah Interfaith Institute and World Conference on Religion and Peace etc. are working in the same direction. Some local level efforts are also there, in which the academic fraternity also plays a vital role. But some times matters regarding conversion make the intentions of some of the religious traditions doubtful. Therefore, dialogue with strong convictions among the partners for their respective traditions is the answer. The role of some of the universities in this regard is commendable. But the real test of dialogue is not in what has been said but how that has been or can be translated into praxis.

The religious conflicts have their social, political and cultural dimensions also, as such; almost all the forums involved in inter-religious dialogue whether on micro or macro level have continuously been expanding their scope to include the underlying problems. As the solutions, except in purely religious mattes, are with the outside agencies – social, political and/or economic, thus roping in such agencies is gaining grounds in inter-religious dialogue. The major problem is that those who are ready for dialogue are generally peripheral to their traditions and the hardliners, or those who really matter are not ready for dialogue and some times inter-religious dialogue remains an academic matter only. Intra-religious dialogue is a solution to this problem, as the religious masses can be educated about the importance of dialogue and about the “other” so that the motives of unscrupulous leaders are
defeated and they become peripheral. The internet with websites of almost all religions and a recent concept of webinars, are making some contribution, but the underlying philosophy of dialogue is sometimes missing in such endeavours and they turn out to be monologues.

Inter-religious dialogue is very simple but very intricate also, talking about only religious matters, leaving the underlying external causes of conflict may be superfluous, but taking all that heavy baggage along may make going difficult if not impossible. Therefore, it is an art where, in addition to intentions, ability and capacity to make fine balances count most. Such efforts have been successful, as now more people know about other religions and misconceptions are being removed and the “other” is coming out of the stereotype of a horde of faceless creatures and becoming fellow traveller in the concerns of real life. This whole study indicates that all other methods of conflict resolution have their drawbacks; inter-religious dialogue is the real hope for establishing everlasting feeling of understanding, comradeship and co-existence between the people of different religious traditions allowing them to follow their respective religious convictions steadfastly. Inter-religious dialogue, though, has not been that successful in resolving violent conflicts in the past, but it is the most promising, if not the only, hope for future.