Jörg Wolff: India – A Democracy Living with Islam

The Indian subcontinent is an important part of Asia which plays a considerable geopolitical role. One of the characteristics of the whole south Asian region is its cultural, ethnic, and religious heterogeneity; another is common unifying traditions. The countries in the region do indeed have two faces. On the one hand, they are successful in development; on the other, they are marked by great disparities, inequalities, and mass poverty. Contradictory forces are at work, which is reflected in, among other things, the growth of fundamentalist movements. What should also be mentioned in this context is the geographical environment in which al-Qaeda has its control centres, its groups being responsible not only for international but also for domestic Islamic terrorism in the region.

However – Islamic fundamentalism has not yet succeeded in threatening seriously the peaceful cooperation between religions based on a historically grown secularism and a strong civil-society culture, which is typical of the region although all countries there are highly heterogenous in terms of religion, and although the region is home to the largest number of Muslims in the world. And that is why the challenge of Islamic terrorism has to be taken seriously.

The Muslims living in multi-religious India have so far not been part of the Islamist terrorist network, but have shown themselves resistant not only to the temptations of global Islam but also to the fundamentalist call for jihad against the enemies of Islam on the global stage. On the contrary, their loyalty to the secular state philosophy, which is characteristic of the country with one of the world's most stable democracies, remains firm. India is a country which has so far not come to know domestic Islamist terrorism, although it is the second biggest Islamic country in the world. The question now is: Why is this so?

Over long periods of time, India has been shaped by cooperation between religions and languages, between cultures and ethnic groups, between urban and rural life, and between locals and immigrants. Despite frictions and conflicts, coexistence has always been surprisingly harmonious.

With a share of 80 percent of the population, India's majority religion is Hinduism, followed by Islam at somewhat more than 13 percent and Christianity at somewhat more than four percent. Further minority religions are Sikhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. However, none of the Indian religious communities is homogenous. Hinduism as the characteristic feature of the country is a 'federation of beliefs', a fabric of faith with open interpretation schemes that has grown over thousands of years. Hindus know neither dogmatic religious precepts nor church or religious authorities. Living in freedom of religious interpretation, the followers of Hinduism are united by their belief in a divine presence embodied in a large number of gods and other personifications or in a principle, such as that of the Vedanta philosophy. Peace-loving and tolerant at its core, Hinduism, unlike Islam, is in no way opposed to the values of the Western world.

However, Islam appears as multifaceted in India as Hinduism, reflecting the diversity of Indian identities. In Uttar Pradesh, the Muslims are divided into the Ashraf and the non-Ashraf castes. Moreover, dividing lines between Shiites, Sunnites, and other sects are running throughout India. And finally, there are also cultural differences between the Muslims in the north and those in the south.

In cooperation with the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung developed a study entitled *Radical Islam and International Terrorism – Indian Democracy as a Moderating Factor*. It explores the factors that have so far prevented the fundamentalisation of India's Muslims and/or the question whether India could serve as a model of peaceful coexistence with Islam.

India's democratic foundation was laid by the independence movement, while today's democratic process is based on a flexible and constant dialogue between all societal and religious groups. The institutional framework leaves room for objections and dissenting opinions; however, extreme political positions never attract a majority. India's Muslims know that they are equal partners in the democratic society of the country, which grants them those liberties the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam does not allow, and takes its constitutional obligations seriously by prohibiting religious discrimination and protecting minorities.

One year ago, the *Sahar Committee Report* commissioned by the current UPA coalition government was published, demonstrating a notable decline in the social indicators of India's Muslims vis-à-vis other groups in the country as well as their considerable underrepresentation on the government. This was followed by an extensive societal debate on the matter.

When the Turks came to India in the middle ages, they were the first to proclaim the traditions of the ulema and the teachings of the Sufis. Of these, Sufism proved to be the formative feature. It became the moral and charismatic force which counterbalanced the strict demands of the ulema, especially as it emphasised the unity of God and ascribed great importance to virtue. Moreover, Sufism still is a factor for peace in India's multi-religious landscape, as it postulates openness towards those of a different faith. It is thanks to Sufism that Wahhabism and, thus, religious radicalism found no fertile soil in India.

All leading politicians in India always emphasise the pluralist societal and cultural composition of the country, the 'confluence of civilisations'. And indeed, the Indian idea is not based on nationalist thought, as in the case of China, but on a long common history and a tradition kept alive for thousands of years. Against this background, India's foreign policy displays self-confidence in its rejection of unilateralism and its insistence on the need to search for peaceful means to resolve conflicts, one example being India's No when it was asked by the USA to dispatch troops to the second Iraq war in 2003. Another example is the fact that India's Muslims do not regard their country's foreign policy as threatening Islam or even aiming to oppress Muslims worldwide.

India is a convincing example of a country which successfully endeavours to guarantee multinational and multiethnic unity without imposing homogeneity on its citizens or depriving them of fundamental freedoms. It symbolises the peaceful integration of 130 million Muslims. Yet there is no reason for complacency as India also has fallen victim to terrorism and has to face the danger. Above all, it must create a framework for the Muslims which makes it more difficult for fundamentalism to mobilise this religious group. Fighting poverty, corruption, bad governance, and discrimination is as much part of the present task as finding a way to cope peacefully with social change. To overcome poverty, India must continue its reform and growth policy at all levels.

In this, it is particularly important that all sides should understand that deliberately fuelled religious agitation would threaten the so-far peaceful coexistence of religions in India and prepare the ground for both Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism. This understanding is all the more essential as the country's geographical environment has already become a field of action for radical Islam – Pakistan and Bangladesh.

India currently represents an economic, political, and social stability factor in a turbulent region. The fact that liberal and democratic thought is deeply rooted in India's population calls for international acknowledgement. It should be the task of all like-minded states to help India retain its current role in the future.