

Understanding the Menace of Social Intolerance

By Parveen Jain



If all of us share universal values such as love, friendship, compassion, mutual respect, and other meritorious qualities, why is social intolerance on the rise, especially when we are all experiencing the havoc unleashed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? It is painful to see increasing intolerance in every part of the world, particularly when it is directed against the healthcare providers – the frontline warriors of compassion.

The societal nuisance of intolerance has likely existed for as long as there have been humans, but it is perplexing to witness the extent of its proliferation in contemporary times.

The economic globalization of the past few decades has resulted in highly interconnected and interdependent communities around the world. People in one part of the world may be receiving goods and services from another part of the world that is very different in terms of culture, social fabric, language, religion, politics, etc. Internet and social media have facilitated multi-tiered people-to-people interactions that have muted the physical boundaries separating nations and communities. Considering this growing cross-pollination of cultures, ethnicities, religious beliefs, and social traits, one would expect social intolerance to be on the decline, but it seems to be increasing around the world in almost every aspect of life: business, culture, daily activities,

entertainment, race and ethnicity, education, and most notably, in religion at both inter- and intra- levels. The resurgence of religious bigotry and intolerance is, indeed, one of the most startling and disturbing phenomena of our time.

It is worth examining the potential causes behind this paradoxical phenomenon in which, on the one hand, people from different backgrounds and cultures are cooperating to foster a common social fabric and, on the other, are becoming increasingly intolerant of one another.

Social intolerance arises from prejudice toward individuals who have characteristics different from one's own. Intolerance is characterized by the attitude of unwillingness to observe, analyze, and accept differences, and an inclination to not see worthiness in the value systems of others. This description indicates two important aspects that point to the root causes of socially intolerant behavior. The first is the intolerant person's lack of knowledge of other cultures and value systems, which becomes even more aggravated when it is compounded by a reluctance to learn due to self-exaltation and arrogance. The second stems from the intolerant person's inflexible assertion of their own views, accompanied by the repudiation of the views of others.

To remedy these causes, one must be on a relentless quest to acquire new knowledge. In addition, one must be open-minded, willing to accept and affirm the existence of a multiplicity of views and values. Intolerance is further stymied if one is modest and respectful of different people and views. With increasing knowledge, an intelligent individual becomes more confident, self-assured, and secure, all of which improve self-esteem and open-mindedness. Such an individual is inherently tolerant of other cultures and value systems.

Social intolerance, which has always existed on the basis of culture, ethnicity, gender, degree of affluence, etc., seems in part to be resurging in tandem with the increasing multidirectional migrations of people around the world. Some migrants are refugees from conflicts within their own countries or between their countries and other nations; others are in pursuit of educational, economic, or professional opportunities, a better quality of life, or other needs or reasons. And even as distant societies with diverse values have become interdependent through an increasingly globalized economy, there has been at the same time a commensurate increase in social, cultural, economic, and religious nativism, a kind of localized protective xenophobia. More and more people seem to be engrossed in their own microcosm, in which newcomers or so-called outsiders are seen as infringing on local culture and values. This attitude creates friction within the society

and hence intolerance by people toward each other. It is interesting to note that many of the societies that previously contested the existence of social intolerance in other societies, are now becoming increasingly intolerant when they themselves face an inflow of people with different backgrounds.

Many of the political, social, and religious leaders around the world are fueling local nativist tendencies and creating a hysterical environment of intolerance. Such leaders remain ignorant by refusing to educate themselves or their followers about the views, cultures, and beliefs of others. Consequently, not only do they fail to appreciate goodness in the outsiders with whom they interact, their ignorance actually augments misconceptions and misunderstandings about new customs and ideas. Driven by an insatiable desire to expand their population of followers, such leaders often use deceitful means to promote their ideas and denigrate those of others. They do not hesitate to incite violence using vitreous, anger-filled, and spiteful language; concocting manipulative schemes to persuade others to conform to their views, and sometimes deploy extreme measures to forcibly empowering or converting others.

It should be noted that there are also exceptionally honorable leaders who have promoted tolerance in their constituencies. One such leader is Jacinda Arden, the current prime minister of New Zealand. Her leadership and astute handling of the crisis of the 2019 Christchurch mosque terrorist shootings is a shining example of promoting religious and social tolerance among culturally diverse communities.

Sadly, however, many religious leaders throughout history have been the instigators of intolerance despite the fact that almost all religious doctrines teach the opposite. One must acknowledge the distinction: the doctrines are honorable, but misguided leaders misconstrue the teachings, often consciously, to mislead, manipulate, and influence their followers. An individual's belief in a faith tradition is personal and emotional. Under the influence of a misguided religious leader, if an individual's emotional state is manipulated through some sort of enticement (wealth, for example, or assurance of a place in heaven), that person may develop a blind faith by sacrificing objectivity. This is when toxic convictions develop, expressed, for example, in statements such as, "My religion is the supreme religion and those not following it are sinners who are destined to go to hell." Manipulative and misguided teachings lead to extreme intolerance that sometimes results in violent actions by those who follow such teachings.

Further, those violent actions can give rise to counter-intolerance from others toward the instigators. Both preemptive and reactive forms of intolerance are based on the misinterpretation of true religious teachings.

One can easily surmise that intolerance of any kind is an unacceptable human behavior because it is against our basic nature. For thousands of years Jain thinkers have promulgated mutual tolerance and pluralism because they are manifestations of compassion, one of the fundamental characteristics of living beings. The object of one's compassionate practice is not limited to humanity, it extends to our behavior toward all living beings. The practice of intolerance violates Jain teachings at multiple levels. To start with, as mentioned above, thoughts of intolerance emerge from a one-sided and inflexible belief in one's own views, accompanied by the rejection or disparagement of others' views. This is against the doctrine of the multiplicity of views (*anekāntavāda*),¹ one of the most valuable spiritual gifts granted by Lord Mahāvīra² to the human race. Next, the passions of anger (*krodha*), egoism (*māna*), deception (*māyā*), and greed (*lobha*)³ contribute heavily to the conceptualization, affirmation, and materialization of intolerance. Finally, the execution of acts of intolerance involve violence in multiple ways, including violence in mind (planning and indoctrination), speech (spiteful language), and body (physical acts). This behavior goes against the fundamental Jain doctrine of nonviolence (*ahimsā*).⁴ Moreover, according to Jain teachings, the injunction to live nonviolently is not limited to one's individual practice but comprises motivating others to likewise practice nonviolence, and acknowledging those who practice it for their virtuous behavior.

In order to eradicate the evil of intolerance, therefore, one should not practice intolerance oneself, should not entice others to practice it, and should not support or applaud those who demonstrate intolerant attitudes and practice intolerance in mind, body, and speech. It is especially important now – during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We must understand that intolerance is not in fact a human attribute, while pluralism, love, compassion, and mutual respect all are. Jain doctrine teaches us that it is these virtues that are our true nature, and intolerance is a failure to live up to our higher spiritual potential.

1 See chapter 7 of [An Introduction to Jain Philosophy](#), 2019

2 See chapter 2 of [An Introduction to Jain Philosophy](#).

- 3 See chapter 8 of [An Introduction to Jain Philosophy](#) for discussion on the causes and effects of the passions of *krodha* (anger), *māna* (egoism), *māyā* (deception), and *lobha* (greed).
- 4 See chapter 12 of [An Introduction to Jain Philosophy](#).