



What does data say about intolerance in India?

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Two years ago, scores of writers returned the prestigious Sahitya Akademi awards they had received to protest against what they perceived to be rising intolerance in the country, sparking a debate on this issue. A **new report published** by the Pew Research Centre earlier this month may lend credence to the voices of those who believe that intolerance is rising in the country but there are several reasons why the latest findings need to be interpreted with caution.

What the latest Pew report says

The latest Pew report ranks India as the worst placed among the most populous countries when it comes to religious freedom. The report uses two indices—the Government Restriction Index (GRI), measuring government restriction on free practice of religion, and the Social Hostilities Index (SHI) that looks at hostilities around the issue of religion—to rank 198 countries across the world. India fares poorly on both counts but the score is abysmal in case of the SHI index. India ranked “very high” on the SHI index with an index value of 8.7 out of 10, 10 being the worst. Keeping India company at the bottom rungs are countries such as Syria, Nigeria and Iraq. Social hostilities include crime/acts of violence motivated by religious hatred or bias, use of force to dominate public life with their perspective on religion, preventing religious groups from operating in the country, harassment of women for violating religious dress codes, etc.

Hostilities between Hindus and Muslims in India such as those resulting from vigilantism against cow slaughter drove India’s SHI score upwards, the lead researcher of the study told HuffPost. The Pew reports suggest that while SHI rose in 2015 compared to the previous year, SHI scores for India have always been on the higher side over the past decade. Between 2007 and 2015, India’s average SHI score was as high as 8.9, while the average GHI score was considerably lower at 5.07.

Why these numbers must be treated with caution

It is difficult to jump to any definitive conclusions based on the latest report because it is subjective in nature, and it does not agree either with several other cross-country rankings on religious freedoms (which are also quite subjective in their own way) or surveys on people’s attitudes towards religious freedom in the country.

The Pew report does not rely on a first-hand survey in India but is based on reports of international agencies and Western governments, and is therefore quite subjective in nature. The rankings published by Pew do not match similar rankings from the Freedom House report

published by the eponymous think tank, and the Human Freedom Index published by another think tank, Cato Institute.

The Freedom House 2016 report (for the year 2015) ranks India as a “free” country based on political rights and civil liberty. Political rights include, among other things, political and electoral rights of religious groups, and civil liberty includes, among other things, whether religious institutions and communities are free to practice their faith and express themselves. The Human Freedom Index (HFI) 2016, which gives data for 2014, assigns India top scores on both freedom to establish religious organizations and autonomy of religious organizations.

The methodologies of each of these reports are different. The Pew Research Centre report is based on a series of questions developed by their staff for which the sources (such as reports from agencies) were combed for answers. The Freedom House report is based on a different set of questions, refers to news reports, reports from NGOs as well as individual contacts of a team of analysts to arrive at the final scores and says quite clearly that “an element of subjectivity is unavoidable in such an enterprise”. In case of the Human Freedom Index, data from the Institutional Profiles Database is combined with a country-based survey of experts. None of these reports are, however, based on representative surveys.

There have been two representative surveys on social attitudes in recent years: one a cross-country survey by Pew itself (the Global Attitudes Survey), and another a national youth survey conducted jointly by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS).

According to the Pew attitude survey of 2015, a significant share of the respondents believed in the freedom of religion. 83% of the people said it is “very important” to be able to practice one’s own religion freely, even as 65% believed that the government should be able to prevent people from saying things offensive to a person’s religion or beliefs. The survey was based on interviews of 2,452 adults in India.

The CSDS-KAS Youth Survey 2016, based on interviews of 6,122 young men and women under the age of 35, provides a somewhat more mixed picture. The survey showed that barely 5% of the respondents reported facing discrimination but a majority of youth felt that people have become less tolerant of the views of others.

What the data on riots says

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data on riots shows that the rate of riots (numbers per million) has actually declined from 57 to 52 between 2010 and 2015. Incidences of riots too have come down to 65,255 in 2015 after peaking at 74,633 in 2012. But there are significant cross-country variations. Two of India’s most populous states, Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, saw the incidence of rioting increase at a double-digit pace over this period, while in other populous states such as West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, incidences of rioting declined. The incidence of communal riots in the country has declined from 1,227 in 2014 to 789 in 2015, even as the rate of riots has remained unchanged, according to NCRB, which began publishing the break-up of riots data in 2014.

The upshot

Putting all the data together, it seems the reality may be less alarming than what the latest Pew report projects. Nonetheless, the rise in rioting in some of India's largest states suggests that worries about social strife in the country are not entirely unjustified.