

Interfaith Dialogue in India: A Philosophical Study Grounded in Empathy, Tolerance, and Acceptance of Plurality

Dr. Kamala Srinivas

Associate Professor, Head, Department of Philosophy SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce (Empowered Autonomous)
Sion West, Mumbai

ABSTRACT: The article provides a philosophical examination of interfaith dialogue within the Indian context, highlighting the virtues of empathy, tolerance, and the acceptance of plurality. Drawing upon classical Indian philosophy, dialogues among contemporary scholars, and examples from Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, the article contends that interfaith dialogue in India is not only a civic necessity but also an ethical and spiritual discipline that upholds the dignity of diverse religious perspectives.

KEYWORDS: interfaith dialogue, empathy, tolerance, and acceptance of plurality

“I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world tolerance and universal acceptance.... We accept all religions as true.” -Swami Vivekananda

1. INTRODUCTION

India has historically been a melting pot of religious diversity for thousands of years. Rooted in classical Indian philosophy and enriched by Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and various tribal traditions, many faiths coexist within a shared cultural landscape. Scholarly research offers vital insights into how identity and dialogue interact creatively. Dialogue underscores the respect and richness of different religious perspectives. Inter-religious dialogue usually refers to discussions about doctrinal differences, often involving theological perspectives. While important, these can sometimes focus heavily on abstract philosophical debates that make resolution difficult. Similarly, intra-religious dialogue is equally important to resolve conflicts within a faith community. Additionally, interfaith dialogue should address real-world issues like global justice, poverty, climate change, and ethnic conflicts at a macro level, and family disputes, crime, famine, and drought at a micro level. An issue-based, action-oriented approach encourages religions to see how their principles are applied practically. Effective dialogue on practical matters often results in greater understanding. Bhikhu Parekh notes in *Debating India*, ‘when general principles are unpacked and tested against shared problems, they often turn out to share far more in common than appears at first sight.’ In India, interfaith dialogue is not only socially essential but also philosophically significant, shaped by the country’s long history of diverse faiths. This practice is meaningful when based on empathy, tolerance, and acceptance of diversity—each playing a vital role. ethical space needed for peaceful coexistence. Interfaith dialogue, therefore, is not an optional pursuit but a normative way of life for maintaining social harmony and collective flourishing. In India, it transcends political necessity, embodying a philosophical and spiritual discipline rooted in empathy, tolerance, and acceptance of religious plurality. As a result, it is necessary to explore how such dialogue manifests as a moral and spiritual imperative, fostering coexistence and mutual respect in India’s religiously plural society.

Globally, religious conflict remains a prevalent issue. Promoting interfaith dialogue is essential to fostering a just and peaceful society wherein individuals respect each other’s religious and cultural beliefs, embrace diversity, uphold human dignity, and promote social justice and development to empower the most vulnerable and marginalised populations.

2. THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DIALOGUE

Drawing on contemporary scholars and thinkers who highlight the transformative potential of dialogue, this article examines dialogue as a process that is centred on the divine, objective, and rooted in mutual respect, equality, and non-coercion. This viewpoint aligns with Indian interfaith practices that seek not to homogenize beliefs but to foster understanding and spiritual growth through encounter.

Modern philosophers of dialogue, such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Raimon Panikkar, provide a conceptual framework for interfaith engagement. Buber’s “I–Thou” relationship insists that authentic dialogue occurs when we meet the other as a subject

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with inherent worth, not as an object to be analyzed or converted. Levinas argues that the “face of the Other” imposes an ethical obligation; encountering another tradition is therefore a moral event. Panikkar, who worked extensively in India, promotes “dialogical dialogue,” a mutual openness that allows transformation without loss of identity. John Hick and Charles Taylor defend philosophical pluralism, arguing that religious diversity reflects the richness of human engagement with the transcendent.

Philosophically, interfaith dialogue depends on three essential virtues:

1. Empathy – entering the experiential world of the other.
2. Tolerance – respecting the right of the other to exist and flourish.
3. Acceptance of plurality – recognizing that truth may express itself through multiple paths.

This article investigates these virtues within India’s historical, cultural, and contemporary contexts. Indian classical philosophy, characterized by its pluralistic ethos as illustrated in the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the philosophical traditions of Buddhism and Jainism, offers a foundational perspective for embracing diversity. The notions of empathy, tolerance, and acceptance are deeply integrated into the Indian ethical framework. These virtues encourage recognizing the intrinsic value of differing religious insights not as threats but as complementary pathways to truth and transcendence.

The article illustrates the philosophical dimensions of interfaith dialogue through examples from Hinduism’s inclusivist outlook, Islam’s emphasis on ummah and peaceful coexistence, Christianity’s call to love and reconciliation, Sikhism’s commitment to equality and justice, Buddhism’s compassion and non-violence, and Jainism’s principle of non-absolutism (anekantavada). Each tradition brings unique spiritual resources that, when dialogically engaged, reinforce the ethical commitment to religious dignity and coexistence.

3. EMPATHY: UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER FROM WITHIN

Philosophically, this resonates with phenomenological approaches that encourage understanding religious experience from the inside. In India, empathy has historically emerged in interactions such as the Bhakti-Sufi encounters, where poets like Kabir and Bulleh Shah articulated a spirituality that transcended rigid boundaries. Similarly, people from all faiths participating in Sikh langar or joining Christian-run social service projects, and their interactions with Hindu and Muslim communities, foster mutual understanding. Buddhist-Hindu-Jain interactions: Monastic debates and shared ethics illustrate cross-religious learning. Empathy becomes the first step toward dismantling prejudice and building human solidarity and show how empathetic engagement helps dissolve stereotypes and humanise the “other.”

Empathy is not mere emotional resonance; it is a hermeneutic act—an interpretive understanding of the other’s lived world. Phenomenologists like Edith Stein describe empathy as a disciplined effort to “feel with” the other without collapsing one’s own identity.

Indian philosophy offers indigenous foundations for empathy:

- The Bhagavad Gita (6.32) teaches: “The yogi sees the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self.”
- Buddhism emphasizes karuṇā (compassion), urging practitioners to understand suffering universally.
- Sikhism teaches sarbat da bhala—the welfare of all humanity.
- Sufi Islam emphasizes the heart’s expansion (wus‘a al-qalb) to embrace all creation.

4. TOLERANCE: ETHICAL RESTRAINT AND RESPECT FOR DIFFERENCE

Tolerance is the ethical restraint of the ego—the willingness to let another worldview exist without attempting to dominate or convert. Classical tolerance meant merely “enduring” or “putting up with” differences. In comparison, philosophical tolerance, however, is an ethical commitment to restrain one’s impulse to dominate or convert the other. Modern interfaith thinkers argue that genuine tolerance requires active respect. India’s Constitutional secularism, which protects all religions equally rather than enforcing uniformity, reflects this philosophical ideal. Practices such as crisis management — when interfaith peace committees intervene during communal tension — and joint observance of regional festivals, such as neighbourhood intermingling during Diwali, Christmas, Baisakhi, and Buddha Purnima, are examples. Muharram in parts of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, this year in Mumbai in September, when Eid-e-Milad and Ganpati Visarjan coincided on the same day, our Muslim brethren voluntarily postponed Eid the next day, post the visarjan, demonstrating lived tolerance that stabilises social harmony. As a result, tolerance prevents conflict escalation and creates civic trust.

Indian traditions explicitly promote restraint and non-domination:

- Jain ahimsā (non-violence) demands respect for all perspectives.
- Ashoka’s edicts advocate honouring all religious sects: “One should not exalt one’s own religion, or condemn others’.”
- The Quran (49:13) teaches diversity as divinely intended: “We made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.”
- Guru Granth Sahib teaches harmony among all spiritual seekers.

In a dialogue, along with empathy and tolerance, acceptance represents a deeper philosophical stance.

5. ACCEPTANCE OF PLURALITY AS A FACTOR IN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Acceptance is one of the most essential and least understood virtues in interfaith dialogue. While empathy and tolerance enable understanding and peaceful coexistence, acceptance provides the philosophical and ethical foundation that allows diverse religious communities to flourish together without requiring agreement on all beliefs or practices. It transforms interfaith dialogue from a superficial exchange into a genuinely meaningful engagement. Acceptance goes beyond tolerance. While tolerance means “allowing” others to exist or practice their religion—often with a sense of restraint—acceptance involves an active recognition of the intrinsic dignity, legitimacy, and value of another religious worldview. It does not require agreeing with the doctrines of another faith.

Rather, it requires acknowledging that: another faith has a right to exist, it may offer meaningful truth or guidance to its followers, its adherents deserve respect, dignity, and equal participation, and differences do not need to be erased to maintain harmony. Philosophers like John Hick, Raimon Panikkar, and Charles Taylor argue that acceptance is grounded in epistemic humility—the idea that human beings cannot claim a monopoly on truth.

India’s religious traditions offer deep philosophical support for acceptance: it provides robust philosophical bases for pluralism:

- The Ṛgvedic verse *Ekam sat viprā bahudhā vadanti* (1.164.46): “Truth is one, sages call it variously.” This is not tolerance but full acceptance of multiplicity.
- Similarly, Jain *anekāntavāda*: reality is many-sided; every viewpoint offers just the partial truth. This is a strong endorsement of acceptance.
- Buddhist *Pratitya Samutpada*: avoids absolutism and relativism. Approves Middle Path and Compassion (Karuna) by avoiding absolute claims, Buddhism allows space for multiple truths.
- Sikh scripture affirms that divine wisdom appears in multiple traditions.

These traditions show that acceptance is not imported to Indian soil; it is rooted in its philosophy, scripture, and practice.

Why Acceptance of Plurality Matters in Interfaith Dialogue?

(a) It enables dialogue without erasing difference-

Acceptance recognizes differences as natural and even valuable. This prevents forced homogenization.

(b) It prevents conflict-

Acceptance reduces the psychological threat one community feels toward another. When people feel their faith is respected, fear and hostility decline.

(c) It allows mutual learning-

Acceptance opens the door to shared rituals, community service, and intellectual exchange. When communities accept each other’s value, they begin to learn, celebrate, and support one another.

(d) It fosters shared civic space-

In diverse societies, public life requires cooperation across traditions. Acceptance allows different communities to participate equally in national life.

Thus, Acceptance of Plurality is the Deepest Philosophical Virtue, as plurality goes beyond empathy (understanding) and tolerance (restraint). Acceptance is the philosophical heart of interfaith dialogue. It moves dialogue from “living side by side” to “living meaningfully together.” By affirming the dignity and value of diverse spiritual paths, acceptance creates the deepest foundation for peace, cooperation, and shared flourishing in plural societies—especially in India. Reality may be interpreted in multiple ways (ontological plurality), no single religion possesses exhaustive truth (epistemic humility), all traditions possess intrinsic worth (moral equality).

6. CONCLUSION

At the core of interfaith dialogue in India is the ethical imperative to uphold human dignity, a spiritual exercise that sustains social harmony, enriches philosophical discourse and promotes peace by accepting pluralism as an expression of divine creativity. Interfaith Dialogue in Situations of Conflict-India has faced episodes of religious friction due to politics, misinformation, and historical grievances. Interfaith dialogue in India is both an ancient heritage and a contemporary necessity. Grounded in empathy, tolerance, and acceptance of plurality, it creates a moral space where diverse religious traditions can flourish without fear or domination. In such circumstances, the three virtues become tools of ethical engagement:

Empathy-Reduces fear and dismantles stereotypes by understanding community sentiments.

Tolerance-Prevents escalation by encouraging restraint, patience, and respect.

Acceptance of plurality-Provides the philosophical foundation for coexistence without erasing differences.

Finally, the dialogue need not be formal, articulated in propositional forms, and confined to institutional settings as it is often assumed. It could be informal, tentative, and casual, driven by curiosity about others’ practical needs for living and working together, giving rise to a valuable fusion of ideas and sensibilities. Examples include: interfaith peace gatherings after communal disturbances, shared rebuilding of damaged religious sites, youth interfaith workshops, and multi-religious NGOs working during natural disasters. These efforts show how philosophical virtues can translate into social stability. As a result, empathy humanizes the other;

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tolerance preserves civic peace; plurality affirms the dignity of differing spiritual paths. Together, these virtues form the philosophical heart of interfaith dialogue in India, enabling communities not merely to coexist, but to contribute jointly to a more prosperous, more harmonious human civilization.

An interfaith dialogue requires greater attention to design to address several reasons, such as promoting better mutual understanding, securing cooperation on practical issues, and gaining a comparative perspective on one's own faith, its tradition, and history. Each of these reasons gives it a particular form and has its strengths and limitations. They all, however, encourage interfaith dialogue to attain the objectives that are not themselves orthodox in nature. Thus, interfaith dialogue deserves to be radically reconsidered as a spiritual discipline, a practice of openness and listening that challenges sectarianism and nurtures a cosmopolitan spiritual identity rooted in empathy, tolerance and acceptance.

Let us wish there is only one religion, which is Humanity!

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