

Panel Discussion on Religion and Politics in India

Jain University, in collaboration with Lokniti, University of California Berkeley and Georgetown University organized a Panel Discussion on the theme Religion and Politics in India on 11 July 2015. The programme began with Dr. Sandeep Shastri, Pro Vice Chancellor of the University, highlighting the rationale behind organizing the Panel discussion. While the theme of the discussion was of contemporary relevance, Dr. Shastri drew the attention of the audience to a recent book titled `Religious Practices and Democracy in India`, authored by Dr. Pradeep Chhibber and himself and published by the Cambridge University Press, which focused on the complex relationship between Religion and Politics. The presence in Bengaluru of the authors of the book, provided a special opportunity to initiate a dialogue on the theme.

Dr. Pradeep Chhibber, South Asia Chair Professor at the University of California at Berkeley, initiated the discussion by introducing the main findings as elaborated in the book. He highlighted the fact that the principal finding of the book was that there are strong linkages between religious practices and democratic process in India. Religious practices create a common platform for those belonging to a religion irrespective of their social status and standing (rich / poor, educated / uneducated, upper caste / lower caste) to come together. This is in spite of their remaining separate in other social institutions, He went on to add that in a hierarchical society like India, religious practices (understood as behaviour) provides participants with a shared space and sense of sameness which is important for shaping attitude towards democratic practices.

The next Panelist who spoke was Mr. Rajdeep Sardesai, Consulting Editor of India Today TV. Mr. Sardesai, commended the book and highlighted the recent events in India and its implications for both religious practice and the working of democracy. He underscored the impact of `religious exclusiveness` and its dangerous implications for democratic processes in India. The emergence of the `we` and the `they` syndrome, he felt, posed a serious challenge to the pluralistic nature of Indian society and dwelt at length on its wider implications for democratic politics in India.

Dr. Irfan Nooruddin, Professor of Political Science at Georgetown University was the third Panelist. He began his presentation by highlighting a series of examples of the complex issues involved in the inter-play of religion, society and politics. While complimenting the authors of the book, he went on to draw attention to the differences in the way religion was practiced in the United States and Europe and dilated on the path that India was likely to tread. Given the deep sense of religiosity amongst people in India and the important role that religious practices play in society, Dr. Nooruddin, highlighted the need to negotiate the relationships between the religion and the secular space in the years ahead.

The three presentations were followed by a lively discussion session, in which members of the audience raised a range of questions. These were responded to by the Panelists.

The Panel discussion ended with concluding remarks of Dr. Chenraj Roychand, the President of the Jain University Trust. Dr. Roychand expressed his happiness that the University was able to provide a platform for a meaningful dialogue among leading intellectuals on a theme of critical relevance. He highlighted the need to focus on the 'religion of humanity' as that appeared to be the way forward. He succinctly highlighted the fact that the core ideas of all religions focused on peace, love and harmony which were an integral part of human growth and survival.