

# Hearings on Religious Freedom in India and Pakistan: Professor Arvid Sharma Oral Testimony

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PROFESSOR SHARMA: Thank you, sir.

I hope I can be heard clearly, yes? Okay.

I would like to begin by using Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, displayed prominently on the Website of the Commission, as the basis for advancing three propositions: one, that the concept of religious freedom articulated in Article 18 presupposes a certain concept of religion, a concept associated with Western religion and culture.

Two, that a different concept of religion associated with Eastern and especially Hindu religion and culture leads to a different concept of religious freedom; and three; that unless human rights discourse is able to harmonize these two concepts of religious freedom, ironically, but not surprisingly, the clash of the two concepts might ultimately result in the abridgement of religious freedom in actual practice, India representing a case in point.

The concept of religious freedom as embedded in Article 18 presupposes that an individual can only belong to or profess one religion at a time. If one believes that one can only belong to one religion at a time, then, it stands to reason that religious freedom would essentially consist of one's freedom to change such affiliation by the voluntary exercise of choice. In parts of the East, however, one encounters a somewhat different concept or notion of religion, as illustrated by the contemporary reality of Japan. According to the 1985 Census, 95 percent of the population of Japan declared itself to be followers of Shinto--excuse me--and 76 percent of the same population declared itself Buddhist. To turn now to India, it is well-known that most modern Hindus do not regard the

various religions of Indian origin: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, as mutually exclusive religions. If the Indian census takers did not insist that one can only belong to one religion, significantly a British and therefore Western legacy, I would not at all be surprised if the Indian religious statistical reality began to resemble the Japanese. Now, what could the concept of religious freedom possibly mean in the context of such a concept of religion? I would like to propose that it would imply the idea of multiple religious participation, multiple religious participation, rather than the idea of religious conversion. Mahatma Gandhi was once asked what if a Hindu comes to feel that he can only be saved by Jesus Christ? Gandhi's reply may be paraphrased thus: so be it, but why should he cease to be a Hindu?

Thus, in the Eastern cultural context, freedom of religion means that a person is left free to explore his or her religious life without being challenged to change his or her religion. I can now advance to and advance the third proposition. According to one concept of religion, described earlier as Western, freedom of religion consists of freedom to change one's religion when faced with a religious option. According to another concept of religion, described earlier as Eastern, freedom of religion consists of not having the need to do so when faced with such an option.

Recent events in India indicate that the simultaneous operation of these two concepts can lead to religious volatility. India's religious culture is heavily imbued with the Eastern concept of religion. India's political culture relies heavily on the Western concept of it. The tensions now building up in India seem to lend support to this third proposition.

[Pause.]

PROFESSOR SHARMA: In the second part of my presentation, I would now like to examine the Hindu attitude towards conversion in more detail in view of its centrality to the Hindu understanding of religious freedom. I shall confine my discussion to the range of opinion regarding conversion found in Hinduism to the modern period; that is, in the post-1800 period.

During this period, two attitudes in the main towards conversion can be clearly identified: one, in modern Hindu thought and for most modern Hindus, the idea of conversion from one religion to another does not make much sense. This opposition or aversion, rather, is rooted in the new Hindu doctrine of the validity of all parts to the divine. If all parts are valid, then conversion from one religion to another does not make much sense.

Two counterarguments against this position may now be immediately considered. If all religions are valid, then why object to conversion from one to the other? And sometimes, it might be in a person's interest to change his or her religion to ensure one's spiritual progress, like changing lanes on a highway, without wishing to trivialize the point.

Now, one new Hindu response to the first point would be that conversion as referred, a fact already alluded to by Professor Embree, often involves cultural violence. And so, if all religions are valid, the relevant question is not why not change but why change? If it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change.

As to the second, one new Hindu response urges that if all religions are valid, this makes all of them members of a fraternity, so if someone feels that one's spiritual progress will be speeded up by adopting another religion, there is no harm in doing so. But does one have to abandon one's religion to adopt another?

Now, second, some modern Hindus also believe that while conversion from Hinduism, like conversion from any religion, is undesirable, yet, conversion to Hinduism in India should be tolerated and even encouraged. According to them, the conversion of Hindus to Islam and Christianity, especially during Islamic and British rule, took place during Hinduism's times of troubles, and therefore, such reconversion is now valid, as it represents the righting of a historical wrong.

If the first position may be described as the new Hindu position, then the second position could be called the Hindu nationalist position. It should be noted, though, that both the first and the second positions are equally opposed to conversion from Hinduism.

I would now like to refer back to Article 18 as I conclude, for it constitutes the bedrock provision for religious freedom in human rights discourse. It should not come as a surprise in the light of what has been said that according to most Hindus, Article 18 does not help ensure genuine religious freedom among religions; does not help ensure genuine religious freedom among religions because it seems to stack the deck in favor of the proselytizing religions, which recognizes the right to change one's religion, but it does not equally emphatically recognize one's right to retain one's religion.

It seems to recognize one's right to proselytize, but it does not equally emphatically recognize one's right not to be made an object of proselytization, the right to be left alone.

I thank you