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Cross-Cultural Religious Encounters and Social Transformation in North India: The Role of Faith-Based Organizations

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Abstract : *In this context, the discussion of religious difference in North India is relevant and important in the context of how it is negotiated in everyday interactions and organised social service. The paper explores the issue of how faith-based encounters and social transformation are linked and how this can be achieved through the work of Faith Based Organisations. It uses a qualitative narrative review of scholarly literature, a national survey report, government documentation and selected organizational accounts as sources. The empirical examples relate to Sikh humanitarian service in the border area of Delhi and in Punjab, Caritas India's interfaith peacebuilding in western Uttar Pradesh and Ramakrishna Mission healthcare in Vrindavan. The analysis sorts activities that are documented from independently demonstrated activities. It defines three routes of material assistance (which opens opportunities for contact), cooperative practices (which establishes civic relationships) and inclusive governance (which transforms charitable engagement into more agency). These paths are not guaranteed but discretionary. Religious tolerance can exist in parallel to social separation, and provision of services can carry over unequal relations between providers and recipients. The paper contends that in order to be transformative, the role of FBOs requires ongoing collaboration, equal access, engagement in decision-making, and accountability. Its contribution is an analytical framework which distinguishes service delivery, intergroup relationship change, and structural inclusion. The evidence available indicates that there are some institutional practices that are relevant, but it is not sufficient to conclude that they have a causal impact on prejudice, inequality, or communal violence. It is therefore important that organisation encounters are assessed by longitudinal and comparative research to determine if lasting changes beyond the immediate provision of assistance occur.*

Keywords: cross-cultural encounters; faith-based organizations; North India; interfaith dialogue; social transformation; religious pluralism; civic engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

Institutions and relationships in everyday life give religion its social value. Individuals can know and accept another community's right to worship, remain friends, partners, neighbours or members of an organization with them, but not live in the same household. How religious co-existance translates into religious cooperation is the central question, and whether or not religious cooperation alters access to resources, public voice, and social recognition. This is an important question to explore that can be done within a faith-based context because it links religious commitments with activities like health care, relief, community meetings, and volunteering.

North India, as a culturally homogenous unit, is treated as a regional frame. The illustrative cases are in the border area of Punjab, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. The inferences drawn in these cases cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the situation in Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh or other states that were part of various definitions of

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the region. Encounters with religions can be shaped by local histories, institutional resources, caste relations, language, migration and urbanisation. Rather than attempting to make a comprehensive inventory of North Indian religious organizations, the paper instead looks at mechanisms and evidentiary limits.

A faith-based organization is one that is organized, has a public identity that derives from a religious tradition, explicitly relies on its founding commitments or governing mission, and participates in social service or civic life. This definition excludes religious populations and incidental visits to sacred sites. A place of worship may be used to run welfare activities but this does not show the religious nature of running a development organisation. Conversely, a secular association may not be a "faith-based" association because they have members who are religious.

The main argument of the paper is that social transformation relies on the way that encounters are organized. While the shared service could provide a meeting point, opportunities for cooperation and participation beyond the provision of assistance are necessary to achieve lasting inclusion. This argument does not presume the success of the charities, but retains their charitable intent. It also acknowledges that within the same religious tradition there may be significant variation in governance and relationship to other communities among organizations. The question is not about the ranking of religions, but about institutional practice.

II. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Objectives:

1. To make clear the connection between cross-cultural religious encounters and organizational service.
2. To explore case studies of North Indian humanitarian aid, health and peacebuilding.
3. To determine how encounters with social inclusion could be linked.
4. To evaluate the usefulness of the current evidence and the needs for further evaluation.

Research questions:

1. How do some faith groups provide environment where people of diverse religious or cultural backgrounds can meet?
2. What organizational conditions would facilitate these relationships and increased participation?
3. What does the available documentary evidence show, and what is not documented, that regarding enduring social change?

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Yogeeswaran et al. (2026) have investigated national identity and interreligious contact avoidance for nearly 30,000 respondents from India. Better scores on inclusive identity were in general related to more positive attitudes toward neighbors from other faiths, and with limited associations to interreligious marriage preferences. There was some exclusive identity and this was linked to higher avoidance scores, but this differed across communities. The study highlights differences between public acceptance and private relationships. For the present research, it serves as a means of investigating the possibility of cooperation beyond the service realm as encouraged by faith-based organizations, but without being a causal finding of organizational effects.

Chakhesang (2025) examined the role of Faith in Peacebuilding among the Naga Communities of Northeast India and Karen Communities of Southeast Myanmar. The study identified through historical documents and through informal conversations with leaders within institutions the importance of the mechanisms of trust, dialogue, communal healing, and grassroots participation. Shared Christian commitments facilitated mediation by the Naga, and interreligious partnerships were needed in the Karen context. The findings offer a comparative perspective on which religious cooperation in North India can be studied, but cannot be extended to other areas or other types of evidence.

Saiya et al. (2024) analysed minority religious discrimination and violent religious hostilities through global statistical research supplemented by an Indian case study. While the majority perpetrated violence, minority-perpetrated violence was not linked to restrictions on religious practices, institutions, and conversion. The structural context of religious encounters is highlighted. In the current research, it helps to discuss the issue of discrimination and institutional access

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and unequal power in relation to interfaith dialogue but does not specifically assess North Indian faith-based organisations.

Maiti et al. (2022) investigated religious prejudice using a random vocational training programme for Hindu and Muslim women in India. Cooperative contact slightly decreased prejudice, but in most cases, changes were not sustained after 6 months. There were continuing improvements among Hindu participants in their attitudes towards Muslims. The study recommends structured cooperation as a possible tool to enhance interreligious relations. It is the ability of an organization to carry out its mission that has yet to be backed by independent evidence for the present research the ability to train and volunteer joints is examined.

Tomalin (2021) looked to see if the increasing use of religion by development institutions was a change or a practice. The article extended the analysis beyond the formal partnerships between international faith and secular organizations, with the concepts of habitus, field and capital from Bourdieu. It highlighted the social contexts, resources and power relationships that have influenced the developmental role of religion. In the current study, it provides a way to analyze how religious commitments are translated into service and participation within North Indian organisations/universities and provides conceptual tools rather than concrete evidence of enduring inclusion.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative narrative review and comparative documentary analysis is employed in the paper. Targeted public web searches and verification of sources on pages identified on the internet, targeted on 13 October 2026. The search terms were faith based development, religion and segregation in India, intergroup contact, civic engagement, Khalsa Aid's relief mission in the north of India and Caritas India's Samvaad scheme in Vrindavan's healthcare. This search was not systematic or a bibliometric analysis.

The source set includes seven scholarly works, one national survey report and four institutional documents from the references. When the whole book was unavailable, a description of the book, bibliographic citations, and chapter information were used to determine the relevance and general scope. These materials are not a full-text systematic synthesis presented in the paper. The organizational cases were chosen because they were clearly documented in the public domain and offered opportunities to compare across the three domains of relief, health and dialogue within the defined geography. The list of organisations is not exhaustive and does not represent all faith traditions or all organisations in Northern India.

Five questions were used to organize the material: What was the activity documented? Who organized the activity? Where did the activity take place? What encounter mechanism could it enable? What evidence of an outcome was missing? There were three separate evidence categories. Scholarly literature provided interpretations; the survey provided context for attitudes; and institutional documents provided information about activities. Propositions of trust, agency or structural inclusion were developed as interpretations rather than coded as observed outcomes.

Interviews, surveys, participant observations, and original experiments were not undertaken. Self-reports of organizations were regarded as accounts of interest and therefore needed to be treated as independent reports. The government documents confirmed the establishment of the Vrindavan hospital expansion but they were unable to assess interfaith impacts. The activities were not aggregated into an impact score as they vary in time, scale and purpose. Causal estimates, significance tests and the inclusion of fictional beneficiaries are not given.

Result

Table 1. Distribution of Sources Used in the Review

Source category	Number of sources	Percentage
Scholarly works	7	58.33%
National survey report	1	8.33%
Institutional documents	4	33.33%
Total	12	100.00%

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Interpretation

As can be seen in Table 1, twelve (58.33%) sources were included in the review, with the highest number (7) being scholarly sources. These works gave theoretical approaches on religious encounters, civic involvement and social transformation. Four sources (33.33%) were found in institutional documents covering the relief, health care and peacebuilding activities of the institutions. Only one national survey report (8.33%) offered some contextual information about religious attitudes and social separation. The distribution suggests a predominantly scholarly base, with institutional and survey evidence. But the quality of the evidence, effectiveness of the organization and level of causality is not established by source frequency, it is assessed by research design, credibility and relevance.

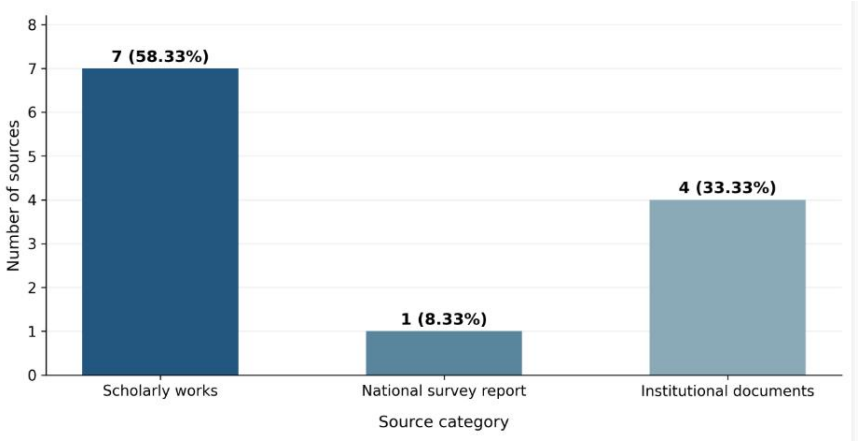


Figure 1. Distribution of Sources Used in the Review

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 From material support to reciprocal relationships

Three different encounter structures are evident in the cases: assistance in times of crisis, service in a continuing healthcare institution, and intentional interfaith convening. They all share the element of purposeful interaction for a social goal. The differences are significant since they may be met only in a fleeting fashion in an emergency, healthcare contact might be repeated but in a layered approach, and dialogue might be heard but only by a limited representative group.

The proposed pathway starts by accessing a common institutional environment. Cooperation can then result in familiarity and reliable relationships. These connections can be used for further problem solving outside of the activity. Last but not least, institutional effects from cooperation may arise through changes in decision making or access to resources. There should be evidence for each transition. Attendance, food distribution, or treatment count as outputs of the program, changes in trust and participation as outcomes, and longer term shifts in exclusion as longer term effects. The pathway is an analytical proposition, not a causal model that is tested in this study.

5.2 Charity and agency

Support can help to reduce the current deprivation without changing the distribution of power. Recipients can be reliant on donor/leaders' decisions. Evidence that participants can sway priorities, challenge decisions, and receive services without losing their independence is better evidence of a claim to social transformation. This change can happen in organizational practices, such as having representatives of beneficiaries on committees, providing easy complaints procedures, and making eligibility requirements clear.

Agency also has to do with being able to refuse to engage in religious participation when being helped. While Faith may inspire providers, service recipients should be able to hold their beliefs freely. This is a recommendation only and does not record any breaches of ethics or organisation by the organisations selected for the review. In the same way, it

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is important to evaluate inclusion in interfaith programs and activities based on more than just a number of religious descriptors, including caste, gender, disability and economic inequality.

5.3 Institutional support and the durability of cooperation

There are other aspects of continuity than moral enthusiasm, and religious organizations can mobilize volunteers and relationships. The reliability of services is affected by professional competences, regular processes and collaboration with other institutions. If dialogue is to be of benefit during conflict, it must have follow-up activities and communication arrangements. A forum that meets in a ceremonial manner may lack practical capacity when compared to a team that has worked together on a number of shared problems.

The paper suggests therefore, a consideration of the relationship evaluation and institutional routine evaluation. A diverse group of volunteers can form friendships, but the group should also share the responsibilities equitably. Formal inclusive rules can have minimal impact, however, if the minority participants are unable to speak safely. To assess social transformation, one needs to take into account the social processes that structure it and the actors' experience of it.

5.4 Alternative explanations unequal encounter

Relatively inclusive attitudes are likely shared by people who volunteer across religious differences. Changes noted following the participation may be due to selection, to general education, or to economic change or encounter with other civic groups. In times of crisis, cooperation can increase due to urgency, and drop off after. These alternatives restrict inferring from organizational stories alone.

Hierarchy can be repeated in encounters if one group is always the giver and another the receiver. A recognition of religious difference in the public sphere can be a mask for unequal speaking time or leadership control. These are all possibilities to explore encounter quality, rather than incriminate acts. The question of evaluations should be: whose knowledge is being used for decision making, who is doing the unpaid work, and who can challenge the organization's version of success.

VI. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Organisations should link interfaith dialogue with regular joint activities, which are agreed upon by local people. Public health promotion, neighbourhood support and community volunteering can provide a continuity to relationships. Access criteria and grievance procedures should be transparent and religious identity information gathered when necessary, voluntary and protected. Evaluation should not be limited to participants and happy recipients but also include those who did not participate and/or were not happy with the results.

Further study might examine the differences between those organizations that have explicit interfaith governance and those that are open to all but have leadership from one community. Cross-group trust, continued collaboration, feelings of dignity and influence over decisions could be measured in both baseline and follow-up surveys. Interviews might include questions about the impact of these changes away from the service setting. Causal inference could be enhanced by phased implementation or well-matched comparison sites, if possible. Factors such as previous attitudes, socioeconomic status, and local histories of conflict should be taken into consideration, along with other markers of civic engagement.

Long-term transformation is measured over the course of time, not just attitudes, but practices as well. These are some of the indicators that should be considered: continued use of mixed community committees, access, leadership involvement, handling of complaints, and cooperation following a crisis. There is a need for separate evidence for reduced violence that is not necessarily available from attendance at meetings. A future design should also involve others, such as Muslim-led and other under-represented organisations, to compensate for the imbalance of the current illustrative selection.

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VII. LIMITATIONS

The review is undertaken with purposive case selection, same depth of source and public institutional accounts. It offers an introduction to the subject and does not attempt to be comprehensive in its range of research. The national attitude survey was conducted before the COVID-19 crisis and does not capture the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on organizations. The three geographical settings are not representative of all of North India, and the cases are not representative of all religious traditions. No primary field evidence of beneficiaries' experiences or of the sustainability of cooperation. The conclusions are limited to those activities that have been documented, plausible mechanisms, and requirements for further evaluation.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Religious institutional spaces offer institutional contexts in which religious commitments can be voiced through humanitarian action, health care and interfaith communication. The North Indian documents chosen illustrate examples of such activities and the literature provides an understanding of how organized cooperation might relate to social relations. They are not shown to automatically eliminate prejudice or to change structural inequality.

The key original insight of the paper is the recognition of three types of change: change in providing assistance; change in the establishment of reciprocal civic relationships; and change in the distribution of participation and opportunity. Evidence is needed beyond the first level for social transformation. Faith-based organisations are most likely to be perceived as potential contributors whose impact relies on the quality of the encounter, fair governance and continued local collaboration. Assessing these conditions first-hand will lead to more accurate and credible future statements on religion and social change.

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