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Emerging Challenges and Opportunities in the Accommodation of Religious Diversity in France

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Abstract

The migrant crisis or refugee crisis has been one of the most debated topics in Europe over the last few years. The purpose of people, moving to Europe, is to have a stable and secure life which they are not able to attain due to various circumstances at their native places. Historically, Europe has been integrating migrants and refugees within its society from time immemorial and this convention still continues during the recent upsurge of migrants and refugees from troubled areas of the world into Europe. As far as European state of France is concerned, it is a mature society that has been accommodating religious diversity since centuries. But presently, this accommodation of diversity is creating serious challenges to the state and society. This paper outlines the mechanism to accommodate religious diversity in France while briefly describing recent religious demography of the country. A candid effort has been made to find out the challenges in assimilating religious diversity and their possible implications. Although, Diversity is not always a challenge it is considered a blessing in the 21st century and it provides abundant opportunities for the comprehensive evolution of the society. This paper seeks the opportunities which religious diversity provides in the inclusive development of French Society and initiatives taken by French authorities to tap this religiously diversified human capital in the growth of the country.

Key Words - France, Immigrants, Religious Diversity, Challenges, Opportunities.

“Diversity may be the hardest thing for a society to live with, and perhaps the most dangerous thing for a society to be without”¹

-William Sloane Coffin

Introduction

The migration from one place to another in search of food, shelter, occupation and better living conditions has been a reality of humans from pre-historic time. The migrants follow different religions and cultures hence, continue to change the religious demography of various countries. France is a democracy with a diverse society and the influx of migrants has made it more diverse, culturally and religiously. But accommodating this religious diversity is a massive challenge before the state because migration is an ongoing process and internalizing such a constantly increasing huge diverse population in one nation, is not an easy task. As well known, accommodation of the diversity could only be achievable when the components of the society are capable enough for the mutual acceptance of differences and state institutions are accommodative in nature. In the case of France, the French government has been strengthening its institutions to serve religiously diverse immigrants and refugees and French society has been embracing them by assimilating in the framework of the French nation-state.

However, Diversity does not pose a challenge always rather it is considered as an asset in the present globalized world. It provides multiple opportunities for the inclusive and sustainable development of a country. The religious and cultural diversity is a boon for France as well. On the one hand, immigrants are bringing knowledge and experience with them which is significantly contributing to the social and economic development of France. On the other hand, art, culture, cuisine, music, and architecture of immigrants are providing an opportunity for the comprehensive evolution of the French society. And this comprehensive evolution is extremely essential for a society to become an embodiment of great civilization.

Brief History of Immigration in France

Immigration in France is not a new phenomenon, it is continued on French land from hundreds of years. But the genesis of immigration in the modern nation-state of French republic started at the advent of industrial revolution when the demand of workers increased in the factories of the country and local workers were unable to meet that demand. Consequently, immigrants from Europe, Africa and other regions of the world were welcomed to quench the thirst. Later, this demand of immigrants more intensified during the first world war as France lost its numerous soldiers and passionately needed additional soldiers to fight. The full citizenship was promised by French leaders for Africans moving to

France. Even after the First World War, immigrants were extremely required to rejuvenate the drowning economy and to accelerate the stagnated development. As a result, France promoted immigration at large scale and this process of influx of immigrants from Africa and European Countries continued till Great Economic Depression of 1930s. After the economic depression, inflow of immigrants declined rapidly due to rising unemployment but it again soared up during and after second world war due to great loss of French lives and immediate need to build up devastated economy.

But after second world war France started to regulate immigration. “The two principal agencies for managing immigration and refugee flows, the Office National d'Immigration (ONI) and the Office Français pour la Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides (OFPRA) were established in 1946, and population/family policies in general were given a boost by the creation of the Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques.”²

While, The National Immigration Office (ONI) recruited the foreign workers and placed them in different sectors of the economy, French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) granted refugee status to limited people. Whereas French Institute for Demographics Studies (INED) established in 1945, began to study the population of France including the population of immigrants and refugees so that appropriate policies could be formulated to integrate immigrants. Thus, during 1950s and 60s French government endeavoured to regulate the immigration through a proper legislative and administrative mechanism of recruitment.

But immigration policy of France changed from recruitment of immigrants to suspension of immigration in 1970s. Afterwards, it went to the level of ‘zero immigration’ in 1990s. However, France again opened its door to immigrants in the beginning of twenty first century but this time more regulated and moderate immigration process was allowed according to pertaining conditions and that still prevails. After the Syrian Crisis and Arab Spring refugees again started to pour into Europe including France hence, created a serious challenge before the authorities to give them asylum and integrate them into the society.

In regard to immigrants, in the first wave, most of the immigrants came to France were mostly Europeans. People from Italy, Germany, Spain, Russia, Austria, Armenia and other European Countries settled into France. But later, People from North and Central Africa, West Asia, and former French colonies like Vietnam, also migrated to France. Eventually, since 1960s immigrants from South and East Asia registered

their presence as well. Thus, today, France consists of the population from various parts of Europe, Africa, Arab world, Americas and Asia.

Religious Demography

Though, it is difficult to present the religious demography of France as French laws forbid statistics related to the religious beliefs of people. “A 1978 law regarding ‘data files, processing and individual liberties’ explicitly prohibits the collection and processing of personal data that reveals, directly or indirectly, the racial and ethnic origins, or religion, of any persons.”³ Still, different research organizations often conduct their research about the religious demography of France. Such a research report has been released by Observatory of Secularism (a commission appointed by French government to answer questions related to secularism) in collaboration with polling organization Viavoice in July 2019.

“According to the report, whose figures are consistent with other estimates, 48 percent of respondents identify as Catholic, 3 percent Muslim, 3 percent Protestant, 2 percent Buddhist, 0.7 percent Jewish, 0.6 percent, and 1 percent other religion; 34 percent said they have no religious affiliation and 7 percent preferred not to respond. The same report estimates “other” religions’ numbers as follows: Jehovah’s Witnesses, 140,000-250,000, and Hindus, 150,000-300,000. In addition, the observatory’s report stated 31 percent consider themselves nonbelievers or atheists.”⁴

Mechanism to Accommodate Religious Diversity

Mechanism to accommodate religious diversity comprises of constitutional provisions and legislations enacted by the French parliament. In the accommodation of religious diversity, Article 1 of the constitution of France works as an axis on which other initiatives and legislations rotate. Article 1 states that -

*“France shall be an indivisible, **secular**, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs...”⁵*

“The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which among French republicans enjoys a secular status equivalent to that of a sacred text, guarantees freedom of religious belief and expression to everyone in France.”⁶ Although, French model of secularism is based on the “Principle of Laïcité (la.i.si.te)” enforced by 1905 law that separated Church and State. Today, this principle of Laicite separates

religion from the state. It discourages the involvement of religion in government affairs and the government's involvement in religious affairs of the citizens.

Since, France follows the assimilation model hence, rejects the direct interaction to a particular religious, ethnic, racial or linguistic community. "This model is based on the idea that the state should interact with individual only, not communities or groups in order to give equal treatment to everyone. As a result, French authorities have rejected any form of targeted measures for ethnic, religious or linguistic groups."⁷

But some provisions have been made to smooth the assimilation of immigrants in French society and to accommodate their religious and cultural diversity. In 1981, the provisions of France's *Law on Association*, which was originally passed in 1901, were extended to immigrants and the foreign-born.⁸ The Law of Association provided them the right to form associations and as a consequence, ethnic and religious minorities established their organizations in France. Several organizations among them are getting funds from *Fund for Action and Support of Integration and Anti-Discrimination*. Throughout the 1990s, approximately \$20 million was distributed to various groups through this fund.⁹

Furthermore, the French government has also created the Ministry for Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development in 2007. "This ministry has four main objectives: to restrain immigration flows, to promote integration process, to promote French identity and to encourage "co-development" (that is to say helping countries of origin to develop)."¹⁰

Challenges in the Accommodation of Religious Diversity

The first and foremost challenge in accommodating religious diversity is socio-economic compulsions of France. As evident, due to Liberal framework of the society, France has always accepted diversity throughout human history. But today, France itself is going through several problems like unemployment, sluggish economic growth, lack of natural resources and radicalization of the society. Therefore, it is getting more difficult for France to accommodate coming migrants and their religious diversity.

Next challenge in the accommodation of diversity is- how to provide citizenship to such a huge number of religiously and culturally diverse immigrants. "In 2018, there were 6.5 million immigrants living in France—9.7% of the total population (of 67 million). 4.1 million were foreign nationals and 2.4 million, or

37%, had acquired French citizenship”¹¹ Still, a huge number of immigrants are waiting for their citizenship. Therefore, granting citizenship to such a large number of immigrants is a headache before authorities.

Another challenge is, how to integrate this diverse population into French society. Immigrants who come to France possess different backgrounds. They belong to different religions, cultures, languages, races and ethnic groups. Since France follows the assimilation model, therefore, the main problem, is, how to mold them according to the French values and beliefs. However, France persistently works to communicate its values to French minorities. Still, it is spending a lot of money to teach French values in its schools. For instance, the French government launched a Plan in 2015 “that will cost €250 million over three years”¹² to make necessary changes in education system at school level and teach French values. Nevertheless, absolute assimilation of immigrants remains a distant objective.

Challenges at Various Levels

At the *individual level*, France is facing the challenge of ‘*lack of Connectedness of the individual (immigrant or refugee) of religious minorities from French society.*’ It is evident, when any migrant or refugee come to another country then he remains habitual of socio-religious practices of the native place consequently, he does not feel connected to the society of the host country. The language also creates a barrier between the individual and society. In France, French is the main language and in most of the cases, the immigrant from the different country does not know it. Additionally, French values differs from his own values. Hence, he does not feel connected to the French society. In the long run, this lack of connectedness leads to more alienation of the individual from the society.

At the *societal level*, the major challenge is ‘*trust deficit between majority and minority.*’ As evident, when migrants of different religious backgrounds come to a new country, the people of majority community remain doubtful about them because they do not know much about the religious and cultural beliefs of these migrants. On the other hand, migrants are habitual of socio-religious practices of their countries and therefore they do not connect to the new country. As a result, a trust deficit is created between these migrants (minority) and host population (majority) in the society. Today, this trust deficit is increasing in the French Society. It has more increased after some Terrorist Attacks in different parts of the country.

Discrimination against religious minorities especially Muslims is another challenge at the societal level. The finest example of religious discrimination is banning on the 'conspicuous' religious dress which includes Burqa and niqab. "*Law of 2010-1192: Act Prohibiting Concealment of the Face in Public Space*" is a law of French parliament, enacted in 2010, it has banned the wearing of face-covering headgear, niqabs, burqa and other veils at public places. Thus, France is discriminating its religious minorities in the name of national security because it is abstaining them from wearing their traditional attire. Likewise, discrimination of religious employees, in a direct or indirect manner, happens more often than is officially reported in France.¹³ According to a study, "in the French labor market, anti-Muslim discrimination exists: a Muslim candidate is 2.5 times less likely to receive a job interview callback than is his or her Christian counterpart."¹⁴ Moreover, "second-generation Muslim households in France have lower income compared with matched Christian households."¹⁵

Though, government of France has launched 'National Plan Against Racism and Anti-Semitism' that has been enforced from 2018 to 2020. The primary objective of this plan has been to combat anti-Semitism and racism. This plan aims to prevent discrimination in the society. But still, discrimination is the staunch reality of the French Society.

Next challenge at the societal level, is '*Radicalization of Islam*' that poses a serious threat to the national security. Actually, this is the recent trend in national politics of European countries to accuse religious minorities mainly Muslims for terrorist attacks and social upheaval. And this accusation is not hollow. If we scrutinize the terrorist attacks since 2012 or even before that then we will get to know that Radicalized Muslim Terrorists were deeply involved in the terror attacks in France. This is the reason that there is a sense of suspicion in the minds of majority for Muslims. So, this is a challenge before French authorities to have a check on the radicalization of Islam and ensure that Muslims do not adopt the path of terrorism. They must also analyze that what has been the reasons for the radicalization of Islam and people from France joined ISIS in large number. In fact, at the individual level, lack of connectedness of the Muslim to the French society, trust deficit between minority and majority at the societal level and fanatic imams who use the Principle of Laicite (that separates state and religion) to promote Islamic radicalization, have been some of the prominent reasons for the radicalization of Islam in France. Here, authorities must diligently work on them and endeavor to eliminate radicalization from the society.

However, the French government has taken the issue of radicalization of Islam into consideration. To tackle this problem French President Emmanuel Macron has proposed “replacing the traditional model ‘Muslims in France’ which implies non-governmental involvement, with the model ‘Islam of France’ which implies the shaping of a moderate Islam that adapts itself to French republican values and rejects the Islamist radical version of Islam.”¹⁶ Moreover, “One of Macron’s plans is to break with foreign funding in order to disentangle Muslim organizations in France from other countries.”¹⁷ He has also urged to train imams at home in order to nurture a generation of indigenous imams.

In addition, to actualize above plans, recently in 2021 “*Anti-Separatism Bill*” has been passed in both houses of French parliament that positively intervene in Muslim community’s religious practices and attempts to have check on rising Islamization. This bill abolishes polygamy, prohibits forced marriages, bans virginity test by doctors, stops mosques from receiving foreign aid and regulates home schooling of children within Muslims.

At the *economic level*, “unemployment, however, remains the biggest obstacle to integration and the biggest impediment to advancement for immigrants...”¹⁸ The immigrants who settle in France in many cases are unskilled therefore, to provide them skills and training and prepare them for the employment becomes a major challenge. Other than this, to provide housing, health facilities, food security and social security for them are some additional challenges at the economic level.

At the *political level*, to ensure political representation of religious minorities in French parliament is one of the main challenges which France is facing today. “Out of 551 deputies not representing the country’s overseas departments and territories (known as DOM-TOMs), 6.35 percent of the new elected chamber are ethnic minorities”¹⁹ Thus, there are only 6.35 percent MPs from minorities in current national assembly constituted after elections in 2017. Indeed, minorities are under-represented in French legislature.

Another challenge at the political level is increasing *xenophobia* (a form of racism) as a tool for political gains, in the country. This xenophobia is mainly against Muslims in France. When immigrants come to a new country then they become the easy target of some political parties. These political parties misuse xenophobia in the country against the religiously diverse population of immigrants and try to secure their vote bank. Though xenophobia in France could not find much legitimacy as compared to other European countries and election of a person from centrist orientation i.e., Emmanuel Macron as the president is the

finest example of it. But still, xenophobia has a significant place in French Politics and its elimination will require much more efforts. More initiatives must be taken in this direction to completely uproot xenophobia from the French Society.

Opportunities: A Way to Strong Nation

The accommodation of diversity disperses a set of challenges for a country but the advantages of the diversity can not be undermined. First, “Diversity in teams or at senior management level brings a wealth of knowledge, experience and different perspectives. Those differences can be invaluable for innovation, problem solving, insight and creativity.”²⁰ Thus, diversity helps to boost productivity in different organizations and ultimately benefits a country. Therefore, it is a fantastic opportunity before the French government to increase productivity in the country by accommodating religious diversity.

Second, improvement in the economy both through skilled and unskilled workers. Lots of research has proved that the influx of migrants stimulates economic growth. The immigrants provide cheap labour, pay taxes to government and in return use least resources consequently, improves economic health of a country. France is also benefitting from immigrants therefore; it is a golden opportunity for France to accommodate these religiously diverse immigrants and refugees and improves its economic growth.

Third, diversity provides a ground for the “Comprehensive Evolution of the Society” thus, it is an opportunity for France. When people from different religions and different cultures come to a new country then they bring different arts, cuisines, architectures, music, dance forms and dressing styles with them and enrich the culture of the host country. Thus, accommodation of religious diversity in France is imperative for the comprehensive evolution of society.

Fourth, by accommodating religious diversity successfully, France can set a model for other countries that how nicely religious diversity could be accommodated in a country and how smoothly religiously diverse migrants could be internalized in the society. So, it is an opportunity for France to accommodate religious diversity and present its model before the world.

Conclusion

When liberal democracies were strengthening themselves in the west then there was a popular belief among political scientists that over the period 'religion' would disappear from public life. But in the last three decades of globalization, instead of disappearing from public life, religion has established itself firmly. Indeed, Religion is not something that can vanish from public life. It is a way of life for people. It is an inseparable part of the society. We can separate religion from the state but we can not separate religion from the society. Religion is separated from the state in France but it is an integral part of the society. Though, State does not recognize religious and cultural minorities and neither grant them special status nor special rights. Nevertheless, it tries to accommodate them within French Society under the banner of the constitution of France.

France has always accommodated religious diversity whenever migrants from different parts of the world having different religions and faiths settled within its boundaries. All the components of the society not just helped to accommodate religious diversity but functioned magnificently to make it an inseparable part of French society. Although, France has faced several challenges in doing so and still struggling in this way but France is an evolved society and it has addressed religious diversity successfully in the past and will continue to do so with full capacity in the upcoming future.

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