

# **FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN THE GULF COUNTRIES**

*"The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is one of the most precious human rights." - Dalai Lama*

## **Introduction:**

Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right, enshrined in various international declarations and conventions. While Gulf countries are known for their rich cultural heritage, rapid development, and economic prosperity, they are also often scrutinized for their approach to religious freedom. This article explores the status of freedom of religion in Gulf countries, delving into the challenges they face, the progress they've made, and the opportunities for fostering tolerance and coexistence.

## **The Islamic Foundation**

The Gulf countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), share a strong Islamic foundation. Islam is the state religion in these nations, shaping their legal systems, social norms, and cultural traditions. Consequently, non-Muslims may encounter certain restrictions when practicing their faith, and converting from Islam to another religion is often discouraged or even penalized in some jurisdictions.

## **Legal Frameworks**

Gulf countries have diverse legal systems, with some adhering to Sharia law, while others blend it with civil and customary laws. These legal frameworks play a crucial role in defining the scope of religious freedom. Though constitutions in these nations generally guarantee religious freedom, the practical implementation may vary.

## **Restrictions on Places of Worship**

One of the most notable challenges for religious minorities in Gulf countries is the limited availability of places of worship. While mosques are abundant and well-maintained, non-Muslim communities often face difficulties in constructing and maintaining their own places of worship. This can hinder their ability to gather and practice their faith freely.

## **Social Stigma and Discrimination**

Despite legal protections, religious minorities in Gulf countries may experience social stigma and discrimination. This is particularly evident in conservative communities, where non-Muslims might face difficulties finding employment or accessing certain services. Such societal pressure can deter individuals from openly expressing their faith and contribute to a climate of self-censorship.

## **Efforts Towards Religious Tolerance**

In recent years, some Gulf countries have made efforts to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. Initiatives like the establishment of interfaith councils and cultural centres aim to foster understanding and respect between religious communities. Additionally, hosting international conferences and forums on religious coexistence has demonstrated a willingness to engage with global partners on this issue.

## **Expatriate Communities**

Gulf countries are home to a significant number of expatriates from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. While they may not be subject to the same level of scrutiny as citizens, they still experience some limitations on their religious practices. However, the presence of expatriate communities also presents an opportunity for cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

## **Positive Steps in the UAE**

The United Arab Emirates stands out as a Gulf country that has taken significant strides towards religious tolerance. In 2019, the UAE appointed its first Minister of State for Tolerance, demonstrating a commitment to promoting a culture of acceptance. The country has also welcomed the construction of non-Muslim places of worship, such as churches and temples, signalling a more inclusive approach to religious diversity.

## **Historical Background of Hindu Minority in Gulf Countries:**

The historical presence of Hindus in the Gulf countries traces back several centuries, highlighting the deep-rooted connections between the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula. Trade and commercial activities played a significant role in facilitating the movement of Indian merchants, traders, and skilled professionals to the Gulf region.

During ancient times, the Indian Ocean served as a vital maritime trade route, connecting the prosperous civilizations of India and the Arabian Peninsula. Indian merchants, known for their expertise in trade, ventured into the Gulf countries, establishing trade networks and forging economic ties. These early interactions laid the foundation for cultural exchanges and the eventual settlement of Hindus in the region.

Over the centuries, the Gulf countries witnessed various waves of Indian migration. The opening of ports and the growth of urban centres facilitated the influx of Indian merchants and traders, who established thriving business communities in cities like Muscat, Manama, and Kuwait City. These communities played a crucial role in fostering economic growth and contributed to the development of maritime trade networks.

In addition to trade, the migration of skilled professionals also contributed to the presence of Hindus in the Gulf countries. Indian workers, particularly in the fields of construction, engineering, and healthcare, were sought after for their expertise and craftsmanship. Many Indians migrated to the region to pursue employment opportunities and actively participated in the infrastructural development of the Gulf countries.

Religious and cultural factors also played a significant role in shaping the historical background of Hindus in the Gulf. Hinduism, with its rich traditions and spiritual practices, travelled with the diaspora, resulting in the establishment of temples and religious centres. These sacred spaces provided a sense of familiarity, allowing Hindus to maintain their religious and cultural identity even while residing far from their ancestral homeland.

Furthermore, the strong historical ties between the Indian subcontinent and the Gulf countries were further solidified by diplomatic and cultural interactions. Formal agreements and diplomatic relations between India and the Gulf nations have fostered closer cooperation and facilitated the movement of people, creating opportunities for cultural exchange and strengthening the presence of the Hindu community.

In conclusion, the historical background of Hindus in the Gulf countries is intertwined with centuries of trade, migration, and cultural exchanges. The presence of Indian merchants, traders, and skilled professionals, along with their religious and cultural practices, has contributed to the diverse fabric of the Gulf societies. The historical connections between the Indian subcontinent and the Gulf region continue to shape the vibrant and thriving Hindu community in the Gulf countries today.

## **Problems faced by Hindu Minority in Gulf Countries:**

It is important to note that while the following note addresses some of the challenges faced by the Hindu minority in Gulf countries, it is a general overview and may not cover the full spectrum of experiences. The experiences and challenges faced by individuals within the Hindu community can vary greatly based on factors such as nationality, socioeconomic status, and personal circumstances.

The Hindu minority in Gulf countries faces several challenges that can impact their daily lives and sense of belonging. These challenges stem from various factors, including cultural differences, religious restrictions, and the nature of the migrant worker system prevalent in the region.

### **Cultural Differences and Integration:**

Adjusting to a different cultural environment can pose challenges for the Hindu minority in Gulf countries. The cultural norms, customs, and practices may differ significantly from those in their countries of origin. Language barriers, differences in social etiquette, and unfamiliarity with local traditions can create difficulties in social integration and hinder the sense of community.

### **Religious Practices and Restrictions:**

The Hindu minority may face certain restrictions on practicing their religious rituals and traditions. While the Gulf countries generally respect the rights of religious minorities, there may be limitations on public displays of religious symbols or the construction of new temples. Obtaining permission to build or expand places of worship can be a lengthy and bureaucratic process.

## **Employment and Migrant Worker Issues:**

The majority of the Hindu minority in the Gulf countries comprises migrant workers who face unique challenges related to their employment. Issues such as exploitation, limited job security, low wages, and long working hours can affect their overall well-being. Additionally, the kafala sponsorship system, prevalent in some Gulf countries, can tie workers to a specific employer, making it difficult to change jobs or seek legal remedies for workplace grievances.

## **Limited Political Representation:**

As a minority group, Hindus in Gulf countries may face limited political representation, which can impact their ability to advocate for their rights and address their concerns effectively. The political landscape in these countries is often dominated by the interests and priorities of the majority population.

## **Education and Cultural Preservation:**

Ensuring access to quality education that includes cultural and religious studies can be a challenge for the Hindu minority. While efforts have been made to establish Indian schools and cultural organizations, there can still be limitations in curriculum offerings and resources. Preserving Hindu cultural practices and language within the younger generations can also be a concern.

It is important to note that many Gulf countries have taken steps to promote religious tolerance, inclusivity, and social cohesion. Efforts to improve labour laws, enhance cultural understanding, and provide avenues for interfaith dialogue are underway. However, addressing the challenges faced by the Hindu minority in the Gulf countries requires ongoing commitment from both the host countries and the international community to promote inclusivity, protect workers' rights, and foster social integration.

## **The Indian Government's Advocacy for Hindu Minorities in Gulf Countries:**

The treatment and well-being of religious minorities is a crucial aspect of a democratic and inclusive society. In recent years, the Indian government has been actively vocal about protecting the rights of Hindu minorities living in Gulf countries. This stance reflects India's

commitment to safeguarding the interests and ensuring the welfare of its citizens abroad. In this article, we will delve into the Indian government's say on the treatment of Hindu minorities in Gulf countries and the measures taken to address their concerns.

## **Recognition of Minority Rights**

The Indian government recognizes the importance of protecting the rights and interests of its citizens abroad, particularly when they belong to minority communities. Hindu minorities in Gulf countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, have long been an integral part of these nations' diverse fabric. They contribute significantly to the social, economic, and cultural development of their host countries.

## **Promotion of Interfaith Dialogue**

The Indian government actively advocates for interfaith dialogue to foster religious harmony and tolerance among diverse communities. It engages in discussions and consultations with Gulf countries to promote a culture of mutual respect and understanding. By facilitating dialogue between communities, the Indian government aims to reduce instances of discrimination and protect the rights of Hindu minorities.

## **Ensuring Consular Assistance**

The Indian government's embassies and consulates in Gulf countries play a crucial role in providing consular assistance to its citizens. They serve as a point of contact for Hindu minorities facing issues related to visas, legal matters, employment, and cultural integration.

These diplomatic missions work tirelessly to address the concerns of Indian nationals and safeguard their rights within the framework of international law and bilateral agreements.

## **Collaboration with Gulf Governments**

The Indian government maintains close ties with Gulf countries and emphasizes the importance of collaboration to protect the rights of Hindu minorities. Bilateral engagements, including high-level visits, diplomatic dialogues, and cultural exchanges, serve as platforms to address issues related to minority rights. The Indian government urges Gulf nations to provide a conducive environment for the social, cultural, and religious practices of Hindu minorities, while also highlighting the significance of reciprocity and respect for the rights of all communities.

## **Advocacy for Religious Freedom**

The Indian government firmly believes in the principles of religious freedom and equal treatment for all its citizens. It actively encourages Gulf countries to ensure that Hindu minorities are allowed to practice their faith freely and without hindrance. By engaging in discussions on religious freedom, the Indian government aims to create awareness and build consensus on the importance of protecting the rights of religious minorities.

## **Community Outreach and Support**

The Indian government, through its embassies and consulates, regularly conducts outreach programs and cultural events to connect with the Hindu diaspora in Gulf countries. These initiatives help create a sense of community and provide a platform for addressing concerns faced by Hindu minorities. The Indian government also supports various community organizations and institutions that contribute to the welfare of Hindu minorities, such as religious centres, educational institutions, and cultural associations.

## **Laws on Hindu minority in Gulf countries:**

The Hindu minority in Gulf countries faces unique legal challenges due to the predominantly Muslim environment and the differences in legal systems. While efforts have been made to ensure religious freedom and protect the rights of religious minorities, including Hindus, there are certain laws and practices that can affect their rights and practices. Here is a brief overview of some key aspects:

### **Freedom of Religion:**

Gulf countries generally guarantee the freedom of religion to their citizens. However, the interpretation and application of this freedom may vary. While some countries explicitly recognize the rights of non-Muslims to practice their religion, there might be limitations or restrictions on certain aspects of religious expression, such as building new temples or displaying religious symbols.

### **Personal Status Laws:**

Gulf countries often have personal status laws that govern matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. These laws are primarily based on Islamic principles and can

sometimes pose challenges for Hindus who seek legal recognition and protection for their personal matters.

### **Building and Maintenance of Temples:**

The construction and maintenance of Hindu temples in Gulf countries can be subject to specific regulations and restrictions. These may include obtaining permits, adhering to certain architectural guidelines, or facing limitations on the size and location of the temples.

### **Worship and Ritual Practices:**

Hindu worship and ritual practices might face certain restrictions or require specific permissions in Gulf countries. For example, restrictions on the use of loudspeakers during religious ceremonies or limitations on processions and public gatherings may be in place to maintain public order or security.

### **Conversion and Proselytization:**

Gulf countries generally have laws that restrict or prohibit proselytization and conversion from Islam to other religions. These laws aim to maintain social cohesion and prevent religious tensions. However, they can have implications for individuals seeking to convert to Hinduism or for Hindus engaging in missionary activities.

It is important to note that the legal landscape varies across Gulf countries, and each country has its own set of laws and regulations. Additionally, interpretations and practices may vary at the local level. Therefore, it is crucial for individuals to understand and comply with the specific legal requirements of the country they reside in and seek legal advice or consult relevant authorities when needed.

Overall, while efforts have been made to protect the rights of the Hindu minority in Gulf countries, it is essential to continuously monitor and advocate for the improvement of legal protections and religious freedoms for all religious communities.



## **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the topic of freedom of religion in the Gulf countries is a complex and sensitive issue that demands careful consideration. While some Gulf nations have made efforts to protect and accommodate religious diversity, there are still significant challenges to achieving full religious freedom in the region.

Historically, the Gulf countries have been known for their deep-rooted cultural and religious traditions, which have influenced the legal and social frameworks governing religious practices. The majority of the population in these countries follows Islam, and the legal systems often incorporate Islamic law, which can impact the rights and freedoms of religious minorities.

Despite this, many Gulf countries have emphasized their commitment to upholding human rights, including freedom of religion, on both national and international platforms. They have taken steps to establish institutions for interfaith dialogue and have permitted the building of places of worship for non-Muslim communities.

However, challenges persist. Some religious minority groups face restrictions on the public expression of their faith, and proselytization efforts may be subject to legal scrutiny. There have also been reports of discrimination against certain religious communities, limiting their opportunities for full participation in society.

The situation varies from one Gulf country to another, with some nations demonstrating greater tolerance and openness towards religious diversity. However, the overarching cultural and legal landscape still poses challenges to the full realization of freedom of religion in the region.

Moving forward, promoting freedom of religion in the Gulf countries requires a delicate balance between respecting cultural and religious traditions and upholding the universal human right to practice one's faith freely. It necessitates open dialogue, legal reforms, and increased awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion in fostering a harmonious and stable society.

As the global landscape evolves, it is hoped that the Gulf countries will continue to engage in constructive dialogue and take progressive steps to safeguard the fundamental right of freedom of religion for all their citizens and residents, fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding in their diverse communities. Only through such efforts can the

Gulf countries fully embrace the spirit of religious freedom and contribute to a more just and harmonious world.

**UTKARSH SINGH**

**Campus Ambassador, HRDI**

**Lloyd law college**