

Ministry of Religious affairs

(GS Paper 2, Governance)

Context:

- For quite some time, opinion makers from different quarters have been asking the Union government to **scrap the Ministry of Minority Affairs and replace it with a new Ministry of Religious affairs.**
- There is a great deal of justification for such a demand.

Global perspective:

- India is a growing international power, and the identity of India can be secured globally by **presenting its culture and religion from a global perspective.**
- The proposed Ministry of Religious affairs could be headed by a practicing spiritual leader to propagate the face of India's spiritual strength.
- India has all along respected all religions, but major religious groups see little in common with Hinduism and want to live separately. A learned spiritual leader at the head of the proposed ministry could bridge this gap and integrate the communities together.



Religion & modernity:

- In the West, some people could argue that Hinduism is an old-styled religion with a huge baggage to reconcile with the contemporary world. Modernity, which emphasises the relegation of religion firmly to an individual's private life, is a challenging idea for any culture.
- In India, it faces a particularly unusual problem: the persistence of numerous traditional and religious practices means that religion and modernity have to cohabit here in a complex, plural, transient, and historically evolving relationship.

The main functions of the Ministry of Religious Affairs should be:

- **Extending overall co-operation in implementing development activities**, providing grants, taking initiatives for resource mobilization, introducing online registration, and utmost use of ICT in religious affairs management;
- Assisting **research and publications in the field of religion**, and providing cooperation in the management of charitable institutions;
- Arranging and participating in **international conferences, seminars and dialogues** on matters relating to religions and religious affairs and establishing connections and improving relations, and signing contracts, agreements, conventions with different countries and international organizations/ institutions;

- Conducting various programmes in the religious and educational institutions for social development, conducting research and strengthening anti-terrorism campaigns, religious values, integrity, brotherhood, and communal harmony;
- Providing **grants-in-aid including reforms of different religious organisations and institutions**, matters relating to moon sightings and celebration of important religious festivals; and supporting the destitute people for their rehabilitation with financial assistance.

Diversity in India:

- More than 70 years after India became free from colonial rule, Indians generally feel their country has lived up to one of its post-Independence ideals: a society where followers of many religions can live and practice freely. India's massive population is diverse as well as devout.
- Not only do most of the world's Hindus, Jains and Sikhs live in India, but it also is home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations and to millions of Christians and Buddhists.
- Indians see religious tolerance as a central part of who they are as a nation. Across the major religious groups, most people say it is very important to respect all religions to be “truly Indian.” And **tolerance is a religious as well as a civic value**: Indians are united in the view that respecting other religions is a very important part of what it means to be a member of their own religious community.

Shared beliefs & Values:

- These shared values are accompanied by a number of beliefs that cross religious lines. Not only do a **majority of Hindus in India (77%) believe in karma**, but an identical percentage of Muslims do, too.
- A third of Christians in India (32%) - together with 81% of Hindus - say they believe in the **purifying power of the Ganges River**, a central belief in Hinduism.
- In Northern India, 12% of Hindus and 10% of Sikhs, along with 37% of Muslims, **identify with Sufism**, a mystical tradition most closely associated with Islam. And the vast majority of Indians of **all major religious backgrounds say that respecting elders is very important to their faith**.

Exceptions:

- Yet, despite sharing certain values and religious beliefs - as well as living in the same country, under the same constitution - members of India's major religious communities often don't feel they have much in common with one another.
- The majority of Hindus see themselves as very different from Muslims (66%), and most Muslims return the sentiment, saying they are very different from Hindus (64%).
- There are a few exceptions: Two-thirds of Jains and about half of Sikhs say they have a lot in common with Hindus. But generally people in major religious communities see themselves as different from others.

Religious tolerance as a core value:

- Moreover, Indians generally stick to their own religious group when it comes to their friends. Indians, then, simultaneously express enthusiasm for religious tolerance and a consistent preference for keeping their religious communities in segregated spheres - they live together separately.
- These two sentiments may seem paradoxical, but for many Indians, they are not. Indeed, many take both positions, saying it is important to be tolerant of others and expressing a desire to limit personal connections across religious lines.
- Indians who favor a religiously segregated society also overwhelmingly emphasize religious tolerance as a core value.

Way Forward:

- Indians' concept of religious tolerance does not necessarily involve the mixing of religious communities.
- While people in some countries may aspire to create a “melting pot” of different religious identities, many Indians seem to prefer a country **more like a patchwork fabric, with clear lines between groups**. Most Hindus in India say being Hindu, and being able to speak Hindi are very important to be ‘truly’ Indian.
- Against this backdrop, the time has come to scrap the Ministry of Minority of Affairs without any further delay and create a unifying Ministry of Religious affairs.