Religious Tolerance is a vital part of who we are as Americans and Indians

By U.S. Ambassador to India Timothy J. Roemer

Indians and Americans share so much, and the shared values and common interests between our two countries are the foundation of our ever-growing strategic partnership. Both Indians and Americans identify strongly with concepts such as democracy, open society, rule of law, tolerance, diversity, and freedom of religion. Our shared value of the importance of education has resulted in over 100,000 Indian students studying in the United States. Our mutual goals of economic prosperity and job creation has led to India rising from the United States' 25th largest trading partner in 2003 to 14th in 2009. Our joint programs in Afghanistan and the recent signing of the Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative are driven by our common interest in a peaceful and stable region and India enjoying good relations with all its neighbors.

My visit to Varanasi highlights the importance of religious freedom in Indian and American society as another shared value that plays an important role in creating the ties that bind our countries so closely together. India is the birthplace of four of the world's major religions. The United States was founded by Europeans in search of a home where they could practice freely their religions. Both countries are secular democracies without any official state religion which provide for the constitutional right to the freedom of religion. This right to religious freedom has bred a tolerance in our citizens to all religions, allowing religion of many denominations to flourish in both countries.

As our first President George Washington wrote in 1790 in a letter to the Jewish community in Rhode Island, "the Government of the United States … gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." This remains true to this day, and the United States remains, as President Obama said, "a nation where the ability of peoples of different faiths to coexist peacefully and with mutual respect for one another stands in stark contrast to the religious conflict that persists elsewhere around the globe." The same, of course, can be said of India, with its religious diversity so clearly and proudly evident in its diverse political leadership.

The importance of religious freedom practiced throughout the United States and India has uplifted the lives of all our citizens. It is part of history in places like Varanasi, the holiest place for Hindus and the place where Buddha gave his first sermon about the basic principles of Buddhism. It is part of our educational systems. I graduated from the University of Notre Dame, a Catholic university

whose primary goal is to build the connection between faith and education. One of the primary objectives of Banaras Hindu University, one of India's finest universities, is to promote the building up of character in youth by including religion and ethics as an integral part of education. Faith can be a key part of our culture, included in music, the arts, and literature.

With religious freedom comes a respect and tolerance for other religions, which is a value held in high esteem in both India and the United States. Varanasi is not only a pilgrimage site for Hindus, but also for Buddhists and Jains. India is the birthplace of Swami Vivekananda, whose common theme of religious tolerance in his well-received speech at the Parliament of Religions in 1893 in Chicago still rings true today. America is now home to every conceivable religion. Sikhs have been present in America for the past 130 years, and Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in our country today.

Religious freedom allows all religion to become part of the fabric of everyday life in democracies. The values of different religions such as compassion and helping others influence our society, improve our democratic system, and touch the lives of all our citizens. At the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar, volunteers work to provide food to thousands of people of many different religions, giving them hope for a better day. At Mother Teresa's orphanages, sisters and volunteers give love and affection to children of all faiths, providing them with a better future. The Aga Khan Foundation teaches skills to street children, making them better prepared to be productive members of society as they get older.

All of these good deeds and the millions more that occur every day in India are a result of religious freedom, as the practice of religion includes performing acts of kindness and charity. Religion thrives because of democracy, which allows individuals and religion the freedom and space to do such charitable acts that form the foundation of religious beliefs. In turn, democracy thrives because of religious freedom, as the universal beliefs of religion such as helping your neighbor, providing for the less fortunate, volunteering, and making charitable contributions are blended together to influence and mold our society for the better.

Last year, I had the privilege and honor to attend the birthday celebration for Gandhiji at Rajghat in New Delhi. Throughout the ceremony, each religion was given a chance to express their faith, through a prayer or a song. It was a moving and fitting tribute to Gandhiji, who believed all religions to be equal with core values of truth, compassion, and non-violence. It was an expression of democracy, with all religions treated the same.

When asked if he was a Hindu, Gandhiji responded, “Yes, I am. I am a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Jew.” As I have felt elsewhere in India, I am certain in Varanasi I will see the benefits of the marriage between religious freedom and democracy and feel the same way as Gandhiji.

In my travels through India, I have met with Shia clerics in Lucknow; visited the Lingaraja temple in Bhubaneswar and the Kapaleeswara Temple in Mylapore in Chennai; paid my respects at the Golden Temple in Amritsar; and attended mass with my family in New Delhi. The incredible diversity of religion and the importance of faith demonstrated on a daily basis that I have witnessed in India are similar to what I see when traveling through the United States. The importance of faith is but one of many examples of the commonalities between our two countries that makes our partnership so strong and enduring. As President Obama said, “the relationship between the United States and India is fundamentally unique because we share common interests, but we also share common values, as the world’s two largest democracies, and as countries that are rich in diversity, with deep and close connections among our people.”