

India and Saudi Arabia Towards a Culture of Dialogue

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The Holy Quran 49.13 has a very insightful and all-inclusive message, ‘Allah has created the human race, though from a single source, as different nations and tribes, so that they may know each other’. This is a crystal clear articulation of the mystery of the creative mind and the inviolably plural character of the created reality. This is a universal mandate for entering into ‘dialogue’ with the diverse individuals, communities and nations that are fortunate to have their being on earth. The diverse national cultures, with all their strengths and weaknesses, need to remain open to a ‘culture of dialogue’, which facilitates learning lessons from one another and getting enriched through interactive social processes.

By way of discussing the dynamics of dialogue between India and Saudi Arabia, the question that arises is ‘what are the prospects of interaction for India and Saudi Arabia?’ What is common between India and Saudi Arabia? What is that makes these two mighty countries different from each other? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these two nations? What are the lessons that they can teach each other, or better, learn from each other, in view of making this world, at least slightly better?

Rule of Law

Firstly, Saudi Arabia is known for its ‘rule of law’. There could be perhaps sharp dispute about the elements of law imposed there. But, the administration and enforcement of law are worth being considered. Law is blind there. It doesn’t recognize any face. It applies on every one, big or small, in an equal fashion. The only difference law makes is between the law-abiding and the law-breaking individuals. Law comes heavily upon its breakers. This is a remarkable milestone in the area of maintaining social order as well as meting out justice to one and all.

India is a country that has a system of law, which has loopholes all over. ‘Might is right’ is the most commanding law, though it is unwritten. With some exceptions, one who is in a position of power or has access to power is mostly considered right and goes scot-free. The basic character of elasticity in India has gone to the point of being highly pathological and it is in fact a liability to the country, with regard to its progress as well as to its day-to-day functioning. ‘Rule of law’ is a great strength of Saudi Arabia, which India has a lot to learn from.

Accommodating Diversity

Secondly, India is a large land of immense diversities, in terms of climate, ethnicity, caste, class, creed, food, dress, language, ideology, tradition and culture. Though there are sporadic small and big communal tensions, now here now there, this country is capable of sticking together, mysteriously so, even amidst conflicting interests and drives. Without a doubt, there is a ‘higher fibre’ that guides the destinies of this nation. No wonder, from this angle, India is privileged to be the only land of its right, in the entire world.

Saudi Arabia seems to be the most notorious among those countries that are incapable of accommodating diversity. It understands only one thing – one perception, one creed, one language, one dress code, one food habit and one pattern of behavior. It recognizes only one face cut. Its fundamental creed is ‘uniformity’, to the extent of murdering all forms of plurality ingrained in life as its genius,

even at the cost of the wise inscription of the Holy Quran quoted above. Freedom in thinking, expression and behavior is not really appreciated. The narrowest window of life that is in vogue over there is reflected in the aggressive drives as well as monotony of life prevailing in the air. Saudi Arabia has a lot to learn from India, starting from the basics of the beauty of creation and of the richness of pluralistic living.

Position of Women

Thirdly, India is a country where thousands of women of high calibre had and have their being and their contribution has been significant at various levels. Though much requires being done in ensuring equal dignity and role for women in social processes, with some margins, all communities allow considerably a decent breathing space for the female gender. Even in circles where primitive traditions strongly prevail and women are forced to face undue restrictions in one's own community, there is hardly any instance anywhere of forcing the private practices of one community on the other. Besides, observably so, awareness of the discriminatory policies and practices in the name of gender and the awakening of both women and men to better social prospects are steadily on the increase. It is encouraging to note that the foreseeable future in this regard looks fairly auspicious.

In Saudi Arabia, only the male gender exists in public space. Female gender is a private affair. Women seem to have only a domestic role to perform in life. They have hardly any personal or civil rights, worth being mentioned. They can survive only under the shade and the dictates of men. They have to be under the cover of 'burqah' when they cross the limits of their private space. Even women who belong to other communities are forcibly obliged to wear 'burqah', shockingly and unreasonably so. They cannot drive a vehicle, they have no voting right and their contribution of social progress is considered nothing important. No doubt, Saudi Arabia has much to learn from India for developing a logical and balanced gender policy and for allotting a dignified space to all women, Muslim and other, in view of a brighter future of the country in particular and the world at large.

Democratic Processes

Fourthly, India is the largest democracy in the world. Democracy would mean that every individual has a voice, a vote, a right and a freedom. The Constitution guarantees equal treatment to all communities and a preferential concern for the minority communities of language, faith, and the like. As the country has scope for a variety of political ideologies, religious confessions, social traditions and cultural streams, it has also provision for safeguarding the fundamental rights of individuals and communities. Though India has a long way to go still before it becomes truly democratic, the spirit of democracy allows its citizens lots of free and fresh air to have their being.

Saudi Arabia is perhaps the strictest Islamic theocracy in the world. Religion and the state are one and the same, to the point of being assimilated into a single entity. Autocracy appears to be the watchword of the country. The roles of the King and the religious head are merged into one. Media is totally monopolized by the government. No language other than Arabic is allowed. No other religious practice is tolerated. Except Mosques, no other place of worship is accommodated. For example, the request to King Abdullah by Pope Benedict in 2007 for a church for the millions of Christians in Saudi Arabia is pending till date. Saudi Arabia has to learn from India fundamental lessons for imbibing a spirit of democracy and for evolving and fixing democratic processes in domains ranging from national to domestic arenas, especially in the increasingly globalized world of the 21st century.

A call within a call

In sum, Shree Narayan Guru, a creative thinker, a sublime poet and an enlightened saint, all in one, has a powerful message to deliver for both India and Saudi Arabia. Highlighting the pluralistic context of religions, he exclaims, 'whatever be the religion, it suffices if it helps becoming a good human being'. He means to say that affiliation to a creed, a caste, a class, a language, an ideology, a community, a nation, and the like, is of secondary importance. 'Becoming a good human being' is the most meritorious thing in the life of the humans. When that does not happen, not only faith fails, all affiliations in life stand miserably defeated. Such a predicament of 'vacuum' takes one to the suicidal point and the tragic end of life, where nothing makes sense!

Conclusion

Could India and Saudi Arabia invent and initiate further honest processes of a 'culture of dialogue', as individuals, communities, civilizations and nations? Could they interact in such a fashion that would enable them to learn from each other lessons for life, get enriched by each other, make friendship with each other and collaborate with each other? If so, 'another' world is in store for us, as the citizens of the world society. A single 'idea' can make that better world possible! One single step can initiate a new journey! Only a life that is motivated by a more 'humane', spiritual as well, style of having one's birth on earth is worth the while. An 'inter-related and harmonious' fashion of human existence is awaiting the humans of the 21st century!

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