

INTERFAITH PARTNERSHIP FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

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Introduction

Human lives in modern times have become extremely complex. On the one hand, the pace of the growth of human civilization is incredibly amazing, while on the other hand, the large gamut of diversities in social life causes tensions, conflicts and violence. Living one's life purposefully as well as becoming humane hasn't become part of the human culture, for a major portion of the people. The educational system seems to have failed, to a very great extent, in making refined human beings. Most of the religious theories and practices contribute to superstitions, fundamentalism and fanaticism. The sociological implications of human life remain mostly uncared. Partnering with one another, as individuals and communities, requires being promoted. Making a more harmonious society is a shared mission among persons and communities of faith and the humans have to make a re-start, in view of facilitating such a dream towards a reality. These are some of the concerns this paper aspires to consider.

1. THE WORLD SCENARIO OF GLOBALIZATION

1.1. The Merits of Globalization

The new wave of globalization¹ is a many-sided phenomenon with regard to its causes, effects and dimensions. It has brought incredible achievements to the human civilization and has to be considered a major blessing. The world human society has become a global village and a small family. Information and technological know-how has developed and extended significantly. Geographical distances have reduced. Market policies have been liberalized. Opportunities for social interaction and progress increased profusely. Networking with the other has become the catchphrase of the day. Any individual or community that dares to exist like islands or travel like parallel lines stands doomed to perish. Mutual connectedness, collaboration and integration are the basic ingredients of a meaningful human life as well as the advancement of human culture today.

1.2. The Challenges of Globalization

On the other hand, globalization poses radical challenges² to human existence. Coming closer to the other becomes motivated by individualistic considerations. Selfishness turns negative and an attitude of cut-throat competition and rivalry prevail. Encounters, conflicts, tensions and turmoil, in major or minor forms, is the upshot. Multi-nationals, majority communities, industrial pockets and political outfits start ruthlessly rule over the society. Smaller concerns, minority communities and weaker sections feel threatened and run the risk of being annihilated or pushed aside to the margins of the society. The arrogance of the former causes in the latter a major crisis of identity and the consequent assertion of identity. Such polarized standpoints cause confusion and unrest in the society. The chain of challenges posed by the mighty phenomenon of globalization is to be addressed by honest, sustained and effective efforts for healthy interaction and mutually beneficial measures. Only then, the alarming side effects of globalization can be countered.

1.3. Religion in the Globalized World

Religion in the world over has been a civilizing force and a means of shaping the conscience of the humans. Notwithstanding the matchless contribution of the religious traditions to the society, they have, in more or less degrees, divided the human society very badly. They have instigated wars and

tensions, perpetrated crimes against humanity, committed massacres and murders, fostered violence and hatred, and the like, very much shockingly so. Exaggerated theories, exclusive interpretations, hypocritical practices and scandalous ways in religions have supported blind believers and fanatics, even terrorists. No wonder, not only traditional religions but religion itself proved to be irrelevant to a large number of people. Scientific advancements as well as the spread of knowledge deal very rudely with certain of the mystified and sectarian tendencies, for obvious reasons. Consequently, the percentage of people who profess to be irreligious or non-religious, atheists or humanists and religion-less or regardless of religion is appallingly on steady increase, especially in cosmopolitan cities, including India. The radical question that confronts us today is not whether this religion or that religion, but saving the basic worth of religion itself. It is high time for retrospection as well as introspection!

1.4. The Distinctive Character of Asia and India

The continent of Asia and the country of India stand distinct in the entire world for their respective merits. What is said about Asia is even much truer about India. A wide range of plurality is their basic character. Aesthetic and spiritual perspective of life is their singular worldview. Their approach to life is highly experiential. Diversity of ethnic traits, geographical conditions, climatic changes, ideologies, religious persuasions, artistic traditions, spiritual approaches, social customs, languages and dialects, political systems, economic situations, races, classes, castes, food habits, dress patterns, cultures and value systems are the major areas in which Asia in general and India in particular stand out in the global context.

The Asian continent has the highest number of languages in it³. India is the only country in the world that has seventeen languages on its currency and has 24 nationally recognized languages⁴, not to mention the thousands of dialects. Asia has been the cradle of all the major religious traditions of the world and India has been hosting the highest number of major and minor religious traditions. Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh religious traditions emerged from India itself. Jewish, Zoroastrian, Christian, Muslim and Baha'i faith traditions came from outside India and developed new perspectives. Many tribal and primitive forms of faith prevailed in India from time immemorial, as well. India has evolved new faith traditions, like Kabeer Panth, Ram Krishna Mission, Sai Baba Sect, Osho community, Nirankari sect, ISCON sect, Radha Swami, Brahma Samaj, Theosophical Society, Swami Narayan Sect⁵, etc. Satya Sai Baba, Ravi Shankar, Amritandamai and others have initiated new streams of religious thought, too. Unity in diversity and global family spirit are the foundational concepts of the country. The national moral fibre that can sustain all these diverse forms comes from the unique Constitution of the country and its secular perspective. Such multi-faceted differences compose the continent of Asia and the country India, like a large garden of diverse flowers together giving forth an unparalleled and rich fragrance.

1.5. Challenges to the Asian-Indian Cultural Fabric

All the same, the social graph of the continent and the country is not unstained by wars, conflicts and violence in the name of caste, creed, tongue, etc. This predicament poses a major challenge to the cultural fabric of both Asia and India. Lots of people tend to lose their footing and start feeling insecure due to the diversities that surround them. Two types of reactions follow. Some withdraw to their own shells as fundamentalists and communalists, and others become fanatics and indulge in violence or terrorism. Either cases are pathological and have to be treated as well as regretted. The latter create untold havoc in the society through communal atrocities, riots and other tensions and the consequent colossal devastation of lives and properties. This chaotic phenomenon unsettles Asia and India in diverse ways. The brutal atrocities perpetrated against the Christian community in Orissa in 2007 and 2008 and in other parts of the country in the last decade⁶ as well as the massive massacre against the Muslim community in 2002 and against the Sikh community in 1986 are striking examples

of a pathological mindset in the Indian sub-continent. Obviously, the carnage and vandalizing terrorism have been orchestrated by certain misguided fundamentalist forces, which are politically motivated religious, social ideological outfits. The incalculable suffering, damage and shame coupled with the threat to the celebrated cultural ethos of Asia and India seem to become steadily intricate.

2. PERSPECTIVES OF INTERFAITH PARTNERSHIP

2.1. Diversity – Being Many and Different

Diversity⁷ is the greatest characteristic the Creator has bestowed upon the creation. Diversity has two intrinsic characteristics – being many and being different. Being many is numerical strength and is the direct outcome of the creative power of multiplying. Being different from the other is a singular merit and is basic to all forms of existence. Only factory-produced goods can be uniform and they have no life in them. Being similar also admits difference in it. Both these characteristics apply to human beings in a special way and to other living beings and plants in a general way. The various living items in the nature are different from one another in shape, size, beauty, taste, fragrance, function, and the like. A plant is different from another plant. An animal is different from a human being. One species of animal is different from another species. Male is different from female. Human individuals and groups are different from one another in their ethnic traits, linguistic expressions, professional inclinations, cultural characteristics, ideological affiliations, social customs and mores, religious perspectives, life values, etc. Obviously, both these characteristics together make diversity sensible.

2.2. Transition from Faith to Interfaith

The word ‘faith’⁸ denotes ‘belief, trust, confidence, pledge, reliance, belief, etc’. Observably, the etymological implications of the word apply equally to divine and human contexts as well as to all religious traditions and social ideologies. Since the connotations of the word have essential reference to the other, who has slightly a different faith, faith would necessarily mean ‘interfaith’⁹. That would amount to state that one cannot have faith in God without having faith in other individuals, who has different affiliations of faith. Besides, no faith can exist without being related to other faiths. In fact, faith has two components in it. One aspect signifies common characteristics and the other aspect, distinctive elements. In either case, faith is an inter-related reality. It cannot exist in isolation. The divine is common to all, i.e., one with many dimensions, so also is faith is one with many aspects. As a matter of fact, faith occurs when balance between one and many are maintained. Therefore, the understanding of faith has to undergo a transition from an independent entity to a relational entity of interfaith.

2.3. The Model of 'One Body, Many Parts'

‘One body, many parts’, is a commonplace example for partnership. One of the leading authors of the Bible ‘Paul’ analyzes it and highlights the reality of essential relatedness among human beings as well as the mystery of life¹⁰. The deeper implications of the reality from diverse angles speak volumes of the details of the harmony perspective of life as well as partnership. The parts of the body are different in their identity and are many in number. They perform different roles, but exist as one body. The different parts have equal duties and equal rights. All of them have their own singular importance and dignity, which is beyond the scope of comparison. One part cannot be replaced or suppressed by another. Joy or pain and achievement or failure of one part is shared and owned by all the parts. It is an ‘existence in togetherness’¹¹. It is beauty in diversity and diversity in unity, at the same time. There cannot be a more powerful model for harmony among individuals and communities. This natural example of partnership and harmony invites the religious communities to endeavour for mutual appreciation, interaction and support that would ensure universal human solidarity and fellowship across all human-made limits.

2.4. Harmony Perspective of Life

The word ‘Harmony’¹² means integration, coordination, balance, etc. The Hindi equivalent ‘Samanvay’¹³ has two components – ‘anvay’ means ‘agreement’ and ‘sam’ means ‘equally’ and ‘totally’. Both words come from the art sector, mainly music. ‘Geetam vaadyam nrityam trayam sangeetamuchyate’¹⁴. Music requires that there has to be harmony among singing, playing and dancing, and among all their components. There has to be harmony among ‘swara, taala and laya’, too. Similarly, there has to be integration among the diverse ingredients of human life. The ‘panchsheel of the harmony perspective of life’ is ‘Sadbhaav (good will), Sambhaav (equality), Sammaan (respect), Sehyog (co-operation) and Samanvay (harmony)’. The presence of these components in inter-personal and inter-community relations determines the quality of human life as well as its religious tuning. ‘Harmony perspective of life’ would mean seeing the entire life at a glance. Saint Poet Daadoodayal says ‘Dadoo pooran Brahm bichaariye, tav sakal aatmaa ek; Kaayaa kaa gun deshiye, tav naanaa baran anek’¹⁵. One has to ponder on the divine in all its dimensions and focus on the inner aspect of life (spirit) in order to feel united with one another. A sense of totality and perfection is the spirit of harmony mindset and harmony is the end result of life.

2.5. Religion the Motivating Force in Life

Bernard Shaw, a world genius thinker, seems to have observed, ‘If you really want to do anything in life, you should have a religion’¹⁶. For obvious reasons, he does not advocate subscribing to a complex system of beliefs or doctrines and performing a set of rituals. He intends to emphasize the fact that ‘religion is the motivating factor in life’¹⁷; ‘religion is the source of strength for living one’s life’ and ‘religion is that reality which gives meaning to life’. The way one thinks, speaks and behaves is one’s religion. Religion is the sum and substance of one’s experiences, attitudes and approaches. It is the foundational inspiration for one’s life-commitments. One’s vision and mission of life are grounded in religion or faith. Faith is the essence of one’s life. It is the powerhouse or lighthouse of one’s life, as well. Such a perspective of ‘religion’ articulates its deeper implications. It goes beyond the limits of all theistic-atheistic and denominational affiliations. It includes all individuals and communities of the human society. In this sense, religion or faith is fundamental to human existence and is a firm pedestal for interfaith partnership.

2.6. Broader Horizons of One’s Identity

Having an identity¹⁸ is the defining character of any living entity. Being conscious of one’s identity is the privilege of human beings, as well. Amidst the vast range of diversities around us, especially in the increasingly globalized world of today, identity-related confusions and problems are but natural. Identity-complex, identity-clash, identity-crisis¹⁹, etc. are aberrations of identity-consciousness. They are psycho-pathological instances. Passionate assertions of identity and politics over identity often end up in explosive tensions and violence that are detrimental to social life. One’s poor self image, self-marginalization, tendency to make one identity absolute as well as unfair administrative policies could be causes of the sad predicament. Manifestly, acquiring clarity about the dimensions and implications of identity and broadening the horizons of one’s identity are ways that can find one moving out of the tragedy. Further, identity has both individual and social aspects. The social aspect has to proceed still further to multiple identities and an identity that is even beyond identity itself.

Being aware of one’s interests, aspirations, accomplishments, gender, language, religion, ideology, social affiliation, cultural heritage, nationality, etc. is an instinctive process of human life. That would amount to state that every human being, first and foremost, has an ‘individual identity’²⁰. But as human beings, he or she has a common identity, too. This is his or her social identity. This social identity is a shared identity with others, on account of the social character. Belonging to the same family, same community, same neighbourhood, same profession, same ideology, same religion, same

state, same country, same continent, same human society and the same creation are various facets of this 'shared identity'²¹. The growth of a human being is geared to perfection through such a journey of consciousness from his or her individual identity to a shared identity. This common identity proceeds further to multiple identities in life at the same time. Besides, this can very well lead one to an 'identity beyond all identities'²². The prayer of Francis of Assisi is acclaimed by people across the boundaries, 'Make me a channel of Your peace...' ²³, because of its singular character of rising above all lower forms of identities. While rooted in the genius of Christian values, it crosses over all religion-based boundaries. It combines in it the essence of all systems of values and becomes acceptable to one and all. It highlights human and spiritual values, in an unparalleled manner. The identity beyond all identities is the culmination of all identities of human life. That is the mark of spiritual heights and religions have to accelerate such aspirations in life.

3. BUILDING A MORE HARMONIOUS SOCIETY

3.1. Engaging in the Process of Dialogue

Dialogue²⁴ is the process through which harmony is attained. It is an exercise that is oriented to building bridges between human beings. Dialogue is exchange of views, interaction, friendly relations and collaboration between individuals and communities. It involves listening as well as speaking. It takes place on equal footing and is open-ended. It is a non-dominating style of life. There is no superior or inferior in dialogue. Dialogue would mean 'being present to the other'²⁵. The dynamics of mutual presence is 'getting related to each other'²⁶. Dialogue is 'being as if a mirror to each other'²⁷. Both parties get an occasion to check one's human and spiritual fitness, with the help of the other. It is an opportunity to purify and enrich each other in all possible ways. Dialogue implies 'walking together in life'²⁸. It would mean 'making a joint pilgrimage in life towards the same divine'²⁹. It leads to 'working together in life'³⁰. Through dialogue individuals and communities of different affiliations engage themselves for making a better society of mutual understanding and fellowship. Dialogue is a democratic and shared way of life. It is a relational style of living one's life. The dialogical process initiates individuals and communities towards a network of harmonious living.

3.2. Harmonizing the Specific and Common Elements in Religions

As human being has individual and social dimensions, so every religious system has both individual and social dimensions. They are like two sides of the same coin and are complementary to each other. The individual aspect of religion is clear from the fact that the religious streams have originated from different sources -- from different geographical areas, different times of history, different social backgrounds and different cultural settings. The great men or women who were mediators of divine promptings were of dissimilar character. The quality of spiritual accomplishment and the personal experiences of the seers and sages were beyond the scope of being compared with that of others. The contexts in which they had their being were different, too. The human and spiritual values they upheld were unlike with that of others. The vision and mission of their lives characterized the genius of the respective religious tradition. Accordingly, each religious tradition developed its own specific traits. The individual moral fibre of the religious traditions is unique. They need to be respected, accepted and mutually benefited from. The specificity of each religious tradition, as reflected in its world view, perception, interpretations, regulations and practices, are sacrosanct and is not to be violated. All traditions have a role to play in the design of the Creator.

All the same, the religious, social and cultural traditions have, at a wide spectrum, a common source and a common origin. That is their social character. They have a common existence or a shared platform to exist. They have a common destiny and destination to reach, as well. There have a large range of experiences that are similar to each other. They have a common ground to meet and a common search to make. They have to travel the path of life together and make a joint pilgrimage to

the same Creator and source of life. Religious traditions should be in creative interaction and fellowship with other religious affiliations. There are various universal values that are present in all religious traditions that are capable of making the human being more humane and spiritual. The similarity in the symbols, theories and practices are to be further searched for. There are elements of irreligion in all religious systems and efforts need to be made for eliminating them, too. The commonalities of the religious traditions facilitate the making of a well-knit country and a prosperous human society. No doubt, the specific and common elements in the religious traditions are to be harmonized, in view of building a strong partnership among them.

3.3. Promoting Universal Values of Religions

Zoroastrian religion presents a three-fold ethic 'Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshta'³¹, i.e., 'good thoughts, good words and good deeds', as its seminal mantra. This is the simplest form of religion and could be accepted as the sum and substance of all religions. The values of 'love, service, forgiveness, freedom and equality'³² that emerge from the Christian tradition as well as the values of 'brotherhood and peace'³³ advocated by Islam articulate the above mantra. The Shinto value of 'harmony of opposites'³⁴ and the Baha'i value of 'unity of faiths'³⁵ advance this ethic further. The values of 'nonviolence'³⁶ of Jainism and the 'middle path'³⁷ of Buddhism amply enrich the above ethical code. The Jewish value of 'making the world better by making people better'³⁸ and the Hindu value of 'Nishkaamkarma'³⁹ and the Upanishad vision 'Sarve bhavantu sukhinah'⁴⁰ add to the treasure of universal values immensely. These universal values are one and the same as human and spiritual values and they, in a collective form, are a religion of universal values in its essential character. Integration of the universal values is characteristic to interfaith partnership.

3.4. Making Religious Communities Socially Responsible

Religion has a social dimension, in addition to the vertical. While the vertical deals with God or the Creator, the horizontal deals with human beings and the rest of the creation. The Creator of life has absolutely no need of any adoration or praise from the created beings. Thanking the Creator for granting life is not very much important either. Living one's life within a discipline and in harmony with the human and other beings and with the nature is more meritorious. That would mean to state that the vertical duties of religion have to be harmonized with the horizontal implications. Failing in one's duties towards one's fellow human and other beings is to defeat the effect of performing one's vertical obligations. The horizontal dimension of life underlines the fraternal implications of life as human beings. The fraternal idea of life is founded on the idea of the divine as 'father' or 'mother', i.e., 'parent' or 'Creator' or 'Life-Giver'. It directly follows that every human being is a 'son' or 'daughter' of God and a 'sister' or 'brother' to me. This is an understanding that surpasses the biological relation by blood and is charged with a spiritual sense. This horizontal relation is complementary to the vertical one. Both together make the idea of life complete. Such a combined idea blends both theory and practice. The fraternal implications of life are grounded in the filial experience of the divine, which characterizes the sublime form of spirituality. The fraternal fashion of considering every one one's sister or brother beyond all borders facilitates a behaviour towards one and all that corresponds to the dignity of human beings. It can go to the point of loving even the enemy and considering him or her a friend. Such a realization and lofty behaviour justifies the ultimate usefulness and fruit of religion. The horizontal dimension of religion or faith is the real test of being human and spiritual in the right sense of the words. A preferential concern for and loving service of the weaker sections of the society is the extra-ordinary quality of being a spiritually accomplished human being. The horizontal aspect of religion establishes the believer in a communitarian style of human life. Such a 'unity in diversity' is the shortcut to social welfare at large, too. In sum, being socially responsible is the shared focus of all religions.

3.5. Nurturing Leadership for Social Transformation

Change is the inner dynamics of life. Where there is no change there is no life. To live would mean to keep changing. Change takes place gradually and degree by degree. It is a long process. To go beyond the present form is to initiate change. Change is transformation. By and large, change is for the better. When a better form appears there is transformation. Transformation of the society is societal transformation. Transformed individuals contribute to transforming the imperfect social structures. Change does not start with others. Change launches with oneself. The proof of the change in oneself is attempting to elicit change in others and in the society. Commitment to the betterment of the society is leadership. A leader is someone who does the right thing even when everyone fails to do it. To have right personal initiatives is the basic characteristic of a leader. Those who wait for someone else to set an example before they act are followers. Leaders create role models for making the type of society they want. A leader has to break new grounds, travel new paths and be an evidence for the goal the path leads to. One's religion or faith has to facilitate one to have the mindset and calibre of a leader. Religious leadership is an innate quality. Real leaders are born. Genuine leadership is spiritual in its nature. One's religious, moral and spiritual heights have to enable one to pursue a leadership role for social transformation. Social transformation would mean tuning the mindset of persons to take care of the other, especially the needy. Leadership that is supported by one's religion includes responding to the basic needs, balancing rights and duties, ensuring socio-cultural interaction, peaceful co-existence and harmonious living. Religious persons and communities have to spontaneously undertake such transforming leadership for the wellbeing of the society. They have to play responsible sociological roles together for the welfare of the entire society. They have to contribute to the making of a more meaningful tomorrow.

3.6. Promoting Harmony in Social Life

There is an inner harmony that the Creator has bestowed in the whole creation. The human world has in it the spirit of that inalienable harmony of life. Negative energies and forces imbedded in the limitations of the creation and the human beings disrupt the equilibrium of that harmony. Because disharmony is being created by the mutual friction of the human and natural units, the process of maintaining harmony has to actively go on. Promoting harmony in the diverse aspects of social life has to be the regular and sustained effort of human organizations, especially religious traditions. 'Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath'⁴¹, says Jesus. Religious traditions are for the human being and not vice versa. They have to be at the service of the human society. 'Religion has to be what God intended it to be, a source of goodness, harmony and peace'⁴², observes Pope John Paul II. Religion by its very nature has to foster harmony and peace. Promoting harmony in the diverse dimensions of social life is the sublime work of the faith traditions at large. All the human organizations, both collectively and individually, have to be involved in promoting harmony in social life.

3.7. Making a Better Society

'Leave this world a little better than you found it'⁴³ – this is the last message what Lord Robert Baden Powell left in his life. This is the dictum that motivates one to strive for a better society. 'Making the society a better place to live in' is the ulterior purpose of life. Leaders and well-meaning people from all faith-based communities and the civil society need to be networked with each other in order to advance this fundamental objective towards realization. The diverse scriptures, cultures, traditions and sciences provide the humans with a firm spiritual foundation for facilitating harmony in social life. A spiritual realization that 'the whole creation is the gift of the same creator' and that 'all religious and social traditions are the common cultural heritage of the human society' has to be pioneered. Such a shared realization and collective commitment will strengthen interfaith partnership as well as a more qualitative society.

Conclusion

Life is an ever-evolving process of becoming human. The role of education is to culture human beings to this effect. Religious traditions are intended to facilitate human beings to travel the journey of being spiritual. Fostering a humane spirit and thus making a better society summarizes the task of life. The divine creative power is made alive again in such an approach to life. 'To be spiritual' is to be interactive with all religious streams and social affiliations. 'To be human' is to imbibe the universal spiritual values from all streams of faiths and ideologies. 'A spirit of togetherness'⁴⁴ with all religious traditions and social ideologies is the core of the human civilization. Marching 'towards a more harmonious society' is the shared mission of all individuals and communities on this planet. Such a composite culture is the heaven the humans are aspiring for attaining in the 21st century. Having the society made 'better' is the proof that there has been a faith at the core of the human civilization and that the humans have lived it, to the full.

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