

RELIGION – A PATH TO SOCIAL HARMONY

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1. INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

1.1. Is religion a path to social harmony?

Is religion a path to social harmony? The answer is believed to be in the affirmative, but not necessarily so. It can be negative, as well. It can be 'yes' or 'no', in terms of the result it produces. It can be partially 'yes' and partially 'no', too. The type and degree of the answer can also be subject to the persons, conditions, contexts, times as well as the basic objectives of life. Most of all, the answer depends on the way one understands and lives religion. The above discussion invites us to revise our understanding of religion, live it and to produce good results in public life, by which the answer can be and should be 'yes', nothing more and nothing less. This answer, definitely, is non-conventional. But, by being traditional, one cannot afford to be unrealistic, lest one be declared deprived of 'the essential sense of religion'.

1.2. Is India a religious country?

Is India a religious country? I suppose, the answer is a unanimous as well as customary 'yes', which may render even the very question absurd. One who dares to give the answer in the negative or even expresses doubt about the assenting answer may painfully arrive at the point of risking one's life! It is a world-acclaimed fact! Most people in India proclaim it almost as an absolute truth. A great number of people in other countries recognize it, too. But, as a matter of fact, I may have to seek an anticipatory bail before I take the liberty of stating that the answer has two sides, like a coin. From one side, the answer is 'yes', where as from the other side, the answer is 'no'. At any rate, could India be considered 'not a religious country', even to the slightest measure? I believe, our discussion below will shed enough light on the nuances and dimensions of this 'bold question' and lay down a substantial 'food for thought' for the conformists, in favour of a more microscopic perception of the deep-seated and celebrated identity of our country.

2. INDIA AND RELIGION

2.1. India as a religious country

India is a unique country that brims forth with 'religious aura'. Justice Markanday Katju, Chairman, Press Council of India, in his article 'What is India?' observes, 'the original inhabitants of India, the pre-Dravidian people, called the Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes'¹ had their primordial belief systems, like animism, totemic perception and nature worship. India has the singular privilege of having the most ancient religious Scripture of the world in the form of Vedas. In the specific sense of 'Hindu', India has the earliest religio-cultural civilization of the world, perhaps rightly called the 'Hindu way of life'. India has also mothered three other religious streams, the Jain between the sixth and ninth century BC, the Buddhist between the sixth and fourth century BC and the Sikh in the fifteenth century AD.

Besides, India has cradled the Jewish tradition from the fifth century BC, the Christian tradition from the first century, the Muslim tradition from the seventh century, the Zoroastrian tradition from the eleventh century and the Baha'i tradition from the nineteenth century. India has also welcomed the Confucian, Shinto and Tao ideologies as they came in. India also has been accepting the new religious movements that keep mushrooming from all traditions, but profusely from the Hindu traditions. Thus, the religious presence in India is highly vibrant in a large colloquium of living diversities. In fact, India

is overwhelming with religious air and awe, beyond the scope of being compared with any country in the world. The large system of religious presence in India is certainly too obvious to be debated.

2.2. India has a high propensity for religious engagement

Religious Scriptures of all traditions in the world are profusely read, ardently researched and vigorously propagated in India. Most of the universities run several departments of religious studies and enormous research is being conducted on themes of religion, themes related to religion and on themes of comparative nature. Places of worship of all religious traditions are competitively on the increase, in the form of temples, mazjids, churches, gurudwaras, etc. Believers of all religions engage incalculable amount of time for religious rituals and observances, like pooja, ibaadat, arj, prayer, saadhna, fast and sacrifices, both at worship places and at home. Extra-ordinary donations of gold and silver as well as cash, along with ordinary contributions from all classes of people in cash and kind loudly proclaim the unparalleled flow of religious sentiment in the commercial form, so much so that some of the religious establishments of India are counted among the richest in the world.

Moreover, in spite of the secular character of the country, there are pockets of religious idols and devotion in almost all public places, like government offices, universities, shops, buses, road sides. Temples, mazars, etc. are found not only on road sides but even in the middle of the road in some areas. Almost all public functions start, and even end, with religious invocations. There are also breaks from work, study and even food in view of fulfilling the demands of religious stipulations. The ceremonial celebrations of festivals also are permeated with overwhelming fervour for religion. Of late, we find an encouraging phenomenon of people visiting places of worship of other religions at their festivals, that too, in huge numbers. Markets are thriving by supplying statues, pictures, food and other materials connected to the festival and thus assisted the religious sentiment flourish. All the above instances prove undeniably that there is an exceptionally high density of religious engagement in the entire life in India. Obviously, the religious character of the country is non-negotiable and one should have no hesitation in accepting the fact that 'India is a religious country', par excellence!

3. RELIGION – THE GLORIOUS AND THE DISMAL

3.1. Is religion good or bad?

There is a story of a devil. Once, Devil went out for a walk with his friend. On the way, they saw a man at a distance bending down and picking up something from the ground. Friend asked Devil, 'what did that man pick up from the ground?' Devil answered, 'a piece of truth'. Friend asked Devil, 'doesn't it disturb you?' 'Not at all', replied Devil. Friend asked Devil, 'why?' Devil answered, 'I will allow him to make a 'religion' out of it, and he will get lost with it'. Friend of the Devil, who was a strong theist, could not believe his ears!

Though it is popularly understood that religion is good, it need not be so for everyone, every time and in every context, as the story above suggests. Religion can be bad, as well. It depends how it is used. As it is a limited world and there is nothing in it that is good and good only. In principle, religion is a positive force. But, it is established, developed and used by limited human beings. It exists in a world of limitations and is intertwined with various components of social life, too. The negative drives of the world can overpower the positive force of religion and it has done so, often in inestimable magnitudes. The right understanding, the right use and the right proportion determine the positive role of religion in human life, especially when we consider it in terms of harmony in social life.

3.2. The glorious face of religion in world history

Religion has been the most civilizing force in world human history. If religion was not there in the world, perhaps much of the world would have remained an uncivilized lot yet. It has motivated the

invention of script, language and printing press. It has developed education, philosophy, art, literature, music, dance, culture and science. It has also fostered gatherings, interaction, relationships and other social processes and human niceties. It has also sustained community relations and a sense of identity and belonging. It has played the equilibrium of social life by facilitating deep relations with the divine power, too. Religion has advanced human and ethical values for supporting meaningful and humane life on earth, as well. In addition, religion has contributed immensely to the process of development, human culturing, enlightenment, spiritual uplift and elevation. This heartening face of religion is worth pursuing further as well as is decidedly creditable and encouraging.

3.3. The dismal picture of religion in world history

The most deadly massacres, genocides, wars, frictions and tensions have been directly motivated and caused or supported by religion. If neither, religion defectively failed to prevent genocides and crimes against humanity, as if it did not exist at all. Religion has perpetrated the worst types of slavery, injustice, hatred, divisions, etc, even to the silliest extent, in the name of race, caste, class, ideology, tradition, profession, culture, customs and mores. It collaborated with arbitrary and spiteful dictators or allowed itself to be a doll to be played with at the whims and fancies of politicians and crooks.

In India, discrimination based on caste culminated in the merciless slaughter of lakhs of so called low caste people over a period of thousand years, the hang over of which is blatantly seen in the name of 'honour killing' even today, all in the name of religion. As Justice Markanday Katju, Chairman, Press Council of India, in his article 'What is India', writes, 'religious passions inflamed in 1947 during the time of partition and people behaved like animals, Hindus and Muslims butchering each other'.²

Furthermore, large scale and elaborate communal atrocities have been perpetrated under the religious banner and thus religion secured for the country, even in the 21st century, the unpardonable discredit of 'national shame', in the words of Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh. Being a Sikh in 1986, being a Muslim in 2002 and being a Christian in 2007-2008 was the only reason of victimizing the other community, may any argument be the proclaimed pretext for public consumption. The misguided forces invariably seemed to protect the so called ideals or interests of some religion or other, either innocently or deliberately. The tropical climate and the over-emotional temperament of Indians is seems to be conducive for such massive manipulation. India is perhaps the best example for religion perpetuating superstitions, personality cults and blind beliefs in a gigantic way and thus enslaving human beings, in the disguise of liberating them.

Besides, religion has been the most advantageous cradles of fundamentalism, conservatism, extremism, communalism and even terrorism. Religion also has conditioned and subjugated people by propagating overstated theories and exaggerated rituals, which perpetuated religious obsessions and scruples. It has also exceedingly exploited the masses in terms of sex, money and power in a disguised fashion as well as perpetuated hypocrisy and escapism from harsh social realities of life. Now the bare and hard-hitting twin-question arise is -- does this gloomy predicament of the world or Indian scenario bring credit to religion and religions? Is this religion worth anything for the human society or the country?

4. INCREDIBLE INDIA – POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE

4.1. The positive 'Incredible India'!

We are privileged citizens of the 'Incredible India' (Atulya Bharat)! We proudly say 'Meraa Bharat Mahaan'. We speak of 'India Shining'. We assert that India is on the verge of becoming a 'Super power'. We proclaim that India is 'Saare Jahaan se Achha'. We boast that India is 'Vishwaguru'. Intellectuals even assert that 'the Indian way' is the real road to peace and progress for the world. We have many other self-appreciative phrases and slogans that are intended to impress the world as well as boost our national self-esteem up. The Akshardhaam temple of Delhi has a remarkable cultural boat-

ride that conveys the captivating impression of almost all the major sciences, arts, inventions, achievements of the world to have had their origin in ancient India. In sum, we claim to be a 'breed of superior culture'.

We take pride in stating that we are part of the largest democracy in the world. Building aircrafts, atomic plants and earth-moving machines and equipments as well as launching rockets and firing missiles are some of our significant achievements. We declare that India is an emerging major economy in the world. We advocate a permanent seat in the Security Council of the United Nations. We want to give a free hand to foreign direct investors in our country. We want to make India an important international tourist spot. We want our country to be taken seriously by the world in the 21st century. We boast of our forefathers for having given 'zero' to the world. We are not tired of repeating that India was a 'golden sparrow', right or wrong, before the Mughals and the English came. All these declarations, claims and ambitions may be true in their own respects and valid for the unique and mighty country like India. In addition to all these, the languages and dialects, music and dance, art and literature, philosophies and cultural traits, food tastes and dress habits of India stand out spectacular. India, no doubt, is 'incredible' from a large variety of angles.

4.2. The negative 'Incredible India'!

An ambassador of a certain Embassy in New Delhi, while addressing the audience at his send-off programme that was organized at the completion of his term of office, remarked, 'India is an incredible country, in the negative sense as well as in the positive'. While appreciating the merits of the country, did he mean that India is indeed 'unbelievable' in the sense 'it is a strange country that is swinging between extremes of good and bad'? I think so.

The 'incredible' India is like a 'coin' that has two sides. Both sides of the coin have different faces and they communicate a different message each. There is no resemblance between them. They do not correspond to each other or blend together. Either side is not able to see and know each other, too. But, both sides are real. Both sides belong to the coin equally. They make the coin together. The one who sees or uses the coin has to intelligently distinguish and assess what is what and co-relate the two components of the coin. Similarly, 'the incredible India on the positive' and 'the incredible India on the negative' are thus to be discerned, measured and harmonized by those who come face-to-face with its either aspects as well as by the enlightened citizens of the country who are sharp in their imagination and life-experience. The barefaced social graph of the country raises serious questions regarding the integrity and quality of religions of the land! The question 'whether religion is a path to social harmony or not' has to be justified by the spontaneous answer that emerge from the honest effort to be firmly rooted in the ground realities of the country.

5. RELIGION – PRIVATE OR PUBLIC?

5.1. Is religion a private affair?

India has a very high sense of relational ties, in terms of families and communities of diverse types, composed by blood, caste, clan, language, region, religion, ideology, profession, culture, social mores, food tastes, dress habits, nationality, etc. This fact shows itself in the pattern of elections, in the quotas of reservation, in the texture of social gatherings, in the modes of solving issues, etc. On the other hand, most people in India seem to understand religion as a personal matter. There is a sharp contradiction here and it is indeed a strange phenomenon to understand. How could these extremes be explained? How could there be a different scale for religion? How could religion be left a matter of mere individual choice and concern? Two arguments could be presented. First, human being is a social animal. All the human concerns have both individual and social dimensions. It is a product of the society, too. Therefore, it doesn't stand to reason that religion is left bereft of the social aspect. Second, the high rate of relational dynamics and the extensive network of connectedness found in matters related to religion

smack of the barrenness of the above attitude. That brings us to the simple conclusion that religion cannot be considered a private affair. The social implications and expressions of religion are a theme of serious thought, as we discuss its role in fostering social harmony. As a matter of fact, religion is a social phenomenon, perhaps more so than an individual business.

5.2. Religion in public sphere

Assessing the phenomenon of religion as it expresses itself in public life is a responsible duty every social and national being has to perform. It needs to be examined how religion manifests itself in public spaces, institutions and interactions. The perspective of Jesus makes complete sense here, ‘The Sabaath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’³. Applying the message to religion, it could be said that ‘religion is for the human being, and not vice versa’. Religion is established for assisting human life to be made meaningful, both personal and social. The result of religious engagement is supposed to permeate into the details of social life. Religion has to be reflected in families, neighbourhood, work places, streets, markets, roads, etc, by way of the values that are being practiced by people and by way of the impact it commands in day-to-day life. Religion shows itself in human relations, in the words and deeds that are exchanged between people. Religion presents itself in thoughts and feelings, decisions and policies, and perceptions and attitudes. The quality of religion practiced has to be verified in terms of the result it produces in public sphere.

6. OUR ‘INDIAN-NESS’ AND THE RELIGION REFLECTED

6.1. Our ‘Indian-ness’

The worth of the religion we live in India has to be assessed in terms of the ‘Indian-ness’ we reflect in public as well as private life. Sociological thinker V. Raghunathan in his book ‘Games Indians Play’ elaborates twelve characteristics as a mark of our ‘Indian-ness’. They are – ‘low trustworthiness, being privately smart and publicly dumb, fatalist outlook, being too intelligent for our own good, abysmal sense of public hygiene, lack of self-regulation and sense of fairness, reluctance to penalize wrong conduct in others, mistaking talk for action, deep-rooted corruption and a flair for free riding, inability to follow or implement systems, a sense of self-worth that is massaged only if we have the ‘authority’ to break rules and propensity to look for loopholes in laws’⁴.

6.2. Our uncivilized habits in public

Let me elaborate some of our uncivilized ways in public. Tearing off a page from a library book, skipping classes without permission of the teacher or the school authorities, leaving the school and college campus dirty, etc. are certain uneducated ways among students and teachers. Writing their names on the walls of Taj Mahal or lifts and at bus stops is a cheap behaviour seen among market-level boys and girls. Getting into fits of anger and lighting a match to a football stadium or a city bus is a common phenomenon among the general public. Jumping the red lights and queues shamelessly, overtaking from the left, covering the road with vehicles from one side, not honouring the zebra crossing and traffic signals, not having the basic courtesy to slow the car to allow an aging pedestrian or a child to cross the road, not caring for the closed gate at railway crossing, etc. are some blatant public habits of uncivilized character.

Besides, polluting the air through noise, dirt, etc., running the tap full blast while shaving, jumping out of the seats to open the overhead baggage even before the aircraft comes to a halt, illegitimately occupying others’ seats of others in the train, disturbing others through microphone at night by violating the Supreme Court verdict, choking and dirtying public places, etc. are symptoms of illiterate and whimsical behaviour. Taking marriage processions to the road and even at the late hours of the night, taking religious processions at festivals for demonstration of power and blocking the traffic and leaving the road a carpet of garbage are indeed irreligious as well as irrational behaviour. All these and many

other symptoms in our behaviour smack of the selfish and uncivilized character of Indians. That is why V. Raghunathan states ‘we are largely a less-civilized people than most other major nationalities and hence we need to take a fresh look at ourselves’⁵.

6.3. Our pitiable sense of public sanitation

India is suffering from a very poor sense of public hygiene. The meaning of democracy seems to be understood in terms of one’s free will in spitting and littering anywhere, throwing garbage in the streets, sidewalks, parks and other public places, sweeping the dust from our homes and shops to the streets, using the streets as toilets, etc. Municipalities release the sewage into our seas, rivers, lakes, streams and canals, dump the garbage on the outskirts of the city, leave the streets in a shameful condition and do not care for the stinking and dismal state of the public toilets. Indians seem to have got immune with their insensitivity towards keeping the country carpeted with garbage and filth. This is in fact a national tragedy. V. Raghunathan categorically comments in his book ‘Games Indians Play’, ‘the biggest challenge confronting the country is its ‘stinking toilets’, which reflect the quality of our public hygiene, collective aesthetics and attitude towards sanitation’⁶.

President of perhaps the cleanest country in the world, Singapore, is heard to have exhorted his people to keep their toilets clean. Our national officials seem to be flying up in the skies with a false pretence of being the super power and seem to be totally cut off from the stark ground realities of the country that are a fundamental block to becoming really a powerful nation. Large percentage of our people who live without basic dignity doesn’t appear to be concern of those who claim to be ‘anointed to rule over their people’. ‘Leave the place better than you found it’ is the apt dictum that can liberate us and our country from this deplorable predicament. But, supportive values of culture, religion, character, ethical sense, sense of duty and respect for others seem to have collapsed.

6.4. Free-riding

There is a story of an ancient Indian king, who wanted to test the integrity of his subjects, announced that all of them have to pour a glass of milk into a large cauldron kept at the town centre that night. The king went to inspect the contents the next morning and found clear water in the vessel. In the cover of darkness, each of them thought that his or her glass of water would go unnoticed in a cauldron full of milk contributed by others. This story clearly refers to the tendency of finding one’s way through free of cost. ‘Free-riding the public good’ is a grave calamity that is widely found among the general public. This habit goes against the law-abiding citizens who pay tax their taxes dutifully and make their contributions scrupulously. It also infringes upon the spirit of law as well as of patriotism. The attitude that prompts such an act can be popularly put as ‘Gangaa to bahtee he, meim bhee haath tho loon’, i.e., Ganges flows anyway, let me also wash my hands! People are given to think that systems made for the public, like buses, trains, flights, roads, bridges, canals, radio, television, internet, etc. can be used freely. India seems to have a greater percentage of free riders. A large bureaucracy as it is, India has scope for a great deal of anonymity in it. The fear of being caught also is very low. No wonder, government employees while away the time in idling, knitting, chatting, etc. Efficiency, effectiveness and commitment as regards their work are not considered important. Greed to benefit the maximum is motivating factor behind free-riding. Unfortunately, the large system of religion has not succeeded in keeping the greed and selfishness under control and thus reducing the degree of free-riding.

6.5. Corruption

Corruption is a higher degree of free riding. India ranks among the most corrupt countries in the world. Leader of Raashtrey Janata Dal party, Sharad Yadav, once said, ‘corruption is in our blood’. He deserves our appreciation for confessing the truth. But, the reality he refers to is appalling. He seems to mean that the entire system of the Indian society is a victim of it that and that it cannot be redeemed, as like the blood in the body cannot be fully cleansed. The slogan that often runs the system is ‘end

justifies the means'. Corruption of thought, word and action, corruption in money and in power assist us compromise quality. Lack of work culture, lack of punctuality, tainted behaviour and relations, dishonesty, cheating, stealing, looting, free-riding, etc are essential part of our lives. There is a lot of manipulation in all fields. It appears that money can work miracles everywhere and almost nothing can be done without money. Government officials and politicians accept bribes and people give bribes to get their work done. Often people give bribe and accuse the bribe-taker, without realizing that if there is no giver, there will be no taker. In spite of sting operations conducted by the media, the situation has hardly improved. Recently, there has been a large scale campaign against corruption, especially in the governmental machinery, by Anna Hazare and his team and a strong insistence on passing the Lokpal Bill. The campaign seems to have created a mass awakening in the country. But, much remains yet to be done. There is a long way to go. Raghunathan goes on to assert that 'Defection is our national trait. So also is looking for loopholes in practically every law or system'⁷. Religious sense seems to have miserably failed to redeem the situation and even has covered up or supported the intensity of corrupt practices. With the wide experience of dealing with all systems of religion, I could state that 'perhaps there is more corruption in religion than outside it'. If 'fence eats the harvest', who would protect the harvest?

6.6. Our highly selfish mindset

Indians on the whole seem to think in terms of themselves. It is true that one has to love oneself first, as the most basic duty. All the same, as social beings, one cannot afford to forego loving the other at any rate. Interest in oneself has to be balanced with interest in the other, lest the human character be staked. Social systems are made so that the equilibrium of social life is maintained. But, the Indian mindset has a high proclivity for self-centred way of conducting one's life. People often do not care for maintaining the systems created. Often, there is a reluctance to give credit to the predecessor by owning his or her achievements, as in the case of the Tamil Nadu State Assembly Building got constructed by the previous government is discarded by the present government. Political interference is pursued for private interests, even in educational institutions, risking worthy candidates in favour of no-so-worthy candidates. Highhandedness seems to be an undeclared policy in the democratic machinery. Illegal constructions are often condoned over a period of time and mercilessly demolished if the bargain fails or for building up one's political image. Those in positions of power indulge in special privileges and find themselves above the standards, rules, regulations and laws set for all. Often people talk for themselves and neglect action for others. In many instances, family ties are given a nepotistic twist. Self-serving approaches dominate over the interests of the society. Over and over again people escape from the harsh realities of present to the comfort zone of the glorious past.

Besides, most people seem to invest all their intelligence for their own benefit, as in plucking the fruit before the harvest season and ripening them artificially for earning a higher profit. The supremely selfish drive of Indians is reflected in all sectors, even to the point of exploiting the simpletons. Most people seem to be highly insensitive to the misery and suffering around. 'Playing crab' is a usual Indian practice. As the story goes, the crab that tries to get out of the bucket is pulled down by the others inside. This refers to a basic uneasiness that is in a large majority of Indians when others do better than one. The consequent psychological game is being perfectly happy when others do as badly as one. Raghunathan makes a series of comments regarding the above observations, 'Indians often compete not by performing better than others but by pulling others down'... 'left to ourselves, we are inconsiderate and uncaring'... 'defection seems to be our default setting'... 'we are far too intelligent for our own good'... 'this is a world of 'selfish genes' and selfish people'... people even 'shaft somebody'⁸. The over-selfish frame of mind raises drastic questions regarding the ethical spirit of religion that is conspicuously dormant!

6.7. Our religious and social fatalism

The German Pastor Martin Niemoller made a famous statement about the inactivity of German intellectuals, following the Nazi rise to power and the purging of their chosen targets, group after group -- 'First they came for the communists and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me'.⁹ This statement perfectly applies to the Indian mindset of fatalism in a more severe manner. Fatalism seems to be ingrained in the Indian psyche and it is reflected in the day to day actions of people, as if they are genetically encoded to be like what they are. Have the gods of the religious country genetically doomed their devotees or predestined them? Unlike most other nations, there is a high degree of passivity, sense of omission and lack of self-regulation in India. The reluctance to enforce fairness, not championing issues, accommodating with filth, corruption, chaos and primitive ways, withdrawing to self and self-realization, surrendering slavishly to caste theories, leaving others to take initiatives, being mute witnesses to rape and other forms of violence, etc are certain clear proofs of this religious and social fatalism.

'Every body else is doing it' is the convenient slogan that shields passivity and inaction. 'Hiding behind what others are doing or not doing' has been the deep-seated habit of a large percentage of people. The apologetic questions, like 'what happens, if I alone do not come late or do not throw a piece of paper on the street', allowing one's rights to be trampled upon by the powerful and the mighty, mutely making a complete subjugation of the self, etc. further elaborate the fatalistic predicament of the country. No wonder, the achievement level of the country on the whole is very low. Not espousing larger causes is the consequent act or sin of omission or the silence of the majority of the people in this country, which is a matter of more serious concern than the commission (wrong-doing) of the minority! Have the religions of this great country lost their vigour and taste and have the faiths become infertile as to render the devotees ethically fruitless in life?

7. RELIGION IN INDIA -- A CRITIQUE

7.1. Religion in India to be re-visited

The above characteristics do not speak well of religion and religions in India. These attitudes do not reflect any religion at all. It only betrays all sense of religion. They depict a high degree of selfishness and a very low level of selflessness. They mean a high level of individualistic preoccupation and a very poor sense of societal awareness. Thinking for oneself and thinking for the society are and have to be complementary aspects. One cannot do without the other. The absence of society-centred understanding of religion causes the worst manifestations of religion or corruption in religion. The self-centred idea of religion is responsible for corruption, rape, lack of work culture, mal-practices, lack of concern for the other, lack of commitment to the country and the society, etc. For instance, Delhi, the capital of India, rates perhaps the highest number of rapes taking place in the country. The system of central government contains a high percentage of officials of crime background. Why are we the way we are, in spite of the high tempo of religious engagement and religious talk? Where have the superlative religious jargons high-sounding religious claims gone? The understanding of religion requires a head-on alteration, in terms of value-consciousness that can accelerate the process of social harmony.

7.2. Amending negative religious theories and tendencies

The idea of God the humans entertain is influenced by the categories of the world. The governmental and administrative system plays the key role in the formulation of the religious theories, especially about God. No wonder, most people consider God as if he or she is a government babu, who has to be kept in good humour with periodic offerings and promises of gifts. He or she seems to enjoy some inducement in times of need, too. Relation with God is almost like a mutual deal, which expresses itself as 'you take this, but give me that'. Failure to keep up the bargain can take up sadistic turns on either side, as well. Actually, the god most people believe in is 'money and power', not the one that matches

the projected theories of religious traditions. Most of those who claim to be theists are not theists at all. Religious theories and rituals are used as shields to cover the atheistic or worldly nakedness. A great percentage of religious claims are solely hypocritical. A very large number of people in India are a religiously misguided lot. Much of the religious content is highly superstitious and it does not produce any fruit in our social life. It is imperative that such negative theories of religion have to be amended.

The comment of Karl Marx that religion is the 'opium of the people' fits general state of mind of Indians. Religion is a 'bhedchaal' or crowd-like following or a 'bheedchaal' or sheep-like following for the general public. They are under the clutches of many self-proclaimed 'mini-gods', who promote personality cult around them. They flow along the current and hardly have any critical thinking in them. They have been conditioned like rabbits and are like 'birds in the cage' or 'dogs in the kennel or frogs in the well'. Religion has made them ghetto-minded and they are prone to getting highly inflamed, like petrol and diesel. They are over-sensitive and reactionary, like the bush 'touch-me-not'. Lot of people are victims of pathological tendencies, are obsessed with certain stipulations, are fanatic and communal and are separated from other human beings and communities – all in the name of religion. The exaggerated sense of religious identity cause divisions in the society and disrupt social amity, forgetting the basic identity of 'being a human being'. Most of the religious heads are illiterate, confused and are lacking in leadership. They consider themselves 'anointed to rule over his people' and enjoy of the best of the world under the disguise of claims of divine sanction, infallibility, clownish attire and superlative titles of religion. Majority of the simple people fall a prey to the highly corrupt and exaggerated system of business in the name of god and religion. The politically and commercially charged language of conceiving one's perspectives, like eternal, only, last, fulfilment, does not allow a way out. But, these and other religious theories and tendencies need a thorough improvement, in favour of the right concept of religion and the resultant social concord and wellness.

7.3. Liberating understanding of religion

One's understanding of religion has to be such that it takes one to higher realities and freedom. Excessive past-centred notion of religion does not help. Loyalty to one's religious tradition has not to be enslaving. One should not be a slave to the foundational figure of one's religion or the religious scripture. One should not ape the central person, but draw inspiration and strength from him or her. Similarly, the letter of the scripture is not to be followed. Only the spirit of the Scriptures has to be imbibed. One has to learn values from the scriptures and traditions. Everything about life is not written in any scripture. They are to be re-interpreted according to the time and context. One has to learn also from other scriptures and traditions. They are not one against the other. The common as well as the special values of the scriptures are to be searched for. They are not to be monopolized by any group. Universal human and spiritual values are to be identified and jointly promoted, in view of better understanding, interaction and harmonious relations among religious and other social communities. In sum, the way one understands religion and its tenets has to be such that it liberates and takes one towards broader horizons that process peaceful co-existence and collaboration.

8. RELIGION A SPIRITUAL FORCE

8.1. Religion to be a motivating force

Religion is 'dharma' or performing the 'duty'. It is keeping the 'right conduct'. It would mean 'dhaaran karnaa' or 'feeling responsible for'. It means 'getting related to', as in 'religare'. Dharma or religion has to become one's 'nature', like the 'saltiness' in salt or the sweetness in sugar. It would mean 'following the dictates of one's conscience'. Religion is the 'sum and substance of one's perspectives, experiences, attitudes and approaches'. Religion decides 'the way one thinks, speaks and behaves'. 'Good behaviour' is the fruit of religion. One's religion or faith has to 'motivate' one towards the positive elements of life. It has to be the source of strength. It has to be powerhouse of life. All the same, religion should be the centre of life. Life has to be the centre of religion. The comment of Jesus 'Sabbath was made for man,

not man for the Sabbath' (Mk 2.27) applies here. Religion has to be at the service of the human being. Living for one's religion or dying for one's religion is a disoriented attitude. Religion has to promote life. Religion represents the qualitative element in life. As Kabeer says, 'saar saar ko gahi rehein, thothaa dey udaai', one has to hold on to the essentials and discard the non-essentials in religion. Religion can be meaningful only when a critical analysis and discernment exist in it. In the final analysis, being the motivating factor in life is the real objective of religion.

8.2. Religion has to grow inclusive

An inclusive idea of religion has to be cultivated. Fixed notions betray and defeat the very purpose of religion. The fool-proof theories of God emerge out of ignorance and arrogance. Diverse ideas of God are prevailing in the society. Religious traditions have to understand that these are symbolic presentations and not the real divine power. They are not contradictory, but complementary to each other, as well. In fact, 'God is always beyond', as Kenneth Leech categorically puts it. All the theories and imaginations the human mind has evolved across the globe are not capable of exhausting the real power of God. The late Prime Minister Shree Vishwanath Pratap Singh said in a poetical evening on 'communal harmony' some years ago, 'I am just a seeker'. Such humble attitude is the beginning of the knowledge of God. Upanishads puts it excellently well, 'Neti, Neti', not this, not this. Silence is the real climate in which the real knowledge of God emerges from one's own experience. Innovative ways, new insights, new interpretations and new approaches as regards God and religion will facilitate breaking new grounds. Henry Miller adds, 'one's destination is never a place, rather a new way of looking at things'. Religion is and has to be a continuous journey towards new ways of looking at things. Being in the process is meritorious. Over-patriarchal theories of religion have to include matriarchal perspectives also. Exclusive and one-sided perceptions of religion have to pave the way of pluralistic approaches. Participatory and collaborative modes of religion only can brighten the future of human civilization. It is high time theists and non-theists, conservatives and progressives and leaders and the general public realize that 'harmonizing the seemingly opposites' is the sacred role of religion.

Religious traditions have a common origin, a common existence and a common destiny. While being rooted in one's own tradition they have to remain creatively united to other traditions. They are like a 'rainbow'. When they are united, they radiate an unparalleled moral and spiritual beauty, but when scattered, their beauty evaporates into oblivion. Difference is an enriching factor and not a matter of conflict. Only in a spirit of togetherness, the difference works as 'beauty in diversity'. The message of a gazal makes sense as the first step towards opening up to the other, 'hum ko dushman kee nigaahon se na dehaa keeje', i.e., do not look at me with the eyes of an enemy. Pluralistic concepts of the divine, such as one, many, male, female, male-female composite, neither male nor female, relational, non-relational, are to be accepted as valid approaches. 'We have to look at what unites people rather than what divides them', cautions Pope John XXIII. Further, saint poet Daadoodayaal presents the spiritual perspective of perfection and unity through the lines, 'Dadoo pooran Brahm bichaariye, tav sakal aatmaa ek; Kaayaa kaa gun deshiye, tav naanaa baran anek'. Focus on the body divides and that on the spirit unites. The universal message of Upanishad, 'sarve bhavantu sukhinah', is the culminating vision for making religion the most inclusive.

8.3. Religion to foster harmony and progressing together

Religion has to be a source of harmony. 'Religion has to be what God intended it to be -- a source of goodness, harmony and peace' observes Pope John Paul II. Whatever that promotes goodness, harmony and peace is religion and whatever that blocks or does not accelerate them is irreligion. Jesus exhorts, 'blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God' (Mt 5.6). Fostering divine qualities and creating human families on earth that permeate divine qualities is the right and the only function of religion. Religion has to broaden the horizons of peoples. Well-loved children are outgoing, inclusive, accommodative, generous, peaceful and socially mature. Similarly, persons who have grown up nourished by the sap of faith from one's religious tradition are bound to be open-hearted. Religious

communities have to open up to each other and proceed to building bridges between communities. The large majority of the people who are affiliated to religious traditions are like 'a single and pampered child that is highly insecure and scrupulous'. The acute suffocation among the isolated and insulated religious traditions will clear off only with the oxygen of mutual understanding and relations. The perspectives of the Bible makes absolute sense here in terms of harmonious progress – 'man and woman are created in the image of God' and 'God dwells in them and in their collections and they are the real the temple of God'. Seeing the divine in the other is the surest way to achieving harmony in social life.

Diverse traditions of faith are 'gifts of the same creator'. They are the 'common cultural heritage of the human society'. They are not mine and yours; they are ours. One has to consider, 'all are mine; one is mine in special and others are mine in general'. Being rooted in one's tradition would mean being related to that of others. All traditions are grounded in the same mother earth and the father divine. They are like 'the branches of the same tree'. They cannot afford to remain cut off 'like islands' or travel like 'parallel lines'. They have to journey through like in a shared fashion. As the advertisement caption for Wills cigarette reads, they are 'made for each other'. The Hindi film 'ek dooje ke liye' also suggests the same idea.

The social character of life refers to inter-community relations. A 'communion of communities' is the objective. The mutual spirit is not one tolerating the other, but one inclined towards the other. Mahatma Kabeer gives direction to the social dynamics of religion, 'behtaa panee nirmalaa, bandaa gandaa hoi; saadhoo jan ramtaa bhalaa, daag na laage koi', i.e., one has to keep going to the other like the flowing water lest like religion, humanity, etc not get stained. A culture of dialogue and interaction has to be fostered, which will enhance the culture of living together, the culture of working together, the culture of travelling together and the culture of harmonious living together. We-consciousness only can facilitate the journey of the humans towards broader horizons of growth. Development and progress are key words to human lives. But how does progress take place? Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in his poem 'A Psalm of Life' guides the destiny of progress, when he says, 'but to act, that each tomorrow may find us farther than today'. Every individual, community or unit has the inclination to grow and progress. But, advancing alone is not progress. Progressing together is progress proper. This joint endeavour is the way to harmony in social life.

8.4. Fostering universal values of religious traditions

Values are characterized by a universal appeal. Exceptional values are found in all religious and social ideologies. They are not for the respective community; they are for the entire human society. Bahai faith suggests 'oneness of humanity, unity of religions and establishment of a world order'. Buddhist tradition advocates 'middle path, enlightenment and compassion'. Christianity teaches 'love, service, forgiveness, equality, relational understanding of the divine, preferential commitment to the weaker sections and 'help live'. Hindu dharma proposes 'nishkamadharma, neti-neti and sarve bhantu sukhinah'. Jainism is committed to 'nonviolence, aparigrah, anekandvad and 'live and let live'. Judaism recommends 'make the world better by making people better and law-centred life'. Islam promotes 'peace, total surrender and brotherhood'. Zoroastrianism upholds 'victory of good and good thoughts, good words, good deeds'. Shinto stands for 'closeness to nature', Sikhism for 'book as guru, service and community meal' and Tao for 'harmony of the opposites'. All these great values are oriented to the human and spiritual wellness of all and are universal. They are powerful vehicles of fostering social accord.

9. NATIONAL SOLIDARITY

9.1. Accepting diversity

Justice Markanday Katju, Chairman, Press Council of India, in his 'What is India' states, 'because India is a country of immigrants (over 92 per cent of them came to the country over the past 10,000 years) there is tremendous diversity in India, so many religions, castes, languages, ethnic groups, etc'¹⁰. All the peoples that came in brought their own cultures and characteristics to India. The sub-cultures that are mushrooming off and on add to the largeness of diversity, too. The characteristic watchwords of the Indian culture 'unity in diversity' and 'vasudhaivkutumbakam' make sense only in the context of the colossal diversity. This diversity and its richness cannot be bypassed even at the smallest gauge but be accepted whole-heartedly. But, how much diversity is respected in India? And what is the contribution of the religions in cultural interactions? Diversity is in fact a divine gift to be shared and celebrated, in view of social cohesion.

9.2. Policy of secularism

In the words of Justice Markanday Katju, 'the only policy that will work in India is the policy of secularism and giving respect to all communities'¹¹. 10. Justice Markanday Katju, 'What is India', Frontline, 10 February 2012, p. 95

India has an exceptionally rich Constitution, which underlines the 'secular perspective'. In terms of the divine, 'secular' is a broadened understanding of the 'sacred'. It is a de-centralized and universal outlook of the divine. In the national context, it is a non-attachment to one tradition or community as well as an all-inclusive approach to the colloquium of religious persuasions and social affiliations. It affirms the equality of all entities including faith. The Preamble of the Constitution summarizes the national values of the country. State respects and imbibes, and it has to do so, the values of all ethnic traits, languages, ideologies, faiths, social traditions and cultures. All are and should be equal before law and there is no privileged place for anyone. But, has the politically motivated and fundamentalist factions not disturbed the equilibrium of the secular perspective of the Constitution very badly? Has not religion been a powerful tool in their hands? Secular perspective has to be strengthened, in favour of social relationships and welfare of the country.

9.3. Civic sense

Civic consciousness is fundamental to being a citizen. Only a civilized member of the country is a citizen, in the proper sense of the word. Citizens have to perform their duties as citizens. The religious sector has to boost up the observance of public duty. Religious processions on the road at festival times and marriage processions at night are to be controlled in view of not causing public nuisance. High profile movements and demonstrations on the road should not disturb the traffic and public movements. Places of worship that are on the road side and cause inconvenience for the public need to be shifted elsewhere or attended to in terms of civic order. There has to be more discipline in public life and inspiration has to be drawn from the western society for this sacred behaviour. Lawful behaviour, work culture, responsible behaviour in public places, respect for the public property and the also the private property of others, etc. are basic expressions of civic sense. Civic behaviour is key to social order. No doubt, religion has to boost up such good conduct in public life.

9.4. Constitution as the sacred book of the country

Every institution or an entity has a manuscript that stands for its core objectives and values. They are necessarily considered sacred and a source of motivation. Such a charter is greatly beneficial for any community in terms of its sense of direction and unity. All religious communities have either a sacred scripture or something that is equivalent to it. The national community of India has its Constitution, which is basic to the identity of the nation. And it spontaneously follows that the most effective way to foster a national solidarity is to accept the 'Constitution as the 'Sacred Scripture of the country' by all citizens. All have to honour it fully by reading, understanding and living its values. The values enshrined in the Preamble, like equality, justice and brotherhood are fully in tune with the core spiritual values of all religious traditions and social ideologies. This national gesture will promote national

consciousness and a sense of belonging to the country together as well as belonging to each other as communities. Commitment to the unity and integrity of the country has to be the fundamental duty of all citizens. All religions have to join hands with each other in this national cause of harmonious living in the country as citizens. Religious sense has to be altered and tuned in favour of the national community of the nation, in order to ensure harmony as the primary value in the national ethos.

9.5. Composite culture

The nucleus of the dynamics of knitting together a large land of limitless diversities like India is the idea of a 'composite culture'. This is not just an idea. It is the reality. It has to be the experience every citizen and community. This is the factual Indian culture of today, as well. There are various ethnic groups and communities living in India. The country belongs to all of them equally. The country is composed of all of them. All of them have contributed to the making of what this country today is. Majority-minority complex, highhandedness and discrimination in the name of caste, religion, class, ethnic origin, profession, language, region, etc. will only tarnish the dynamism of the country and therefore they have to be kept under strict watch. They are threats to national integration. Aggressive tendencies are to be controlled. Special concern for the deprived and marginalized sections has to be the priority for all communities as well as the state. The spirit of composite culture will enhance national solidarity. This, in its turn, will promote social harmony in India. Is it not the fundamental duty of religious traditions in India to set out for an all-out campaign for harmonious living together as part of the composite culture?

9.6. International outlook

The spirit of nationalism has not to be a national obsession. The national solidarity ought not to be the attitude of the frog in the well. Nation is not an isolated entity. It is not like an island that is cut off from other islands. Nations are not supposed to be like parallel lines that do not meet. In the era of globalization, like that of ours, a global understanding of the country needs to be developed. Obviously, nationality is an essential part of the human identity as well as the human society. All the same, one has to think global while being national. There has to be much better understanding, collaboration and cordial relations among nations. Inter-country, inter-cultural and inter-community interaction will enrich the human society in all dimensions of life. An inter-connected and collaborative perspective among nations will definitely usher in an age of social harmony.

9.7. Universal perspective

Universal perspective is similar to the international outlook. But, it goes still beyond that. The slogan of Mahatma Gandhi, 'Sarvodaya', i.e., 'the rise of all' or the 'the progress of all' elaborates this universal attitude to a great extent. It also means a consciousness of being together as well as a benevolent stance of intending the uplift of all. 'Sarve bhavantu sukhinah' (let all be happy), 'vasudhaiva kutumbakam' (the entire earth is but one family), 'sarva jan hitaay' (for the good of all), etc. describe this vision further and affirm the universal welfare of the human society. The ideal 'satyamevjayate' reflects 'desire for truth' or 'commitment to truth', which is beyond the borders of all entities and is universal. 'Satyagrah' of Mahatma Gandhi was his 'experiments with truth'. The universal perception leads one to securing freedom. Nationalism has to be universal in its concerns. Religion has to foster such larger points of view. Only then, the road to social harmony will be clear and travelable.

10. RELIGION FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

10.1. Religion as a social force

Religion has to be social force. It has to play a significant role in public life. It has to awaken transformation in individual human lives and social processes. The interest, time and money invested in

the cause of religion have to be manifested in the resultant sense of value in life. Religious engagement has to be gauged in terms of the value-based and humane life one leads in social life. Intellectual exchange and informed critical debate among professors, students and people of all walks of life as well as religious heads have to go on in view of guiding the destiny of the human society. Religious diversity in the society, around the globe, in country and in the respective locality and the institution as well as in one's area of operation, has to be considered in terms of the challenges and possibilities of social life. Religious identities are not absolute identities. Every human being has multiple identities. Religious identity is only one of the many identities. Identity is an open-ended and evolving reality, as well. One has to grow from individual identity to a social identity, which is positively a shared identity. Religious traditions have to engage with each other in a conscious process of learning from each other, purifying each other, enriching each other and transforming each other. Only then, they will have the credibility to transform the society towards harmony. In reality, religion is an energy that drives social life.

10.2. Schemes for social change

Schemes have to be developed for making religion a force for change in the society. Inter-disciplinary conversations on religion in relation to other aspects of social life have to be regular endeavours in view of facilitating change. Partnerships have to be initiated amidst distinguished artists, scholars, policymakers and professionals in order to address religion in the work place and public life. Public events have to be organized for sensitizing the general public in this direction. Study circles are to be launched for studying religious traditions in relation to their social contexts and global implications. The affinities and similarities between religious traditions are to be scrutinized in view of identifying common grounds. Differences and particular characteristics of religions have to be analyzed and mutual enrichment has to be fostered. Ways and means of modulating religious engagement in terms of awakening qualitative change are to be searched for. Religion has to be reflected in making policies, living laws and regulations, facilitating processes of reconciliation and extending service to others. Religious sense has to boost up inter-community interaction and international relations. Social change has to be divinely motivated and orientation for the same has to be concord and peace in the society.

10.3. Collaborative action among communities

Many years ago the District Collector of Ujjain declared that depositing the pooja materials in rivers and lakes dirty the water and pollute the environment and therefore it was not to be done. But, unfortunately the religious heads felt threatened as regards their hegemony over their pet traditions and most people couldn't contain this idea as against their deep-seated practice. Religious heads have to come together and agree on the larger good of the society and decide for pro-active steps as well as support individual or official initiatives in these lines. A large number of temples, public places and national monuments, as in Sevagram and Wardha, are found to be uncared and dirty. Religions have to join hands with each other for addressing such problems of the country. Coming close to each other will serve as being a mirror to each other, which in its turn can facilitate introspection and purification of the weaknesses of the respective traditions and communities. Heads of places of worship of all religions have to come forward to support almost thirty per cent of the population of the country to have basic essentials of food, clothing, shelter, education and thus basic human dignity. The girl child has to be redeemed from the sad plight of being an object of rejection and elimination and thus sex balance has to be restored. Rivers, rivulets, canals, brooks and seas have to be kept unexploited and clean.

India seems to be the largest open-air lavatory in the world and almost forty percent of the people of our country are still forced to perform their morning rites under the open skies. Heads of the richest places of worship in the country could take the lead. Basic hygiene and human dignity are to be upheld. Efforts should be taken to make the bureaucracy a service centre than a power centre, to bring down the 85 per cent leakage in the national funding, to foster quality, scale and punctuality and thus to mend our action collectively as a people and become more action-oriented and self-regulatory. Dharma has to be lived as the absolute path of truth. Values for harmony and progress, like cooperation and keeping the means

above the end, needs to be emphasized. Such shared approaches are possible only when conflicts among communities, if any, are settled. Harmony with the majority community, concern for the minority communities and harmony with all communities have to be the focus on priority basis. A common minimum programme has to be evolved for social uplift and harmony in social life. Networking with individuals, organizations and communities of all affiliations as well as collaborating with administrators, educationists, industrialists, businessmen, medical doctors, social activists and people of other walks of life are the means for this. Integration of the society and advancement of the human civilization are the ultimate produce of this endeavour.

10.4. Making a better society

'Leave the place better than you found it' is a caption I found before a public toilet some time ago. The message for the toilet is clear. If one's predecessor did not behave well, one has to improve the condition of the toilet before he or she quits the place. This is the golden dictum that motivates social transformation, as well. One has to ensure that one betters the social surroundings. Commitment to nation-building and social uplift requires knowing the other deeper. One has to meet others not as Hindus, Muslims, etc. or theists or atheists, but as human beings. Efforts for building bridges of understanding and friendship among people of different religions and ethnic groups will reorganize the society. Inter-linking faith and public life is necessary for the right focus. Faith has to empower one for a more qualitative leadership, both within the faith community and in the society. The real test of the spiritual stamina is 'knitting together' and 'being committed to making a better society'. 'United they stand, divided they fall'. Harmony at the horizontal level is harmonized with harmony at the vertical level in the process of making a better country and a better society.

In the task of making a better society, collaborating with the governmental machinery is imperative. Maintaining law and order, facilitating the smooth flow of life, guaranteeing the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, measuring out justice to all, legislating for the development and progress of the country, etc are surely the functions of the government. But, concentration of power and resources can make the system self-centred and elected functionaries can get disoriented. Religious heads and the public have to keep negotiating with the governmental and administrative machinery for challenging irresponsible ways and enhancing good governance. Faith-based organizations, social activists, experts and scholars have to participate in the administrative process and together target achieving integration in the society.

11. SOCIAL CHANGE WITHIN ONESELF

11.1. Motivating models of change

There is no debating the fact that change has to take place. But, the question arises, 'who will change whom'? No one can change the other. One can change oneself only. 'Charity begins at home', thus goes the old adage. One has to initiate the process in oneself. But, another question emerges here, 'can anyone change oneself'? Barack Obama, who is the President of America, the most powerful country in the world, who made an epoch-making victory in the transfer of political power, used to affirm during his election campaign, 'change, we can'. That proves that undeniable reality that 'we have the capacity to change ourselves, as individuals, groups, communities and nations'. He established it in an incontestable manner. Mahatma Gandhi insists, 'be the change you want to see in the society'. This is an honest and responsible motto. There is perfect agreement between my expectation from the society and what I am. Rabindranath Tagore continues the argument, 'you cannot cross the sea merely by staring at the water'. I need to jump into the river and swim across. That is true. If I do not toil, I will not be able to see the result.

Gautam Buddha goes a step further, when he asserts, 'you cannot travel the path unless you have become the path itself'. Only when one has prepared the way and walked it oneself, one can expect

others to travel by it. Jesus Christ proved this fact in his own life when he declared, 'I am the way'. He identified himself totally with the way. Nelson Mandela culminates the discussion by affirming, 'revolution starts with the self, within the self'. Yes, change is a revolution by itself. To change the society is a great revolution. To change oneself is still greater a revolution. Becoming a transformed person and a better human being is the first step towards social transformation. By initiating change in one's personal life, one has to make sure that he or she leaves the family, neighbourhood, environment, community, country and the human society better. One has to become a motivating model of societal change oneself.

11.2. Being spiritual

To be spiritual is to be like the breeze. One does not know where it comes from or where it goes to. One cannot hold it either. No one can claim it as his or her property. It is the shared property of everyone. It is still beyond. Spirit has the qualities of the breeze. Therefore, to be spiritual is to be 'guided by the promptings of the Spirit'. It would mean 'to transcend' or 'to go beyond' or 'to cross the boundaries'. Spirituality is only one, though it has many dimensions. Different religious traditions are ways to attain spirituality. But, spirituality is not identical with them. Spiritual sensibilities are above the reach of individual traditions. Spirituality is a holistic outlook to life. It is the art to go to the other side (Yah deevaaron ke us paar jaane kee kalaa hein). One has to cross the boundaries and bridges of religious beliefs, cultural affiliations, ethnic belongings and ideological leanings, in order to be spiritual. Being spiritual thus is fundamental to social change and elevation.

11.3. Leading a value-based life

The result of spiritual transformation in one's life is 'integrity in life'. Integrity is wholesomeness. It is the sum total of character and other moral qualities. United States Air Force Academy presents character thus, 'we define character as the sum of those qualities of moral excellence that stimulates a person to do the right thing, which is manifested through right and proper actions despite internal or external pressures to the contrary'. Doing the right thing at the right time, even when everyone fails to do it, is the sign of a leader. Inspiring, motivating and taking people and the society beyond and ahead is the function of a leader. Awakening transformation in social life is leadership proper. Living a life that is based on values of genuineness, honesty, punctuality, hard work, respect for others, etc. is the guarantee for transformation in social life.

11.4. Refreshing the natural qualities of life

There are various elementary qualities in human life, which often are taken for granted. But, they are vital and transformative in life. They are natural and innate to human beings. Finding oneself amidst the magnificent and miraculous creation and the details of life, human persons are taken in surprise with a sense of mystery, a sense of wonder, a sense of appreciation and a sense of recognition of life. There is also a sense of search for the deeper implications and broader dimensions of life and a sense of ardent search for what is beyond. A pensive mood, a reflective attitude, a devotion to excellence or quality in life, a value-consciousness, an adherence to the higher principles of life, a sense of joy in working hard, a sense of perfection, etc. are naturally heavenly. The appreciative comment about Jesus categorically vouched by the people who were around him was 'He (Jesus) has done everything well'¹² speaks volumes of a spiritual nicety as well as a human attainment that is innate to life. Besides, a sense of wellness, a spirit of being related to the other, a spirit of commitment to the good of the other, a holistic perspective of life and a spirit of being harmonious that reflect divine and human qualities at the same time.

11.5. Being human

Mr Chidambaram, Home Minister of the Government of India, at the national communal harmony award function in 2010, called the attention of the audience to the 'basic human identity', which the humans seem to have forgotten as they grew up and invited people of the country to awaken a 'sense of being humane' in life. 'Being human' is fundamental to human life and 'being humane' is the heart of being human. The great saint poet, thinker and social reformer of Kerala, Sri Narayan Guru, exclaimed, 'you may belong to any religion, but being a good human being is more meritorious'. Being human is more commendable to being a religious. The Hindi film 'My name is Khan' has an episode, where the mother of the hero child, who was faced by some communal friction at school and refuses to go to school again, motivates and convinces the child saying, 'my child, there are only two types of people in the world: good people and bad people; you have to join the good people'. Good human beings are humane. At the end of the day, what counts in life is only that. St Francis of Assisi has a high profile prayer, 'Lord, make me an instrument of peace'. Though he was rooted in the Christian tradition, this prayer has externally no Christian identity, but has the finest of Christian values, the best of all spiritual and human values, too. The prayer, undoubtedly, affirms the human character. When we are ready to lose the religious and other identities of the world, we gain the really human and spiritual identities at the same time, which are above all accomplishments. That is the *raison de'tre* of social transformation, as well.

11.6. Being socially responsible for harmonizing the vertical and the horizontal

The human being is essentially a social being in nature, equally as he or she is an individual being. He or she is an individual in existence, but social in consciousness. The other is not totally other, but is an extension of his or her being. Therefore, he or she has to be socially connected and networked. The individual and the society are bound by each other both in receiving and in giving. Individual is born from the society, but he or she makes the society. Indian understanding of dharma is 'dhaaran karanaa', i.e., 'to feel responsible for'. Every individual is responsible for the other, the country and the society as well as for oneself. The question, 'am I my brother's keeper?',¹³ stands as a test to one's sense of social responsibility. One has the duty to serve the other as social beings.

The Jain philosophy 'jeevo aur jeene do' is a very motivating dictum. 'Jeene kee madad karo' is a much greater motivator. One should not stand on the shore of individual life. One has to get socially involved. 'Man and woman are created in the image of God'¹⁴, as Bible perceives. One has to perceive the image of the divine in the other. 'Man and woman and their community are the living temple of God'¹⁵, too. One has to consider the other the abode of the divine. This vision is supported by Upanishads when it states 'aham brahmaasmi'¹⁶, i.e., I am brahman. One has to see the other as the divine itself. Consider the other one's 'brother or sister' is the result of this way of looking at others. Loving the other and getting into relationship with others has to be expressed in practice. 'Do to the other what you have him or her do to you'¹⁷, 'Honour one another above yourselves'¹⁸ and 'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me'¹⁹ are a few golden rules from the Bible for perfect social and spiritual harmony. Harmony of the vertical and the horizontal becomes accomplished in the very process of social transformation as well as change within oneself.

12. EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL HARMONY

12.1. Educational Institutions

Educational establishments of schools, colleges and universities cover systematic education from lower end to the higher end. They, especially towards the higher ups, are powerhouses of the educated, enlightened and the cultured. They are laboratories of advanced human culturing. They are nurseries of high quality genius. They are temples of universal thinking by way of thinking beyond the boundaries. They stand as living promises of a brighter future for the humankind. They are on their feet to shoulder the noble mission of leading the world to superior heights, not only in the area of scientific research,

inventions, knowledge and progress, but also in the pursuit of human and spiritual altitudes. The entire process of education is and has to be geared towards achieving harmony in social life.

12.2. Making good human beings

The ultimate objective of education is making good human beings. The Hindi film 'taare zameen par' analyzes the shortcomings of the present system of education and suggests focus on the person of the student. It is not merely a career-building or a means of livelihood. Martin Luther King Jr, in his book 'The Purpose of Education' cautions, 'we must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character -- that is the goal of true education'. Education has to be focussed on inculcating human and spiritual values. The orientation of education is in the direction of making good human beings and good citizens. Character-building for human culturing is the path that leads to that aim. The sentiments of the teacher have to be that of the stone-cutter who was conscious of the ultimate outcome of his work as 'I am making a temple' and not merely earning a livelihood or just cutting the stone. Making a good human being is the final end product of education. Only good human beings can aspire for committing to social wellbeing.

12.3. Education to foster critical thinking

Another Hindi film 'three idiots' challenges the parrot-like passive approach to education. Martin Luther King Jr, in his book 'The Purpose of Education' exhorts, 'the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically'. Scholarship has not to be bookish. Applied scholarship is scholarship proper. Knowledge has to awaken insight and wisdom that accords the learner the capacity to discern and evaluate life and its details. This presupposes creative thinking. An effective musical concert calls for improvisations, while it is based on classical items. Tasty cooking requires new combinations, as well. The teaching of Mahatma Kabeer makes sense -- 'saar-saar ko gahi rahein, thothaa de udai', i.e., hold on to the essentials and throw away the non-essentials. Innovative ways in life is the fruit of a critical approach to learning. Thinking has to be socially applied and in line with the ground realities of the country and the society. Religion can be a path towards social harmony only education facilitates critical thinking in human beings.

12.4. Education to promote harmonious living

Lack of clear information about other traditions as well as that of one's own leads to prejudices and misunderstandings. Information and knowledge of all religious traditions and social ideologies have to be part of the syllabus. The universal values of all faith traditions as well as secular values are to be taught in class rooms. Awareness has to be fostered among the younger generation as regards the need of maintaining harmonious relations with people of all communities. They need to be empowered and equipped with motivation and commitment to promoting good will, understanding, friendly relations and collaboration among the different and social groups. An education that accords the students with such an empowerment is in fact education proper.

12.5. Education for leadership

Leadership is a basic human quality. It does not come by itself at a later age. It has to be inculcated and developed in the younger age. Education has to nurture leaders for social transformation. Leadership would mean responding to the surroundings and the society positively. Awakening leadership qualities in the youth is the optimum result of education. They need to be sensitive to the social situation around them. They need to get provoked by the social ills and problems and be committed to respond to them. The younger generation has to be agents of social transformation. They need to develop innovative ways of networking the society. Change has to be focussed on better fellowship among the religious communities and social groups. They have to be facilitated to form task forces for combating communal elements and misguided forces. They need to evolve processes for conflict resolution and

transformation. Since social transformation is the means to social harmony, students have to learn by doing. They have to learn not only from books but from life experiences. Good leaders are identified as those who pioneer social harmony. It is the duty of education to produce good leadership in the society.

12.6. Education by obliging the ‘Gururin’

Paying the ‘Gururin’ back is the golden return of education. Receiving and giving are two sides of the coin of life. One receives and gives from birth to death. Normally, one receives more in the younger days and gives more in the elder days. Growing up is to be measured against the degree of giving. Students have received from the teachers so much that its value cannot be assessed. One would never be able to pay the teachers back for what he or she has received. Students have to be taught to recognize the ‘Gururin’, i.e., the obligation of having received knowledge from the teachers. Getting relieved of the obligation is not by paying the teachers back in any way. Promoting learning and understanding in the society is the way of paying the ‘Gururin’ back to the teacher. In this line, ‘investing a portion of one’s earning, say 10%, for supporting a poor child for schooling’ or supporting a poor student for schooling could be practical schemes that can honour the ‘gururin’. Both teachers and students have to venture into such humanitarian schemes and emerge as role models in the society. Such an attitude and gesture will certainly add to the quality of both teaching and learning. Such measures are sure ways of promoting social harmony as well as living the finest human and spiritual values in life.

13. CONCLUDING REMARKS

13.1. Let my country awake!

Rabindranath Tagore gifted our country and the world the great and the most celebrated poem, ‘Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake!’. V. Raghunathan takes the liberty of rewriting that poem thus -- ‘*Where the neighbourhood is without filth*’ and the queues short and smooth; Where civil service is corruption-free; Where the towns have not been broken up into fragments by narrow potholed streets; Where justice is given out quickly from the profundity of the courts; Where a tireless work force stretches its arms towards perfection; Where the clear stream from the mountains has not lost its way into contaminated rivers of dead water; Where the economy is led forward by thee into a rate of growth higher than six per cent (real) – *Into that heaven of liberalization, my Father, let my country awake.*²⁰ The creative aspiration of Raghunathan points the finger directly at religion and challenges it to produce fruit in social life, in terms of harmony in all areas.

13.2. At the end of the day!

The outlook to life has to be functional. Life is that which functions and that which is on the move. Theoretically what is and should be is fine. But, as a matter of fact, that which practically happens to life is more to be counted. The wheel of the vehicle is intended to roll on. The different gears are stage that decides the speed of the journey. So is life. The utility of the needle of the clock is to connect the present moment to the next. So are the different phases of life. Life is like a relay race. One connects to the other and one hands over to the other. And the relay of life goes on. Life is given and no one has chosen to be born. It is a great gift from God, the Creator. It has to be lived gratefully. All have to live and so have to accommodate with each other. A little more of good sense and a little less of selfishness will work wonders in social life. If everyone vows to extend a little more consideration for others and a little more good will for others, the ultimate value of life will shine in human life. The beauty of life lies in loving one another, helping each other and caring for each other. At the end of the day, ‘living harmoniously with each other’ is the culmination of harmony in social life. Is this not what is meant by ‘satyam, shivam, sundaram’? When is this dream going to realize in our country and in the society?

13.3. A mission in life

To receive life is to receive a mission in life. Every human being has a mission in life. Mission is a special task, which each one has to perform. That is the fulfilment and fullness of life. General task is to live one's life to the full through one's livelihood and individual career. The special task is something beyond one's livelihood. It is a social task that is performed for the other. The other is confined to blood relations and ethnic affiliations. It reaches out to the so called strangers. Yes, the mission is a fellow-feeling for other human beings, who are affiliated to other background and persuasions. It is a commitment to the welfare of the community, the country, the society. This mission is a higher calling from the divine Creator. It is the sacred duty of every human being. The realization of this singular mission of every human being takes the human society to harmonious living. To activate and refresh human beings towards this human and spiritual height is what is intended by religion and faith. One has to awaken one's deeper religion, faith, spirituality, positive insights and innovative measures in view of making the path towards social harmony in the country and in the larger society a brilliant reality and a fulfilling experience of every moment!

13.4. Keep going

The above has been a humble attempt to think together with my country and my society, having drawn motivation from the higher promptings of the Spirit above as well as having firmly remained rooted in my experiments with religion, faith and spirituality in life. Two lines, I believe, will mark the most fitting grand finale of the entire discussion above and boost up our mission to national solidarity and social harmony anew -- 'Chalte rehein, chalte rehein, isee kaa naam zindagee; Milke chalein, saath chalein, isee mein zindaadilee'. 'Keep going, keep going; that is life. Meet the other and go together; that is the spirit of life'!

Endnotes

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