

TOWARDS AN IDENTITY BEYOND ALL IDENTITIES

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A sense of identity is basic to human existence and it is certainly a positive phenomenon. It applies to individuals and groups of all affiliations. Ethnicity, gender, language, caste, colour, class, creed, food, dress, ideology, profession, culture, and the like, without a doubt, stand for the specific identity of one group or other. Every brand of identity has different characteristics, which are obviously complementary to each other.

The world of today is characterized by a vibrant wave of globalization. On the one hand, the world has been highly narrowed down like a global village, due to the steady increase of technology, communication and migration. Diverse communities are bound to rub shoulders with each other, whether they want or not. But, on the other, the drive of cut-throat competition seems to make the weak or insecure individuals and communities feel threatened to be cornered, if not wiped out of existence. An acute sense of identity complex, identity crisis and identity clash is the natural outcome.

The dire demands of the context seem to necessitate redefining the parameters of one's social existence and interaction. A few questions could help. What is the source of our identity? Where are our attachments and loyalties grounded? How and with whom do we form our social interactions? What has to be the nature of our bonds? What is the criterion of our coming together? What are dimensions of our self-understanding? What is the real worth of human existence? How do we take off from the new cultural setting created by globalization? What is the way forward for the humans of the 21st century?

St Francis of Assisi has a momentous and world-acclaimed prayer to his credit. 'Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master, grant that that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born to eternal life'.

The above prayer, observably so, evolves from the Christian tradition, but there isn't the slightest mention of anything that is specifically Christian. While highlighting the essence of Jesus' vision of human life, the prayer crisscrosses all religious and secular boundaries, embraces every human being and deeply touches the core of his or her being. The prayer has a humane and spiritual flavour, of its own right. The prayer summarizes all human aspirations and opens a new window to the perception of human identity. It gives a superior purpose and meaning to the social processes and policies that are essential for our peaceful co-existence and collective progress.

Identity is a three-layer concept. At the first level, it is a way of understanding oneself as an individual being. That is an 'individual identity'. At the second level, it is a way of understanding oneself as members of a family, a community, a nation or the larger society. That is the 'social identity' or a 'shared identity'. At the third level, it is a way of understanding oneself across the

boundaries or above the explicit identities. That is a 'spiritual identity', which, in fact, is an 'identity beyond all identities'. These identities are progressively inclusive and qualitative in character in the ever-emerging process of growth in life. The prayer of St Francis of Assisi, obviously, belongs to the third and the highest level. It is a rare model for the way one could think larger and live one's identity in life, too. When one is set on one's journey towards human adulthood and spiritual attainment, is it too high to aspire to imbibe the spirit of the sublime identity Francis of Assisi presents? I do not think so.

The perception of identity in the increasingly globalizing world society of today is universal in its scope and is necessarily relational. It is neither 'dependent' nor 'independent', but 'interdependent'. Therefore, transforming the understanding of one's identity is vital for creating an equitable and harmonious global culture, where every individual and group finds his, her or its due space. The global identity, in its turn, is capable of redefining human relationships, in terms of other individuals, communities, the nature, the divine and all supportive social institutions. The realization that we are citizens of a world society, that we are members of a world family, that it is our duty to form a community of communities and that we share a world human culture are inevitable ingredients of that universal identity.

Moreover, the understanding of one's identity has to be dynamic and ever-evolving as well as inter-connected. Our identity is multiple in its nature, as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen puts it, 'inescapably plural'. We have many associational linkages that keep composing in us a variety of new identities. Social transformation today has to focus on exploring deeper and larger mutual relations in the material, ethical and spiritual arenas of life. Our perception about ourselves, about others and about our collective existence has to change. The social structures and processes at all levels, local, zonal, national, regional and global, have to change, too. A fundamental change in one's outlook, attitude and consciousness is called for.

'Being human' is the real identity of human beings! Nothing less is acceptable and nothing more is required. There is no debating the fact that one is born a human being. But, that is only a little more than the embryonic form. One has to keep becoming a human being, every moment of one's life. Young ones of animals are on their feet in a very brief span of time. They become adults much sooner on account of their instinctual setting, too. But, the humans, as they are both tender and intelligent beings, need time to evolve. This is a life-time process for them. However, the clear target is nothing other than 'becoming humane', certainly, the more, and the more. Reputed philosopher, poet and saint Shree Narayan Guru of Kerala exclaims, 'whatever be your religion, it suffices that you become a good human being'. External identities are of temporary and relative importance only. What really matters is the core identity. Becoming a 'good human being', fully groomed, civilized, enlightened, spiritually tuned and humanly networked as well as endowed with a spirit of loving service of all, is the identity of the humans, in the right sense of the word.

From this point of view, is not the disproportionate preoccupation with the so called identity in life a pathological phenomenon? Is not withdrawing from the world, like a tortoise, to safeguard the purity of our identity a retreat from life? Why do we limit the expansion of our life and reduce our engagement with the world in the name of identity? When are we going to free ourselves from the shackles of identity-crisis? Could we not think more clearly, by prioritizing our identities as more and less important? How could we reconcile some of our conflicting identities? Could we not rise above our attachment to certain trivial identities? Could we go beyond some of our

identity-related conditionings? When are we going to grow up as adult human beings, to conceive a larger and inclusive life and have our being in an inter-related and harmonious society? Why don't we use our lower identities to accelerate our journey of spiritual elevation in life, rather than blocking it? No doubt, it takes courage to answer these questions. But, the answer, here and now, decides the 'worth of our birth on this earth', for oneself and for others! The answer will be indicative of the nation and the human society we are going to construct for the generations to come, especially in the foreseeable future of the 21st century.

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