

WOMEN AND HARMONY IN SOCIAL LIFE

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1. The Image of God as the Harmonizing Factor between the Divine-Human Realities

The theistic perspective of life argues for the obvious role of a 'God' who is responsible for creating the entire system of life. Given the invisible character of that Creator, the essence of that Power can be understood only from a reverse logic. The process of understanding the Creator starts from the created, rises up to the Creator and reaches back to human beings in a 'u-turn' manner. The Creator and the created can be better comprehended and experienced in a network of relations between them. The image of God or the Creator that is reflected in the created, in human beings in special, facilitates a direct access to the inner character of both God and human beings. The foundational vision of the Bible 'God created man in his own image'¹ makes sense from this viewpoint. 'Aham brahmaasmi'² of the Upanishads advocates the almost the same idea from a non-dualistic worldview. Mahatma Kabeer highlights this relational reality from the height of mystical experience when he says 'jit dekhoon tit toon'³. The use of the term 'Narnaaraayan'⁴ in the Indian epic tradition refers to the indispensable connectedness between the human and divine principles, as well. 'The image of God or the Divine is reflected in all living beings, especially human beings'. This notion reiterates the mutuality of the transcendent and the immanent aspects of the Eternal Truth. The idea of the 'Image of God' is the harmonizing factor between the divine and human realities.

2. The Image of God as Foundation for the Plurality of Genders

The mastermind of the concept of creation is embedded in the plurality of genders. The idea of a single gender would have rendered gender itself irrelevant and superfluous. The basic dynamics of multiplication would have amounted to a mere zero then. The active role in the process of increase and growth of life-forms would have been totally absent. The social character of life, especially in human beings, shines in the plurality of genders. Plurality is made specific in order to avoid confusion. 'Two' is a complete number and is the symbol of perfection. Therefore, duality of genders stands as the genius of the design of creation. The marvel of this idea is clearly phrased by the author of the Bible, 'male and female he created them'⁵. The two essential components of life, applied particularly in the context of human life, are indeed palpable and functional. The plurality or duality of genders emerges from the image of God in which human beings are created. The two dimensions of the image of God emphasize not only the 'plurality of

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¹ Holy Bible (New International Bible), Genesis 1.27, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984, page 3

² Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad, 1.4.10

³ Kabeer Granthaavalee, Shyam sunder Das (Ed), Nagree Pracharinee Sabha, Varanasi, VS 2045, Sumiran kou Ang, 9, page 4

⁴ Mahabharata, Vanaparvan, 12.46-47

⁵ Holy Bible (New International Bible), ibid

the image', but also the plurality or the 'multi-dimensionality of God' or the Creative Power itself. The dialogical quality of the image proves beyond doubt that the plurality or duality of genders is intended by God and it corresponds with the divine character.

3. Dialogue of Genders as the Central Dynamics of Life

The double-sidedness of the Creator's image that is indelibly present in man and woman affirms the diversity of the core ingredients that are inevitable for a meaningful human life. To be diverse would mean not only 'to be more than one' or 'many', but 'to be different'. Both meanings underline the social implications of life. 'Difference' is fundamental to the singularity of each item of life, especially in gender. For that reason, the natural mode of being man and woman is necessarily dialogical. Man and woman are different in physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual characteristics. They have to be so for the precise roles they are endowed with. These roles are not contradictory, but are complementary. Man and woman are like right and left or front and rear wheels of the same vehicle. While they have dissimilarities on account of their particular gender, they have immense similarities for the reason that they share the same human nature. 'Give and take' is the dictum that makes man and woman mutually enriching and fruitful. As a result, they cannot remain like islands in any area of social life. They cannot afford to travel like parallel lines either. They are and have to be living examples of deep 'human interface' that is other-oriented and intimate. The 'Trinitarian concept of God'⁶ in the Christian perspective of life and the 'communion among the three persons of God' is a perfect model for the multi-faceted communion that has to exist between man and woman. Ascending the rungs of the ladder of Indian spirituality 'Saalokya (being in the same world), saameepya (being near), saaropya (sharing in the form of the other) and saayoojya (communion)'⁷ is another model for the dialogical journey of life man and woman are called to travel. The 'horizontal dialogue' between the two sides of the image of God that is shared by male and female genders is oriented to merge with the 'vertical dialogue' with the total image of God. This spiritual trance is realizable only in 'a spirit of togetherness' between the dual genders, in all its dimensions. Such a relational experience is the central dynamics of human life, in terms of gender in special.

4. The Dilemma of Imbalance of Genders in Human History

In spite of the heavenly ideal of 'male-female communion' that is portrayed above, the world history is disreputable with blatant records that irrefutably state that human life has been significantly male-dominated and patriarchal. Though there have been exceptions of matriarchal systems and emancipated groups and individuals of women even under patriarchal systems, in the over all picture, assertion of the superiority of man relegated woman to an inferior position. It is obvious that man has a more active role to play in several areas of life and that he is stronger in many respects. It is also true that woman has certain functions that limit her movements and involvements. But, that does not give license to man for manipulating woman and her roles or for subjugating and cornering her in societal life. There is no denying the fact that exceptional women have been in the forefront in the world history and that in recent times the involvement of women in social life has made remarkable contributions in the diverse arenas of human

⁶ Holy Bible (New International Bible), *ibid*, Mt 28.19, page 1134; Jn 14.15-17, page 1227

⁷ Srimad-Bhagavatam (Bhagavata Purana), 3.29.13

civilization. All the same, the world still remains impoverished because of the insufficient contribution of women in the society. This sad predicament applies to the religious sector all the more. It is paradoxical to note that religious theories and practices are also victims of male selfishness and arrogance. Religious communities stand on different levels as regards the position of women in the society. Yet, in the larger context, religious traditions would have been much purer and the human society richer, to a great extent, if women had their due share of participation in decision-making and administrative process. Although there is plenty of rhetoric in the political, religious and social sectors on reservation of opportunities for women, very little of it is seen being translated into action. In spite of the fact that there are substantial signs of awakening and empowerment among women in different communities, there are 'miles to go' before the human society wins over the dilemma of disturbed equilibrium between the genders.

5. Measures for Better Harmony of Genders

Men are inclined to entertain the thought that the problems of women are merely women's problems. As a matter of fact, this is a disoriented understanding. The problems of women are equally problems of men. Perhaps, they are more the problems of men than of women. Certain exaggerated understandings or distorted attitudes among men are predominantly responsible for the sad predicament of women. Consequently, the empowerment of women has to start with the empowerment of men primarily. Awareness needs to be created among women and men alike concerning the areas where women are condemned to be sufferers of the lust, greed, arrogance and aggression. The concentration of importance on men needs to be broken. The ambition of men to monopolize credit as well as decision has to be reconsidered. Special thoughtfulness has to be extended to women so that they too have opportunities for growing to their full stature. The basic principle of justice has to be the norm of evolving policies in families and in the society. A spirit of equality has to be maintained in the various areas of individual, family and societal life. The pathological instances of wife-beating, dowry-related ill-treatment, arresting female births, sexual exploitation, rape, female child labour, underpayment, and the like, are to be identified, duly punished for and treated effectively. Adult education has to be intensively taken up for women. It is to be ensured that women have due participation in making decisions, implementing schemes, evaluating pro-active measures and evolving plans. Opportunities for education, economic self-dependence, intellectual-psychological growth, etc. have to be increased further. Women have to be promoted to leadership positions so that they have their due share of opportunities for being responsible for the societal life. The religious sector has to facilitate the governmental and administrative machinery to be honestly committed to the above cause and support the same in an all-out fashion. Women have to be motivated to awaken themselves and exert complete effort to stand up on their feet in every way. It is also to be made certain that the measures of empowering women are not geared against men but are aimed at achieving better harmony with the complementary gender. Therefore, all the measures have to be monitored in a spirit of other-centred collaboration.

6. Involvement of Women in Fostering Harmony of Faiths

Women register a much greater participation in religious activities. This is possibly because of the centrality of emotions and experiences in faith and faith-related matters. Women, as they are, have more emotional involvement, especially in terms of their wifely and motherly roles, too.

Perhaps the most leading mystical tendency of considering human spirit ‘woman’ and divine spirit ‘man’, irrespective of religious affiliations, must be responsible for this phenomenon. All the same, the participation of women in religious matters remains, to a great extent, as that of passive spectators. Since almost the entire religious system of theories and practices happened to be a creation of men, the feminine dimension of the religious heritage is not developed enough. Women have to be incorporated into the mainstream of religious thinking, law-making and activities.

Besides, the involvement of women in religious matters has to be extended to reaching out to people of other faiths. Women are capable of doing this more easily than men since they aren’t usually entangled with doctrines and dogmas. They are free from many ritualistic functions, too. A mindset of integral dialogue of life, in terms of worldviews, ideas, feelings, spiritual experiences, attitudes, action, etc. has to be developed among women. The style of living one’s faith has to be extended to a ‘circle of all faiths’. All faith traditions are the gift of the same creator. They are the common cultural heritage of the human society. They are not ‘mine and yours’. The horizons of one’s faith have to be broadened from ‘I and mine’ to ‘we and ours’. The renewed perspective of harmony of faiths would be ‘one is mine in special and others also are mine in general’. The divine ‘Spirit’ is one and following the promptings of the ‘Spirit’ is spirituality proper. Therefore, in the true sense of the word, spirituality can be only one, though there are different dimensions of that spirituality in diverse faith traditions. Spirituality is even beyond theistic and atheistic considerations. There is also a non-religious perception of the same spirituality. Women have to come forward to unearth the deeper implications of such harmony perspective of life and be active and committed agents of ‘harmony of faiths’ and perspectives in the society. Harmony of faiths is fundamental to ‘making a harmonious society’ and whole-hearted involvement of women in such a noble mission is crucial for harmony of faiths in the society, in terms of both curative and preventive measures.

7. Women as Promoters of Harmony in Social Life

The entire creation is conceived and realized on the foundation of a harmony perspective of life. There is an inbuilt sense of harmony in nature, among the living beings and especially among human beings. The relational network of human life is firmly grounded on the texture of harmony. ‘Harmony with the divine, the human and the natural’ are the three dimensions of a creditable human life. Coordination of the diverse facets of human living is inevitable for maintaining the equilibrium of societal life. ‘Vasudhaiv kutumbakam’⁸ of the Upanishads is the characteristic articulation of this harmony perspective. ‘National integration’ is oriented to the unity and integrity of this country. ‘Social harmony’ is aimed at the uprightness of the whole human society. The world at large and our country in particular show alarming symptoms of pathology in the stances of terrorist attacks, communal violence and crimes against humanity. Violation of the fundamental rights of citizens, defiance of the constitutional duties, deep-seated prejudices, structured injustices, discrimination in the name of different strata of communities, and the like, are staring blots on the advanced civilization, education, technology and spiritual sense of the modern society. Harmony and peace-initiatives have to be a thoroughgoing campaign geared towards ‘humane ways’ of life. One’s religious sense has to be the motivating force for the ‘civic sense’ of life. One has to draw strength and courage from one’s own tuning

⁸ Mahopanishada, 6.72 / Hitopadesha, 1.3.71 / Pañchatantra, 5.3.37

with the divine irrespective of diverse persuasions. The cultural and spiritual heritage of great men and women, scriptures, traditions and values has to be the shared lighthouse for the human society and for our country in special.

The most unyielding question at this juncture is ‘what is the role of fifty percent of the human society in evolving an adequate response to the crucial problems of the society and the country today?’ There is no denying the fact that the women half of the society in general and some significant women in particular have contributed beyond measure to the well-being of human life. All the same, it appears that women have a more important role to play than men in the present century and in the coming centuries in view of bettering the human society in terms of making a more harmonious society. Ensuring equality of human dignity, rights and opportunities among men and women is primary to the harmony of social life. Men have to remain within their own discipline so that women are not violated in any respect. Women have to be facilitated by men to obtain their rightful share of education, employment and participation in public life. Women have to get awakened individually and get organized for consciously eliminating or minimizing discord in the areas of ethnicity, language, caste, class, colour, creed, ideology, profession, culture and nationality. Women, with a spirit of togetherness, have to collaborate with men for promoting harmony in the diverse sectors of social life. Such a ‘humane’ culture of harmony between women and men who coexist and march together in all areas of human life is the spiritual celebration of life that is worthy of the Creator of the universe as well as of the genders.

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