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Concept of Social Harmony in the time of Social Distancing –

Perceived though the Perspective of Indian Saints.

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Abstract - In the time of social distancing the paper discusses the concept of social harmony as seen in the works of Indian saints. **Social-Harmony plays a very crucial role in maintaining the integrity and unity of a nation.** Social relations among different groups are really important aspect for any society to develop as a whole. India is a land of yogis, poets and saints that have always show the path of love and compassion to the world. It's a land of spiritual practice and knowledge where various saint- poets like Tulsidas, Kabir, Rahim, Surdas, Mirabai, Guru Nanak, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda etc. have propagated the idea and value of social harmony. The paper further discusses the idea and importance of social harmony not only among humans but also with nature, and lessons to be learned by the spread of corona pandemic.

This is a critical time but also an opportunity for all of us to become more familiar with the ways in which technology can keep us connected since we are unable to physically congregate. No doubt this coronavirus crisis is prompting us to improvise new ways of collaborating and harmonizing. At this time of uncertainty, it is also important and necessary that we do not lose optimism and self-confidence in the constructive efforts round the world.

As such, in the time of social distancing I would like to discuss the concept of social harmony as seen in the works and message of Indian Saints. Social harmony as such, can be defined ‘as a process of valuing, expressing, and promoting love, trust, admiration, peace, harmony, respect, generosity and equity upon other people in any particular society regardless of their national origin, weight, marital status, ethnicity, colour, gender, race, age and occupation etc. among other aspects.’¹

Dalai Lama says “the entire world is interdependent. That is why I often speak about universal responsibility. The outbreak of this terrible coronavirus has shown that what happens to one person can soon affect every other being. But it also reminds us that a compassionate or constructive act—whether working in hospitals or just observing social distancing—has the potential to help many.”²



Well, as such it seems that social harmony is what a society or a country yearns for. **Social-Harmony plays a very crucial role in maintaining the integrity and unity of a nation.** Social relations among different groups are indeed an important aspect for any society. India or Bharat, is a land of rishis, yogis, poets and saints that have always shown the path of love and compassion to the world. It's a land of spiritual practice and knowledge where various rishis like Shri Vyasa Muni, Maharishi Valmiki, Shri Brahmarshi Vishwamitra, Rishi Agasthya, Maharishi Patanjali, Shri Adi Shankaracharya, Goswami Tulsidas, Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Swami Sivananda Saraswati, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Shri Paramahansa Yogananda, Shri Ramana Maharishi, Shri Shirdi Sai Baba, Shri Aurobindo, Shri Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Shri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, Shri Shivkrupanand Swami, Avadhot Sivananda Swami, Shri Shri Ravi Shankar and Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, have propagated the idea and value of social harmony. Social harmony and equality were and are the heart of Indian ethos.

Indian philosophy and culture try to achieve an innate harmony and order and this is extended to the entire cosmos. Indian culture assumes that natural cosmic order inherent in nature is the foundation of moral and social order. Inner harmony is supposed to be the foundation of outer harmony. External order and beauty will naturally follow from inner harmony. Indian culture balances and seeks to synthesize the material and the spiritual, as aptly illustrated by the concept of Purushartha.³

These saints and poets belonged to various castes and communities, spoke varied languages and dialects, and came from different professions. For example - Kabir was a weaver, Namdev was a tailor, Akho was a goldsmith, Goro was a potter and Chokhmela was a mahar. While Eknath and Gyanadev were Brahmins. All spoke and sang about the tradition that was based on equality and harmony of all mankind. Whereas Mirabai and Narasinh sang in praise of God. These Saints and the *acharyas* had their own followings. In different periods of time, several religions were formed all over India. But the beauty of these religions was that, that

all of them represented pure *bhakti* which is the central theme of the all Hindu scriptures and was illustrated by all of the Saints. Just like a flower in a garland appear to be separate, but is tied together harmoniously by a thread or string, all the religions or traditions of India are initially tied up with the string of *bhakti* as if they are all one single religion of *bhakti* which is appearing in numerous forms.

As such, these saints-poets did not belong to any single religion or tradition. But they belonged to this country and its people. They did not write in Sanskrit, but preached and sang in the common dialect and their poetry survived hundreds of years of oral tradition. The *Santvani* still vibrates in the air and sky of our country giving the message of social harmony. Let us just tune in as see what they say –

- Tulsidas says – 'तुलसी इस संसार में, भांति भांति के लोग।

सबसे हस मिल बोलिए, नदी नाव संजोग।'

- Kabir says – 'जाति न पूछो साधु की, पूछ लीजिये ज्ञान,

मोल करो तरवार का, पड़ा रहन दो म्यान I.'

- Rahim says – 'जे गरिब पर हित करें, हे रहीम बड।

कहा सुदामा बापुरो, कृष्ण मिताई जोग '

- Chanakya says – 'व्यक्ति अपने कार्यों से महान होता है, अपने जन्म से नहीं । '

- Guru Nanak says that cast is vain and contributes not to goodness or holiness: --

'Castes are folly, names are folly

All creatures have one shelter, *that of God.*

If a man call himself good,

The truth shall be known, O Nanak, when his account is accepted.'



Man, no matter what his caste or social position may be, is exalted by devotion: --

‘What difference is there between a swan and a crane, if God look kindly *on the latter?*

Nanak, if it please Him, He can change a raven into a swan’

(<https://www.sacred-texts.com/skh/tsr1/tsr125.htm>)

In all the above hymns or poems devotion or Bhakti comes in many flavours and the poets sing about harmony with society as well as with the almighty. According to various Hindu school of thoughts there are five kinds of emotions that arise from these Bhakti songs and poems. The five bhavas or rasas they are Shanta, Dasya, Sakhya, Vatsalya and Madhurya.³ These bhavas arise in one’s heart subconsciously, and a person goes towards whatever resonates with his or her temperament. As such all the saints have a humanitarian message that shows basic equality of all living beings. The list could be endless, and it’s not possible to include in a short paper.

Every nation is the expression of an idea and Swami Vivekanand says “This idea is working for the world and is necessary for its preservation.” The words of Vivekanand with their freshness and vigour provide an answer to questions that agitate both individual as well as society.

In his Chicago Speech (11 September 1893) he says –

I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth.

In a letter to Justice Sir Subramaniam on January 3, 1895 Vivekananda says -

The modern class is not the real caste. It is in fact an obstruction to progress, which disturbs the uninhibited activities of castes and classes amid their differences.



He strongly believed that India has a long-standing tradition of solving its own problems. The illusion that no efforts were made in the past towards the upliftment of the downtrodden and such efforts have started only recently is a deliberately constructed myth. He asks-

Has India ever faced a shortage of reformers? Have you read the history of India? Who was Shankaracharya? Who was Nanak? Who was Chaitanya? Who was Kabir? All these preachers were like the shining stars of our galaxy. Did not Ramanuj empathize with the backward classes? Did he not try to bring them under his fold?

He says we have made a mistake in understanding our caste system. He believes and says everyone has made the mistake of holding caste to be a religious institution and tried to pull down religion and caste all together, and failed. On the contrary, he articulates that caste is a social custom, it is an outgrowth of the political institution of India. Swami Vivekanand understands this difference and hence he constantly tried to separate religion from the evils of society and tried to comprehend the truth. He says-

At present, our religion is not in the Vedas, Puranas, devotion or deliverance; it has entered the kitchen. Currently, religion in India is neither on the path of knowledge nor intelligence; it only treads on untouchability. It has ended up getting condensed in, "Aatmavat sarvabhooteshu" (consider all the living beings as your own soul). Is this message meant to be confined to books only?

Swami Vivekanand, who was devoted to the Vedanta, was extremely unhappy with social evils and firmly determined to eradicate them from society. He strongly believed that a harmonious society is the first step towards the welfare of mankind. Once during a discussion on non-duality, Swami Vivekanand told his disciples -

I belong to all people. We are followers of the Vedic Hindu Religion. We have nothing to do with untouchability as there is no such concept in the Hindu religion. Our scriptures do not mention untouchability; it is merely a superstition that keeps interfering with the routine concentration of work of the population.



The recent crises have made us aware about the positive as well as negative points of our society. Aided by donors, investors, and communities at large, many NGOs are working to tackle the crisis and help out vulnerable sections of the population, especially vendors, daily-wage earners, and small businesses. As lakhs of labours have become jobless and penniless, we see many NGO's and organisations coming forward and feeding and sheltering those helpless and also creating social awareness. While on other hand it seems that some religious sects are trying to purposefully spread the virus and also create disharmony. At this juncture the teaching of our saints and gurus can certainly guide us towards creating harmony.

Thus, in the present scenario it seems that this message of social harmony has become stronger. Here it is important to understand what Sadhguru articulates when he says "Unfortunately, certain people make our differences into discrimination...if you take away the discrimination and keep the differences how beautiful it is ...no society in the world has this fine distinction.... these subtleties, these differences are fantastic. We are colourful culture because of these differences." We should never confuse differences with discriminations. Our nation survives and is beautified by these differences.

However, it's quite clear that a nation that invests in prejudice, that manifests in oppression of its own citizenry, cannot be successful. People of all faith, nation, colour irrespective of all these differences living peacefully in mutual trust as a society is social harmony. Social harmony refers to greater interconnection among its various believers. It is a situation wherein different units feel together, where individual identities are dissolved within a greater social reality and where there is greater attachment to the notion of a greater unity. It is a system where in we acknowledge that differing identities co-exist within the system, but we also claim that there is cooperation rather than competition or strife. Social harmony is, accordingly, a state of affairs where social strife is minimized through cooperation, compromise and understanding.

As such the base of Indian civilization has always been spirituality. We have always believed that every being has been formed from the same essence (तत्त्व). In the Indian tradition, philosophy and religion have always gone hand in hand. We proclaim earth to be our mother and each soul to be divine. No doubt all our ancient and modern saints, poets and rishis, from



Kalidas to Sadhguru all have preached social harmony. But it is regrettably that many times we are yet unable to sustain this status. We failed to remember this feeling of universality and end up distancing ourselves from each other.

Simultaneously, we should not forget that India's centripetal forces – economic growth, corporate and infrastructure development and improved national democratic governance – bring the national together. Rajiv Malhotra in his *Breaking India* says that the centripetal forces that divide India are both internal and external and they are threat to Social Harmony. The internal ones include communalism and social-economic disparities of various kinds. India has the largest number of poor citizens in the world, largest number of children without school. There are social issues that are partly historical and partly modern. In each and every social aspect we see different narratives and movement that are a threat to Social Harmony. Separatist movements threaten everyday life in Kashmir, and other parts. Today India is confronted with a large number of separatist movements. While outwardly we are surrounded by unstable and radicalized nations, while inward also there are many threats.

The same is being said by Vivekanand. For years we had been cut off and had stopped learning. He says that there two causes to produce a disease, in some cases germs from outside attack the body while in some cases germs thrive and multiply within the body. But in both case immunity plays an important role. So, we should strength our inner self, if we want to survive.

He says that solution will come not by bringing down the higher, but by raising the lower up to the level of the higher and this can be done by education. The only solution for the welfare of the nation is to be free from social evils and adopt a harmonious way of life through education. There should be closeness instead of rage. We must strengthen the society instead of yearning after personal rights. We must care for the entire mankind and not only ourselves. A harmonious society will come into existence only on the basis of love and good feelings towards others.

In times of social conflict, intolerance, and war-like situation, the concept and approach propagated by out saints, to creating and sustaining peace takes on a new and urgent significance. All of us today would appreciate the teachings of these saints and gurus, that are



clear, practical, undogmatic, and contemporary in flavour. These teachings on Social and Communal Harmony will prove to be important readings for anyone seeking to bring peace into their communities and into the wider world.

Essentially the idea of *वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्* - is the idea in which Vivekanand believed and is the Idea of our nation. This declaration is not just about peace and harmony among the societies in the world, but also about a truth that the whole world has to live like a family. Just by expecting this idea and by at least trying to live by it and practice it in our lives, we could make this world a better place.

This pandemic phase and the lockdown have made us aware the we cannot and should not be tranquilized by the false security that the modern technology is provide us. We should never incline to forget about how fragile the life on this planet is. While preparing our instant dinners in the safe vicinity of our kitchens we tend to forget that food is not coming from the supermarket but from a star 150 million kilometres away which gives light and energy to plants which feed us and the animals too. Whether we like it or not, whether aware of it or not, we are the part of a delicate ecosystem we are all dependable on and responsible for. For Kalidas, The Himalaya is a great devaatma, a great spiritual presence, stretching from the west to the eastern sea like a measuring rod to gauge the world's greatness. While Shankaracharya referred to the holy river ganga as the goddess of divine essence. In *Sanatana Dharma* nature is worshiped - tress, animal, birds, mountains, rivers, sun, moon etc. are worshiped and are part and parcel of existence. Indian has it has its own unique own unique eco centric approach, that has been propogated by all saints and gurus. Eco centric approach is an inherent part of a spiritual world view in India.

Today with every animal species going extinct we are losing part of our own survival, a part of ourselves. It is not possible to harm another human being or any other life form without harming a small part of ourselves. For ages we have been running after materialistic pleasures. We have been out of harmony with the universal law of harmony. The image may seem conflicting, but in this atmosphere of fear, isolation and panic, we can hear the birds again, the sky is smokeless, the rivers are clean. Slowly we are reflecting and planning and praying of a better world. As humans we should have empathy for nature as well.



We are lucky to have inherited a history, culture and civilization dating thousands of years back. This past no doubt has been a continuous source of inspiration for us. It is truly said that our capacity and capability to understand our great inheritance will decide our future, because each layer of society has had its own importance and existence.

In the end we should not forget -

चन्दन है इस देश की माटी, तपो भूमि हर ग्राम है।
हर बाला देवी की प्रतिमा, बच्चा-बच्चा राम है।।ध्रु.।।

हर शरीर मंदिर सा पावन, हर मानव उपकारी है
जहाँ सिंह बन गये खिलौने, गाय जहाँ माँ प्यारी है
जहाँ सवेरा शंख बजाता, लोरी गाती शाम है।

जहाँ कर्म से भाग्य बदलते, श्रमनिष्ठा कल्याणी है
त्याग और तप की गाथायें, गाती कवि की वाणी है
ज्ञान जहाँ का गंगाजल सा, निर्मल है अविराम है।



Corona crisis has shown us many incidences of social harmony. Yet the politician-corporate nexus is still quite strong in the world as well as in our country. At present, we have to be alert and remember that – ‘The woods are lovely, dark and deep’, but my nation has many promises to keep and a long journey ahead. Social harmony is the demand of the day.



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