

Confronting Conflicts : The Indian Tradition

Today, the world scenario is quite dismal. After the end of cold war, we all presumed that peace would now dawn on this world, but, on the contrary, we found a considerably increase in conflicts arising out of considerations of regional autonomy and national sovereignty, linguistic and ethnic equality, religious fanaticism and ethnic rivalries, terrorism and post-colonial international interventions.

The conflicts have further increased due to technological economic and ideological shifts. Today's conflicts are about settling border disputes controlling resources, capturing power, retaining tribal or clan dominance or continuing instability in neighbouring states and regions. In recent times, we have seen new dimensions of conflicts emerging into sight. For some of the old ones – where we thought we were looking at light at the end of the tunnel – things have gone awry in the opposite direction. The potential and the existence of conflicts constitute a clear and present threat to harmony, peace and prosperity of nations and societies. It is, therefore, important that we take a hard and close look at our time-worn approaches towards bringing peace to strife-torn lands and bridge the gulf of hatred. We have to find out where we are going wrong, and, we have to find better ways to establish peace.

In this present situation it becomes necessary to give serious thought to the strategies of conflict resolution. In general, it can be argued that

understanding the root causes of problems is essential for conflict resolution whereas conflict in a given system cannot be managed without going for dialogues and collaborative processes and creating harmony which is the culminating phase in resolving conflicts and remove violence. Conflict management is a prerequisite for achieving durable peace and prosperity in the world. In Buddhism it is said that to be in harmony with others, you must be at peace with yourself. The aim should be to eventually evolve a self equilibrating regimen to ward off and resolve conflict for the collective good of nations and communities. Clearly, if we want to argue for the existence of the world as we know it, we have to find out ways of qualifying and supplementing our efforts towards harmony by conflict resolution, management and reconciliation.

There is no doubt that India has given birth to many religions and lived in peaceful coexistence with them for hundreds of years. It has been possible because of its ethos of plurality, humanism and openness, its sense of adaptability and the power of assimilation. Hence, it is helpful to look into our ancient heritage of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain philosophy and also the teaching of the medieval sufi and the saint poets, their all-embracing message of love and also to learn from the experience gained from our interaction with the world outside in our search for strategies of promoting harmony and reconciliation.

II

Everything in this universe according to Indian philosophy is in constant conflict, '*dvandatmakam jagat*'. However, at every step in Indian philosophical cultural and religious tradition the effort was to resolve this conflict, which is possible, as said in the Upanishads by realizing that one who perceives all the beings in his own self and own self in all the beings does not hate any one any more :

*Yastu sarvani bhutani aatmanyebanupashyati
Sarvabhuteshu chatmanam tatona vijugupsate.*

This realization depends upon one's deep understanding of the existence of one Supreme Reality and that the Self is one with that Reality. This is Vedantic philosophy.

The basis of Vedantic philosophy is the identity of all beings with Brahman, the Supreme Being or Transcendental Soul (Paramatma) and hence the essential identity of all living entities, be it human, or animal.

The consequence of Advaitic philosophy is that if you harm another being, man, woman, animal, or insect you are harming yourself. The concept of ahimsa or non-violence has its roots in this monistic theory that every life is a spark of the divine and our recognition of the divine must be so universal as to identify ourselves with this divinity and the divinity in everything. The *Upanisads*, the *Brahma Sutras*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and other religio-philosophical treatises of ancient India are full of references to

this highest doctrine of monism. Suffice it is say here that pacifisms and humanitarianism are the necessary corollaries of this very doctrine. When God was to be visualize in all, how could even there be any justification of war which was nothing but self-destruction and self-annihilation. The Taittiriya Upanishad explains that when one sees difference, even to the smallest degree, their arises fear. So long as there is another, there is finitude and hence fear. When the notion of difference is transcended by the vision of underlying unity, there is fearlessness which is *moksa* (renunciation).

III

However, Indian Religio-philosophical tradition while extolling the value of peace accepted violence as legitimate when it is a matter of safeguarding order as a whole, and a refusal to engage in it would actually be considered a serious lapse. The Vedic literature is full of war-spirit, is shown by the fact that about one-fourth of the total Rig Vedic hymns are addressed to Indra, who is a war God. Lord Shiva is a God who destroys. War was enjoined as a defensive measure dictated by necessity and was not upheld on the basis of war for the sake of war and was also not exalted as the highest act of moral excellence. It was accepted for performing one's own duty. Lord Krishna warned Arjuna as mentioned in Bagavad Gita, if you do not fight this righteous war, you are committing *adharmā* (unrighteousness) and well certainly incur sin and also lose your reputation (2.33). One will have to do ones duty.

Bhagavad Gita provides arguments for the legitimacy of killing including the teaching that the soul in its essential nature is deathless and immortal:

He who thinks that this self a killer and he who thinks it is killed, both fail to understand; it does not kill, nor is it killed (2.19). Moreover killing is a duty (dharma) for Arjuna, the protagonist of the Gita, since he belongs to the warrior caste of the kshatriya.

Another justification for violence appears in the theory pertaining to the *avatars* of Vishnu. The action to safeguard dharma is encouraged rather than acts free from desire. Violence is legitimate when used against enemies of *dharma*, as it is when deployed against enemies of the king, who is entrusted with the protection of *dharma*.

Two points are clear from this:

- 1) violence can be resorted to only in just causes;
- 2) there is something that can be categorized as righteous violence. A righteous end justifies even unrighteous means.

IV

The Indian tradition thus does not categorically prohibit the use of violence in spite of its extolling *ahimsa* (non-violence) as a great virtue. However, it preferred the gospel of peace, *maitri* or friendship to all and used the concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) leading to harmony for any kind of

conflict management and reconciliation and considered philosophical pacifisms as a virtue capable of realization. Harmony means empathy, love and togetherness. It is love which deals with the root causes of the conflict and settles it in a human way and is the most profound strategy of conflict resolution and is talked about by practically every religion, sufi faqirs and medieval saints of India and by Mahatma Gandhi and by many thinkers of the present time.

Love is a primary directing force that floods the soul and flows outward towards the other. Love is always rooted in the field of other. The final sense is one of coming together – becoming and being dialectically united. This is the crowning strategy of conflict settlement making way for reconciliation without which there cannot be any genuine peace in the world. Love goes beyond the monocultures of industrial and technological civilization. Monocultures looks at things as binary opposites hence in these cultures after 9/11 tragically every Muslim is a suspect. Love, on the contrary, creates the landscape of harmony, safer far for life of all kinds than the landscape of monoculture. And we should not neglect to notice that, whereas the monocultural landscape is totalitarian in tendency, the landscape of harmony is democratic and free which does not set the goals on the principle of an eye for an eye but on tolerance, solidarity and dialogue to settle differences and heal wounds. It is the human love for each other which harmoniously rejoins us and is the most potent strategy of conflict resolution particularly in comparison to any other strategy. It paves the way for the establishment of the culture of peace in the world.



Indian religions and philosophical tradition considered *ahimsa* (non-violence) to be the prime factor in the attaining of peace, harmony and brotherhood which ultimately helped in conflict reconciliation. *Ahimsa* linguistically a negative term, is however not a negative concept in Indian tradition whether Hinduism or Jainism. It is a positive attitude engendered by positive virtues such as compassion (*karunya*), kindness (*daya*) and *kshanti* (forbearance).

During the Vedic period in India the concept of *ahimsa* or non-violence was virtually unknown, and non-violence as a moral virtue is first mentioned in the *Chandogya Upanishad*(3.17.4) where the word *ahimsa* implies self-sacrifice and restraint. However, the doctrine of meeting hatred by love, anger by calm and violence by non-violence was very much acceptable to the Vedic seers. The ideal of maintaining friendly relations with all appealed to the Aryans the most. In their daily prayers to God, they invoked His blessings, "to be seen by all, as friends and to see all as friends (yaju XXX, 18). The Vedic seers appealed for world peace with this kind of friendly relations with all. They wanted genuine peace from all sides, from all beings and from all the universe (yaju, XXXVI, 12) :

Let there be peace on earth and peace in sky,
Peace in heaven and peace on the seas,
Peace in plants and herbs and peace in all elements,
Peace be in peace itself and peace in the universe,

Then peace and peace and peace be all round.

VI

The Vedic seers articulated the doctrine of friendship and peace in a real sense of the term and added *abhaya*, fearlessness in the doctrine to prove that peace under duress could not change the heart, mutual distrust, hatred and enmity. It was to be done without any fear with all sincerity to resolve conflict and violence. This is one of the core fundamental and cardinal virtue commended even Lord Krishna and the Vedic seers. The Bhagavad Gita (XVI-I) puts fearlessness as the first among the *daivi sampat* (divine qualities). Fearlessness is said to be the same as enlightenment. In fact, fearlessness is the other side of *ahimsa* (non-violence). "Injure no being" is co-related with the notion that one should spread fearlessness among all beings (Chandogya Upanishad).

A man who is fearless can follow the path of non-violence and to follow this one needs to have high courage and strong will force. Manu in his *smriti* (10.63) accords *ahimsa* prime position in the list of virtues, which according to him summarizes dharma. Indeed, *ahimsa* (non-violence) some times said to summarize all virtue.

The notion of *ahimsa* came to occupy a central place in the teachings of the great heterodox teachers of India, Mahavira, the founder of Jainism and Buddha of Buddhism. The greatest votary of ahimsa was the royal monk Asoka who, in reality, was responsible for transforming *ahimsa*, an act of personal virtue to *ahimsa*, an act of national virtue and turned it into a thing of love "which was achieved through piety only and which brought bliss in this world and in the next" (edict XVII). In other words *Ahimsa* is not a closed term with just one denotation but with multiple interpretations. Mahabharata explains this with the help of a parable. The story is of a little pond guarded by a yaksha in the *Aranyaka* Parva. A drink from that pond killed all the Pandavas except Yudhisthira, who brought them all back to life because he could answer the Yaksa's questions. One of the questions was :

Kascha dharmah paroloke

Which is the highest dharma for people living in this world?

Yudhisthira replied :

Aanrishyamsyam (non-injury).

It means one who does not bodily harm others. It also means one who is not cruel, mischievous, base, vile and malicious. The positive meaning is one who is human, compassionate and has balance. One who does not fly away from this world and at the same time who is not utterly absorbed in it. This extended meaning of the term is used by Mahatma

Gandhi in the modern times. For Gandhi non-violence or ahimsa means more than not doing physical harm to an opponent. It embodies a positive concept – it requires doing not merely the refraining from injury. Ahimsa “is not merely a negative state of harmlessness but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doers. But it does not mean helping the evil-doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love, the active state of ahimsa requires you to resist the wrong-doer”.

∇II

Gandhi brought the concept of non-violence into political sphere and was able to make mass movements of non-violent, non-cooperation into powerful forces for political change. He used the term *satyagraha* (“Soul force”) to describe his novel method of conflict resolution, suggesting that the spiritual realm had power no less effective than those of the material realm. Gandhi himself summarizes this process thus :

“I seek entirely to blunt the edge of the tyrants’ sword, not by putting up against it a sharper edged weapon but by disappointing his expectation that I would be offering physical resistance. The resistance of the soul that I should offer instead would elude him. It would at first dazzle him and at last compel recognition from him which recognition would not humiliate him but uplift him (Young India, 8 October, 1925).

The following concepts which are fundamental components of satyagraha turn it into an edifice of spiritual morality :

(1) Faith in human goodness, (2) Truth, (3) Non-violence, (4) Creative self-suffering, (5) Means and Ends (a principle which is merely a reflection of the Hindu belief in *Karma*), (6) Rejection of coercion and (7) Fearlessness.

All these concepts together help in our understanding of Satyagraha as a method of conflict resolution and also as a way of life based on spiritual morality.

VIII

Dialogues among people, religions, cultures mean to deal with differences and understand and appreciate the common bonds of people and also the diversities. This is why dialogues among people, religions and cultures enable us to pursue the higher goals of peace, tolerance and civil dignity. It also helps as says Remin Jahanbegloo to shed light (*dia in Greek*) into things through the spoken word (*logos in Greek*). In other words, bringing forth that which is hidden, is the ground or foundation of all cultures, all civilizations. In order to enter into a meaningful dialogue aimed at resolving conflicts and better mutual understanding, every individual has to be prepared to exercise tolerance towards other ways of thinking, towards people who base their daily lives on values and

experiences other than our own. Let us remember the well-known quote by Einstein that 'a person starts to live when he can live outside himself' and hence tolerance alone is not enough : equally important is the notion of "responsibility" – for other cultures as well for one's own culture. While tolerance means not to interfere with other's ways of living or thinking, "responsibility" actually suggests responsiveness to the "otherness" of the other.

Today, says Ramin Jahanbegloo, we are not experiencing a clash of civilizations, so much as a clash of intolerances. Intolerance is mainly the inability or unwillingness to endure something different and there is the urgency to show love and understanding for others and their otherness. Only then it will open to the possibilities of the other's thinking, as well as to the voice of the dialogue itself. Rig Veda says that the only way to remove differences (*vaimattya*) is to understand each other and move together and also to know each other's mind :

Sam gachaddhwam sam vadadhwam sam no
Manasi janatam. (Rig 10,191,2)

This will help to attain, as says, Toshihiko Izutsu, a "fusion of horizons" and achieve human solidarity and bring peace and resolve conflicts.

It is time that we are witnessing a multiplicity of forms of violence in contemporary societies, such as ecological violence, religious fundamentalism leading to violence, social exclusion and sheer violence otherwise also. These are the emerging challenges and India can always fall back to its religio-cultural tradition to effectively face these challenges and resolve conflicts and violence and establish peace.

One of the serious challenges mankind is facing today is environmental pollution. In the name of progress modern scientific-technological civilization is slowly destroying the ecology of our planet. The modern man does not regard the natural world as alive in the sense he is alive. He does not think that man and nature are mutually related and part of universal life. Man has tamed nature and put it to his service. But environmental pollution has shattered the illusion that by taming nature happiness and peace can be attained.

In the Indian world-view, there is no dichotomy between matter and spirit, man and nature. In this holistic view, all life is one and inner reality and external reality are mutually dependent. India looks upon man and nature as 'waves of the same river'. Indian literature and art are full of motifs of lotus, sun, fire and water. The lotus symbolizes purity and generation, and the sun, knowledge and truth. The Himalayas are the symbol of the upward surge of the human spirit and of the axis around which the entire cosmos revolves. The Sindhu or the sea, is the symbol of infinite reality. The Indian attitude to progress is harmony with nature's

rhythm. The Hindu and Islamic traditions of India, the parables and mystical songs of the Sufis reflect the idea of a rhythmic universe in which man and nature have a symbiotic relationship. We have now recognized that pollution is a threat to the survival of mankind and that it cannot be cured without restraint of greed. The Upanishads, while talking about the supreme reality which is all-pervading, add: Don't be greedy. There is only one path to survival and that path is the ecological one, of harmony between man and nature, of sustainability and diversity as opposed to domination, exploitation and *parigraha*. *Parigraha* leads to greed, and then to violence.

India is facing another challenge : religious fundamentalism. It is eating into the very fabric of our composite culture and pluralistic world-view. The Indian ethos is an apt illustration of organic pluralism by which different groups attempt to preserve their unique cultural attributes while developing common institutional participation at the national level. Our constitutionally approved secularism is a sound policy but it has not given us the results we hoped for. In a religion-centred society there is a lot of confusion in understanding the term 'secularism', particularly because the concept has come from the West. The spirit of secularism can be effectively articulated only in our own cultural terms – tolerance and understanding of the equality of all religions. The Atharvaveda says that this earth, which accommodates peoples of different persuasions and languages, as in a peaceful home – may it benefit all of us. The acceptance of this religious plurality is possible in the country because of

our understanding of *Dharma* as a socio-ethical principle. It is like a centripetal force in nature which holds and sustains and keeps things at the centre. The spirit of *Dharma* is love for all. Secularism has to be understood with reference to *Dharma* – universality of spiritual values. The Indian cultural ethos does not accept secularism as something opposed to religion or as a totalitarian view of religion of India as a Hindu nation. The answer to communalism is not abolishing religion but a proper understanding of *Dharma* as a unifying pluralistic force. Only critical insiders like Shankara, Gautama Buddha, Muslim Sufis, Nanak Dev, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda or Mahatma Gandhi can point out the wrongs within the traditions and then suggest ways to put them right from inside. Nanak Dev critically examined the *Sant* Tradition and put stress on internal piety and devotion, and rejection of caste, ritual, magic and miracles. He wanted to go beyond what he considered the limitations of both Hinduism and Islam. Gandhiji realized the vitality of the culture-bound concept of *Dharma* to communicate with the masses of the country.

Another challenge which India is facing is that of depression of the lower caste and violation of democratic rights of the rural poor, adivasis and dalits. There are innumerable cases of atrocities and violence against the weaker sections of the society. Caste distinction has created bitterness and hatred and has at times, led to riots. Gandhiji fought all his life to eradicate this social menace. This challenge can be met by properly understanding the cultural ethos of India connected with *Rita* and *Satya*.

Satya is the sustaining truth and *Rita* is the dynamic regular order, the truth of becoming. To sustain the social and moral order or *Rita*, the society was divided into four classes. This division provides the archetypal design of the social system aiming at an all-round development and fulfillment of an individual contributing to the welfare of the society. The literary documents show ample evidence that in the beginning this class system, now changed into a caste system, was actually a functional division of society: based on the particular potentialities and tastes of the different members. A vedic seer says in the Rig Veda: I am a poet, my father is a physician and my maternal grandfather a stone-cutter. In fact the word *Varna* means what is chosen. A student is called a *varnim* because he chooses a profession for which he is preparing himself. He could have chosen the profession of a *Brahmin* to devote himself to knowledge or the profession of a *kshatriya* to protect the society or of a *Vaisya* to give nourishment to the whole society or of a *Sudra* to provide stability and movement. This division of labour is metaphorically personified in the body of a man whose limbs are inter-connected. The absence of any can cripple him. Indian culture gives us four *varnas*, and not castes, with a provision for upward and downward mobility based on meritorious deeds or otherwise. Today one may feel that these are old ideas but Indian ideas, however modern, have a spirit of Indianness- a deep sense of continuity in the midst of change. In India, the past lives in the present and both are carried forward into the future. With proper education and economic and political power the ills of the caste system can be removed and a consciousness can be created to fight obscurantism, parochialism and

suppression of the weaker section of the society. Indian culture demands the common people's independence from every form of dominance over them. Gandhiji saw God *Narayana* in the poor and called him *Daridranarayana*.

Today man has become selfish and individualistic. He never thinks he has any responsibility towards society. He thinks he can live in himself. The Indian traditional system does not absolve him from his social obligations. Man is born with a four-fold obligation: the obligation to the ancestors fulfilled through the life of the householder carrying forward the tradition of the family; the obligation to the sages and to wisdom fulfilled through a life devoted to the intellectual pursuit of knowledge and truth; the obligation to the gods fulfilled through a life dedicated to the divine and finally, the obligation to all beings – his life emptying itself for the fulfillment of the surrounding void – a life pulsating with the All-Breath rather than one's own breathing. The Indian cultural ethos says; You can't get happiness in yourself. You can get it only if you dedicate yourself to society. One of the meanings of the vedic concept of Yajna, sacrifice, is the fusion of the individual with the collective through charity and dedication. The Holy Quran directs every man to keep some money for charity – *zakat* – an ethos shared by all in India, irrespective of religion, social status and speech. Indianness does not spring from an exotic content but from the mind behind the organization of that content.

The most serious challenge today is violence. Everybody is facing it. In fact violence has tainted all the challenges India is facing today. The central point of violence is complete disregard for man's body. Two factors related to the body have created a crisis in the traditional religious and philosophical understanding of human life : (1) License to mutilate and demolish a body in the name of religion and political ideology; (2) The body is used to increase the hunger for sex. In the Indian cultural ambience sex is only one metaphor among many and not the most significant. Now it has become an obsessional reference to modern civilization and its pain, desire and violence. Body in relation to fashion results in the sexualization of the body, isolated from the previous system of boundaries and controls. The body is deconstructed to sell a product – thereby breaking the order of symbolism and making it subservient to technology.

In a culture which still believes in the paradigm of continuity, the body is to be considered as the hardware of the complex technical device that is human thought. It must be nurtured well so that it is capable of nourishing the software of human thought which is maintained and supported by the social situation and the will of the supreme divinity. The body is the house of God. There is no reason why the body should not be saved from destruction. The body has been viewed since time immemorial as an abode of the Atman. Pairs like *Deha-Dehin*, *Sarira-Saririn*, *Kshetra-Kshetranjna*, *Anga-angin*, *Pura-Purusha* are well known. Metaphors of the house and the householder, the castle or city and the king, the chariot and

the rider, the cage and the bird, the sheet (*chadar*) and the weaver, the *chunri* (scarf) and the bride etc. are very much alive in our written and oral traditions even today, symbolizing the unity of the body and the supreme soul. Perhaps the most significant way in which culture can contain violence is the displacement of the patterns of violence by introducing the time-tested universal laws of ethicality, love and humanity and not just by rational laws. Over rationalization also creates problems. It depersonalizes the society. Therefore it is imperative to tackle this problem of violence by regenerating our reverence for life. Man must see other beings in his own self and his own self in others. Both the physical world as well as man are equally important. This helps develop cultural syncretism, moral and religious humanism and the stature of the free human personality. Human dignity cannot be achieved through technology which turns one into a cog in a machine. It can be achieved only through ethics, and ethical achievement is measured by how much our actions are governed by compassion and love – not by greed, violence and aggressiveness.

X

In this context one can recollect the love story of a modern Hindi film, *Veer-Zara* to testify that love even in the modern times can be a very potent means for settling the border issues and moving beyond the partition – which took place in the subcontinent about 60 years ago to divide people of two communities in the name of religion and make conflict a perpetual happening. It shows how a movie can become the crystal seed to rapprochement, of creating new narratives of healing. It replaces the old myth of partition as a genocidal narrative of violence, and creates a

situation for displacement of vivisection with a new creation of a myth of reconciliation. No theoretical analysis of conflict resolution, management, settlement and reconciliation can match with the message of a love story of two lovers – an Indian man and a Pakistani woman – separated by family, state and history and yet reunited after 23 years by a young Pakistani lawyer, a human rights activist. The story ends with the lover and beloved, both are now old with gray hair, walking across the Wagah border. Suddenly partitions, borders police appear like old things of the past needed to be displaced by love and sheer love. People’s memory and activism create a new narrative of conflict resolution and reconciliation for the establishment of the culture of peace in the world and for envisioning the shape of the future.

XI

Peace is more than the absence of conflict. It encompasses protection of democratic ideals and human rights. India has always spoken in the language of peace and human fellowship. In her 5000 or more years of documented history, India has passed through every gamut of human experience, prosperity and adversity, victory and defeat, freedom and subjection. India has learnt from these experiences and acquired a spirit of gentleness, fellowship, tolerance and universality. The result of this learning was a complete absence of the aggressive spirit in India’s long history. Her voice has been the voice of peace and tolerance. Her great children like : Gautama Buddha, Mahavira, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and many others have proved through the manner of conducting their life and work and the manner of

accepting their death that this voice is not a voice of weakness but strength.