Respecting the Self-Assertion of Communities

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Abstract

Conflict is an aberration in human affairs; collaboration is the law of natural human processes and collective self-enhancement. Can people be assisted to bring a non-confrontational approach to problems? Ancient epics were about daring conquests and empire-building. Modern epics have been about the struggle for freedom, emancipation and equality. Time has come for us to move to enacting and recording for future generations grand “Epics of Reconciliation”. Can we build up the ‘Creative Minority’ that will take this initiative?

Keywords: minority-groups, border-men, right policies, leadership.

The Ethnic and Cultural Dimension

When speaking of the strong self-assertion of communities in different parts of the world, we have to understand, first of all, the ethnic and cultural dimensions of the problem. Cultural minorities from all over the world are making their voices heard these days when they feel their interests are not attended to by the majority community (e.g.: the Basques in Spain, Welsh in the UK, and Quebecois in Canada). Similarly, smaller nations representing smaller ethnic groups feel threatened by larger ones.

Wrong handling of ethnic grievances has often led to major conflicts, as it happened between the Hutus and the Tutsis in Africa. The last Belgian elections revealed the unease that persists between the

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1 Archbishop Emeritus, Jovai, India.
Dutch and the French speaking people in that country. Meanwhile, Uzbeks have been fleeing Kyrgyzstan due to ethnic tensions. Something similar happened to the Armenians in Syria recently. Such incidents in different parts of the world reveal the power of ethnicity and the centrality of culture in the political life of a nation and inter-community relationships in a pluralistic society. There are not many countries in the world that do not have to deal with violence related to ethnic and cultural differences.

Where ethnicity and culture were ignored for a long time, as it happened in Soviet Russia, self-assertions of minorities have been much stronger, as soon as the controlling forces weakened. The reason is easy to understand. Ethnicity defines what a community holds as most precious: its identity. For every community, their own identity and culture are unique. They constitute the ground of their selfhood and collective existence. That is why anthropologists consider self-affirmation of communities as something normal, even necessary. Therefore, we should not look at this phenomenon negatively. It provides the energy that a community needs for its very survival and self-enhancement. It serves a psycho-sociological purpose ensuring solidarity within the community in times of danger.

Even weak cultures have survived when related communities have had a fierce sense of uniqueness about their identity during the course of their history. A self-perception of being chosen and elect gave them the needed strength even in the most adverse circumstances to struggle and survive, as it did in the case of the Jews, Armenians, Gypsies, Welsh, Irish, Poles, Tibetans, and others. Every community has a right to be proud of its collective self and its cultural heritage. If people feel that their ethnic, cultural or historic identity is undervalued or threatened and that their political or economic interests are ignored, they become restive.

**Minorities at the Borders**

Many countries have difficulties with minority groups, especially border-men, who have too little shared history with the mainland communities. The smaller ethnic groups in any nation are inclined to
resent the indifference and unconcern of the dominant society to their problems. It is for that reason that the assertion of ethnicity and culture has become a discernible trend almost in every part of the world: in Russia, France, Eastern India, Pakistan, China, and Australia; by the Scots, Welsh, Tyrolese, Basques, Catalans, French Canadians, Flemings, and Croats. Such a phenomenon has been gathering strength in recent years, and has acquired the name ‘Identity Politics’ on the world scene. Such self-affirmation can take a violent turn when it is not given scope for legitimate self-expression or when the concerned parties make up their mind to take their claims to extremes: e.g., in ex-Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Georgia, Indonesia, Chechnya, and Sri Lanka. It is often said that violence is the eloquence of the weak.

Border communities feel that they had not been a part of the events and processes that gave shape to the national culture, and that their shared history with the majority community has been too brief and the common heritage too small to make them feel of sense of togetherness. In consequence, they have developed a weak sense of belonging to the nation concerned. The emotional distance becomes more when there are, in addition, memories of hostile relationships between the dominant and marginal communities in the past, or the weaker community senses a threat to their cultural identity. Tensions mount when border men express their sense of alienation further, wanting to secede from the control of the dominant cultural group and constitute a new state. Threat of secession in this case is an affirmation of difference.

There are any number of communities that want to secede from a bigger political unit for reasons of cultural or historic differences, or economic or political deprivation: e.g. the Scots in the UK, the people of Aceh and Irian Jaya in Indonesia, those of Chechnya in Russia, those of southern Sudan in undivided Sudan, the Baluchis in Pakistan, Muslims in South Thailand, the Muslims of Mindanao in the Philippines, Kurds in Iraq, and Catalans in Spain. In some cases there is violence on the side of the protesters, and in other cases it is the State that takes the initiative in being hard on the minorities. Sometimes the secessionists take rigid positions; there are times when the representatives of the Government likewise remain inflexible.
The Inadequacy of Offering an Economic Response to a Cultural Problem

Most of the above mentioned instances of unease, however, can be looked upon as stages in the evolution of any society to full and mature nationhood. Even nation-states with long histories like the UK or France went through these stages in the shaping of their national identity in their earlier history. Such collective self-questionings, therefore, in newly emerging nations need not be considered unusual in the development of a national consciousness.

As we have said earlier, if we do not make place for the cultural dimension of minority-dissent or secession demands, we will not be able to bring solutions to the anxieties that afflict these regions. Emotional integration of smaller tribes and ethnic groups on the borders calls for a strong sense of cultural sensitivity on the part of those who guide the destinies of the nation. As of now, what most Governments are trying to do is to offer economic packages in response to ethnic problems. It is inadequate. It is no use trying to bring an economic solution to a cultural problem, though it can be part of it.

The Reality of Having Emerged from Relative Isolation in Recent Times

Let us look at another aspect of the problem. In several newly emerging nations, many ethnic groups were living in relative isolation among themselves until very recent times. History tells us that when communities emerge from such a state, there is a period of uncertainty. People feel that their identities have to be defined and relationships with neighbouring ethnic groups have to be sorted out. Competing interests of other communities in the neighborhood can lead to tensions. Such tensions are built on perceptions of political, economic, psychological or cultural exploitation of a group by a stronger one. Some perceptions might be true and some even exaggerated. In a multicultural society, communities that could have had the advantage of early education or a specialized skill which became a part of their heritage are quick in
taking up financially rewarding jobs. For example, some are good in the
cultivation of certain cash crops and grow rich, others have developed
business skills and begin to prosper, and others have acquired a knack
for political maneuvering and capture power. These communities may
be perceived as exploiting others, or may actually be doing so. Those
who feel left behind build up grievances against perceived exploitation.
If, on the contrary, the neighbouring communities begin to consider
these aptitudes and skills complementary, the chances of conflict
become greatly reduced. But such a helpful development will greatly
depend on leaders on either side.

In any case, it is not rarely that minority communities feel
marginalized in the economic competition in reference to the majority community or to
the stronger ethnic group in the neighbourhood. Their discontentment
manifests itself in various forms of protests. As we said earlier, there
may be truth in the allegations, but there are times too when minority
leaders keep alive the discontent in order to retain the political loyalty of
their communities. Occasionally, there is a third party that fans these
inter-community tensions for their own political or economic interests.

In addition, communities emerging from isolation are in the process
of self-discovery, are like young adults lost in themselves for a while. They
want to have their past glory and cultural assets recognized, and are eager
to assert their rights and privileges. They are determined to take their
future in their hands and give shape to their destiny. All this is legitimate.
In recent years, education and development have brought a better self-
understanding even to relatively backward communities. These early steps
towards progress have also stimulated self-assertion and a desire to carve
out some space for their communities in the future order of things. This
ought to be considered natural. There is the further possibility that exaggerated
self-affirmations of some communities can lead to similar exaggerations in
others, setting in motion a chain-reaction with no end in view.

The Type of Leadership

If, in a community’s perception the threat to their identity or
interests persists, it does not emerge too easily from anxiety. A stormy
and troublesome period is ahead. The horizon looks dark. But if smaller communities are given space to grow, develop, and express themselves, they gradually learn to take their place side by side with others, begin to recognize the cultural assets of other communities as well, respect their rights and interests, and accept to live and work in collaboration with them joining hands together towards a common destiny. This period of transition is very sensitive. People can be led astray by self-interested leaders or inspired by ideologies that believe in violence.

If there are intelligent and sensitive leaders on either side during these troubled times to provide an inspiring and complementary vision, the concerned communities easily move forward with a great sense of serenity and self-confidence. If, however, this fails to happen, neither the flowering of culture, nor the development of economy is possible. Many opportunities for the enhancement of the identity and culture of the community will pass them by. For, isolation is stagnation. With swords drawn, even survival is uncertain. Everyone needs to keep struggling to keep himself at least at the subsistence level.

The Wrong Signal Given

We cannot afford to ignore the fact that it is generally communities with no political clout that feel compelled to go to extreme measures in order to express their grievances. The self-assertion movements of most communities are initially peaceful. But often enough, as long as they remain peaceful, they are ignored. But when some turn violent with bomb-blasts and loss of lives and property, the entire tone changes. Civil authorities rush to the scene. The police and the army become alert. Discussions are promised; grants, subsidies, and allowances flow in abundance. In most such cases there is no evidence whether there is an in-depth study of related issues, the history of the community and the causes of the discontentment, which led to the outbreak of violence. Meantime, the wrong message is given: that violence pays, that the leaders of violent movements will receive VIP treatment, that the protesting community will offer various forms of doles, and that an unbending attitude will win them international attention. This sort of an approach has
encouraged other communities to take to violence too, with a fresh round of concessions.

Curiously, those who mediated, handled/mishandled, represented/misrepresented issues, seemed to benefit, until we noticed that vested interests had grown around insurgency, involving politicians, businessmen, underground and overground leaders at various levels, mediators, security personnel, ‘surrendered extremists’, pro-talk groups, anti-talk groups, and media persons. The advantages to be drawn from militancy led to the heightening of political consciousness in every ethnic group with a grievance, with little readiness to concede to other communities or to Government representatives.

Local Resources not Serving Indigenous Communities

There are other things too, in addition to the cultural dimension that have aggravated the situation. If the smaller ethnic groups feel that the natural resources in their areas are taken away from them without adequate compensation or without any advantage to them, and if their land keeps going out to the corporates or is hastily turned into special economic zones, resentment is bound to build up. The announcement of dams and other mighty projects with little consideration to the economic needs or difficulties of local communities sends a shiver through their spines. In several places these communities have been holding up such projects. On the other hand, total isolation is not the answer for the concerned community. Delaying projects which can bring economic benefits, might put off development for everyone indefinitely. The pros and cons of a particular project must be studied and discussed, guarantees should be given and honoured, instead of closing doors to the new economic processes, which might leave one’s community far behind. Total isolation did not help Afghanistan or Tibet in an earlier era, nor partial isolation Russia or China in more recent years. Only intelligently planned openness to wider realities and to ever widening opportunities can pave the way to prosperity. That was the law of economic development in any period of history, in any part of the world.
It is with such vexing questions about possible options in mind that we have to search for answers for the problems of ethnic minorities. We do not want the thoughtless exploitation of their resources to develop in such a way as to build a strong economy, which passes over the head of the indigenous people like an over bridge. Nor would such ethnic groups like to become some forgotten relics of the past, or a mere cultural curiosity.

**Change in Demographic Pattern**

People in a nation worry a great deal when there is a fast changing demographic pattern due to immigration. When the indigenous people’s proportion falls significantly, there is bound to be a sense of alarm. The indigenous people can become mere observers of the major economic drama as it develops, and they keep wondering who is meant to benefit from economy, who owns the economy and whom it serves. These are situations when the indigenous people will need to be protected and assisted to develop those skills that are needed for creative economic ventures.

**Mistakes on Either Side**

There are many ways in politics in which things go wrong: when national leaders adopt wrong policies, when they make a wrong use of right policies, when unfair things are done in the name of national security; when movement leaders misinform and misguide their people in self-interest, when they build on their communities’ grievances and foment anger and hatred, when they exploit their own people for the sake of their personal interests, or when the ideals they place before their followers are clearly unrealistic.

Recent history shows how good things have been used for the wrong reasons. For example, nation-states have invoked the sovereignty principle to suppress human rights in different parts of the world. World Powers have invoked human rights to interfere in the destinies of sovereign nations, or claimed to act in defense of democracy when they wanted bulldoze weaker ones. In the same way, dominant societies pretend to be safeguarding
national integrity and security when suppressing or silencing minorities within national borders. On the other hand, leaders who claim to be leading a movement to defend their community and culture have been taking advantage of their followers or compromising their interests for their own personal interests. Thus, right and wrong have been on either side.

Experience has shown how even democracies can become illiberal, intolerant of minorities, can silence weaker voices, connive at and even provoke ethnic conflict, and have recourse to state-violence. On the other hand, it is also true that people can place themselves under petty tyrants for obtaining some personal benefits. Communities have been known in addition to have recourse to various strategies to establish their victimhood before stronger communities. They develop a martyr-complex and try to convince themselves and others of the criminal intent of everyone else and of their own total helplessness.

The Value of Popular Movements

A society sets itself moving in new directions and breaking new ground with the assistance of their younger members. Thus, young people in a society are not just trouble-makers or rebels who need to be disciplined and tamed. They constitute precious ‘human resources’ to be tapped and valuable ‘human capital’ to be used. Their perceptions and insights are priceless. The activities they initiate and movements they launch on natural instinct bring dynamism to a stagnating society. Their prophetic message hastily translated into action needs to be interpreted and guided not outright rejected. Their energy is to be used and their cooperation and commitment elicited.

Popular movements which young people have led in modern times have been ways by which communities grew conscious of themselves and of their strength, and became capable of taking their future into their own hands. Thus, political movements have brought life and direction to mute millions. Many ethnic groups in recent times have grown conscious of their collective identity, their strengths and sturdiness; they have become aware that they count for something, and that they can exercise some influence and shape their destinies. These things have been positive.
Youth Need Guidance

Further to all these, one should not forget that if adults can err, young adults can err all the more. And it should cause no surprise that some movements led entirely by young adults should slightly stray, especially when guidance has been wanting. The old need the young to break new ground and take their society forward. But the young need the old to caution too, guide and lead events with maturity and wisdom in the long term interest of the community and of the wider society. Traditional culture readily gave such role to seniors in their society.

In many recent cases, it would seem, that adults had renounced their responsibilities. When the enthusiasm of youth learns to be guided by the wisdom of experienced persons who represent the community’s sense of responsibility for the common good, some difference is bound to come. This unfailing element in traditional culture should not be set aside.

We Need Peace-Makers, Culture-Translators

It is in this context that we begin to realize that the unrealistic expectations of some groups might have led them too far in the view of others and brought the communities concerned into conflict with each other. We need men and women of peace. However, we are living in an era when peace-makers are hard to find. Ideologies inspired by the concepts of Hegel, Marx, Darwin, Gramsci and others gave young people another message. The fighter is the hero today. Fighting for justice, for human rights, one’s people, culture, nation… this provides the ideal for the young people of the day. Working for peace is not a popular mission.

What confuses the issue further is the fact that two persons or groups in collision can have different understanding justice in a concrete situation. What happens when perceptions about justice collide, and when people who are fighting for perfectly good causes come into conflict? What happens when justice according to me collides with justice according to you? Can we adopt a creative form of dialogue which I call critical dialogue with the opponents: listening, affirming, appreciating, questioning, and searching together?
Dialogue itself can go astray, e.g. giving importance to less valuable things, questionable things, making odious comparisons based on ethnicity or culture, using political clout, being caught in stereotypes, or humiliating opponents. We need bridge-builders, culture-translators to enable minds and meanings to meet.

**Respecting the Opponent and Befriending him**

Heroes like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King approached knotty political problems with absolute respect for the persons who represented the other side, even for the direct opponent. They had the ability to tap the good will buried in the deepest recesses of the opponent’s inner being. They appealed to the *natural goodness* in the heart of their enemies and *did not embitter them with denunciations*. They tried to befriend their foes. They made sure that their demands were fair, their assessment of the situation objective and their statements true. They avoided exaggerations, threats and any form of violence. While they claimed their own rights they did not ignore the rights of others.

We need peacemakers today... those who esteem others, even their enemies; those who win sympathy and support by the *uprightness of their conduct* and truthfulness of their argument; those who transform hearts and make a valuable contribution to the common human heritage; those who, by the *human touch* with which they handle even the most vitiated situations, build confidence; those who have the ability to identify and separate real issues from ego-requirements, from rigid ideologies, and from pre-determined positions.

**Changing a Grievance into a Message**

People gather round defenders and promoters of genuine human values and common interests. People of all cultures and interests learn to come together. While Samuel Huntington spoke of a Clash of civilization, we would like to speak of a *Dialogue of Civilizations*, conversation between cultures and negotiation between interests. The
culture of even the smallest community is something unique and deserves our respect. Persons with worthwhile messages are happy to meet with each other.

*People with a message are different from people with a grievance.* One is a lamp, the other is a shade. One inspires, the other obscures. One looks forward, the other backward. The former are optimistic, confident and respectful; the latter pessimistic, unsure and aggressive. The first elicits good will; the latter believes in confrontation and crushes out even the little good will the opponent has. One takes responsibility; the other shifts responsibility to everyone else around. One is open to new possibilities; the other falls into the ditch he himself has made.

The fact is that we all have grievances. And others have grievances against us too. As individuals and communities, we have hurt each other, and there are collective memories to be healed. We can work on such healing. If we really have a genuine grievance, we can learn to transform that into a soul-capturing message. That will make all the difference.

**A Moment to Reflect and Learn, a Sense of Responsibility**

People begin to think more comprehensively when they reach an impasse. The Kurukshetra war in ancient India wiped out entire races. With that Buddhism was born. It is after the Kalinga war in which hundreds of thousands were killed that Asoka, the Emperor of India, saw the folly of violence. He repented. From that time he thought of conquering nations only with a message of peace. It was after two ruinous World Wars that the Western nations said they would cooperate rather than collide. The European Union came into existence. The pains that we have earned through conflicts hold out lessons to us. All societies have gone through negative experiences, but those who reflected and learned from those experiences regained strength. The Japanese and the Germans were quick to learn that the wars that their army had lost, their economy could win. And it did.

Arnold Toynbee in his voluminous *Study of History* argues that correctly through human experience, those who knew how to accept reality and learned to reorganize themselves for a fresh start, succeeded.
He quotes the examples of Greece, Rome, England and Holland to argue that they made a breakthrough when they decided to learn from experience and to lay the foundation for their fortunes on the hard rock of realities, challenging situations, including the experience of a crushing defeat.

**Expressing Differences in Creative Ways**

The skill of the leaders on either contending side lies in their ability to search for motivations that will bind their communities together for a common purpose, *not by force but through persuasion*. The sheer need of emerging together from a relatively underdeveloped condition is a good motivation. We must consider that the present state of backwardness of some of the regions of the world is not necessarily a setback, but a good starting point. Francis Fukuyama holds that late modernizers have an advantage. He believes that beginners bring with them values that provide the backbone of success: industriousness, sparing habits, accommodating and non-confrontational ways, readiness to work hard and take trouble, an eagerness to please and win collaboration and support, willingness to take risks and innovate, and other similar qualities. They do not grow complacent too early. They cannot afford to do so.

Innovative leadership searches for new ways of making diverse interests find a meeting point. The emergence of the *European Union* and the economic success of *ASEAN* tell us how people can *hold their differences in abeyance* or seek to express them in new and *creative ways*. But they must explore and discover advantages in doing so. Recent economic trends are showing that even the weakest country or community can have something to *specialize in*, and that they derive the maximum advantage when they combine themselves with other people who are different, and precisely because of their different natural endowments. Creative and insightful people have evolved ways of transcending even major differences for common benefit. If India, China and Pakistan could show that it can be done, the future of humanity could be very different.
The Cluster Effect

There seems to be a law in nature: *talents reveal themselves in clusters.* There were a number of dramatists in London during Shakespeare’s days. Explorers and adventurers crowded the Portuguese and Spanish court at a particular period of history. Florence, Venice and Milan had bunches of painters in the peak era of art. Turin was the home of a number of saints during the 19th century. Paris was crowded with social thinkers at some stage, Berlin and Vienna with musicians. Vikramaditya, the great Indian Emperor, had his nine literary jewels and Akbar a host of scholars in their court.

In like manner, modern business too has been growing up in clusters. The *Asian Tigers* would be a good example. The rise of *China and India* can give rise to another cluster of great performers around them. Interaction among creative leaders stimulate interest, provide know-how, and encourage innovation. Think of the Information Industry picking up in certain cities of India. Bangalore has stimulated Hyderabad and Chennai. One learns from the other.

Suddenly, there can dawn an *age of energy and optimism,* of accomplishment, expansion, growth and development in any part of the world, if only creative people take initiative. That responsibility falls on your shoulders and mine. In our helplessness we meet with help from each other. Our young people can learn to bring something of their present political energies in the direction of social harmony and economic productivity.

Unfortunately, violence or corruption also spring up in clusters. Certain regions become known for people who produce commercially valuable goods and others for mobs that protests; some regions for persons who are creative, others for persons who are destructive. When the wrong choice is made what stares at your face in consequence is a situation of aggressive voices, mutual denunciations, civil disturbance, chaotic disorder, violence, inequality, injustice, poverty, lack of education, lack of shelter, epidemics, ethnic conflict, and armed political dissent. Many lament the evils of this era. It is far better to *rejoice at the opportunity* one has for doing good precisely in these challenging times.
Promoting a Sense of Responsibility

A sense of responsibility seems to be the most needed value in public life today, for example, a community’s eagerness for identity-affirmation should not lead it to collective self-centeredness. Everyone must have respect for the larger interests of the wider society. If the pursuit of self-interest becomes too important for a community, it would soon land in trouble with other communities and it would move on to the path of decline. That is what happened even to the mightiest empires in history when they adopted a policy of consistent confrontation with neighbours. Unfortunately, there are always some who adopt this course, giving evidence to the absence of a sense of responsibility towards itself and towards others.

Or else, exaggerated assertion of self-interest can force a community into a ghetto, close the minds of its members to new ideas, possibilities, creative organizational structures and technologies. This would render their mental outlook rigid, and consequently incapable of meeting the challenges of changing situations. Meanwhile new, creative communities and countries would come up, accept the emerging challenges, confront them courageously with rising confidence, and set aside the closed-minded.

We have created and propagated certain myths, for example, that the Government can and will do everything for us, as long as we just put the right amount of pressure. The Government itself has promoted this impression for political purposes, and later let people down. The reward has often been according to the measure of the pressure, and not according to the merit of the case. In this way they have made people understand that violence will be rewarded. No wonder that insurgency has grown. But we know that the Government alone cannot solve the problem. The civil society has to play its role too. People have to take their own responsibility as well.

Many things that people expect from the Government or others as though their fates depended totally on them, are easily won by their own efforts, with hard work and an intelligent handling of both hurdles and opportunities. From the moment the leaders of the community succeed to arouse a sense of responsibility in its members, they will commit them to constructive work, disciplined effort, a methodical
approach to development, interest in probity in public life, concern for
common good and mutually stimulating altruism. Albert Schweitzer,
who spent the major portion of his life in interior Africa, believed that all
of us “should sacrifice a portion of their own lives for others”.

**Sectarian Interests Should not be Placed
above Common Interests People, nor above National Security**

Political parties will show a similar sense of responsibility when they make sure not to allow their parties’ interests to have precedence over the interests of the people. This is a sensitive area. All parties should agree to this norm and adopt a code of conduct in dealing with sensitive matters. Playing cheap politics in this context is playing with common interests. Ordinary citizens feel disturbed when they get the impression that major decisions are taken in their regard merely to suit the fortunes of the ruling group or the needs of the party and not on the merit of the issue. It becomes most unconvincing when, after that, they quote national security while sacrificing everything to the election interests of the party or the whims of the dominant society in the country. There is something unfair when a small community’s major interests are sacrificed to the majority community’s petty interests or prejudices in the name of the well-being of the nation. Ensuring national security is the sacred duty of every citizen not merely that of the smaller communities or of border men. Solutions do not get any closer if such things are allowed to happen.

**Cultivating Sensitivity in dealing with Minority Communities**

Similarly, the use of the ‘strong arm method’ can be counterproductive when dealing with communities that set a great score by their honour. Young people can be provoked to accept the challenge. And yet people in power find it hard to resist the temptation of indulging in a show of strength and of issuing threats. History provides us with enough of examples of communities that chose to die to the last
man than be humiliated. Sensitivity can be absent in this regard in some persons representing National Government or Big Power interests.

Media men too show scant sensitivity when they take the liberty of linking the name of an ethnic group or nationality with the words like miscreants, thugs, rogues, anti-social elements, which they would never do in reference to a bigger community or mightier nations. We may have to search the inner psyche of communities to remove the anger that has accumulated over a period of time for the hurts and humiliations they have undergone from harsh words and deeds. Blessed are those who have the ability to heal the collective memories of communities. They are truly prophetic personalities.

A Vision for the Future

Many of the newly emerging nations are producing a growing middle class. As their purchasing power increases, they will constitute significant market. In the same way, the number of young people of working age too is growing in these newly emerging nations. They will constitute a mighty workforce in the world. If this enormous big human power could be trained, motivated and guided, they would lead world economy.

There was a time when the best brains of developing nations were fleeing their countries to build their future. It was referred to as brain-drain. Today, the ‘brain drain’ trend is on the reverse. Talented young people who went to make their fortune abroad, like doctors and engineers, are returning to make a bigger one at home. They are coming back with the advantage of additional experience. With fast improving medical skills and facilities, the younger nations are all set to become the biggest ‘healing centre’ in the world. They are already recognized as the most important destination for outsourcing. These are some of the indicators that predict unlimited economic opportunities for young people with skills and determination.

As a late-comer to development, many emerging nations have a golden opportunity to adopt the most rewarding economic models, introduce the most remunerative working styles, and install the latest and the best model of infrastructure. It does no one harm to be a part of
this scene of unique adventure. E.F. Schumacher, speaking of communities that make a new start, says “Suddenly, there is an outburst of daring, initiative and invention, constructive activity, not in one field alone, but in many fields at once. No one may be able to say where it came from…”

But we know where it comes from. It comes from thinking leaders, prophets, poets, writers, who provide a stimulating philosophy for action, insisting on giving a positive response to problems. It depends on dedicated young people who inspire their colleagues to help their communities make the right choices at strategically important moments. In this way, they give a new direction to history. Then suddenly, the story of violence, corruption, agitations, picketing, extortions, communal conflicts, ethnic tensions is all forgotten. And a new era of peace and prosperity is ushered in.

People from the younger nations can carve out a sure place in this emerging order of things. With their keen interest in education, self-discipline, spirit of cooperation, skills in Information Technology and naturally pleasant ways, they can lead the new economy in unbelievable unexpected ways. They are already making their presence felt in many of the international metropolises. In due time, some of them will return with additional experience to set in motion a technological revolution also in weaker nations. The rest of the drama remains unpredictable.

Recognizing Interdependence, the Importance of a Human Touch and a Natural Sense of Fairness

Human beings have always been interdependent. Every community, nation and civilization has been borrowing techniques, institutions, concepts and habits continuously from other communities, nations and civilizations. The greater the interaction, the greater the stimulus for growth. Ideas and lifestyles that we consider our own, may have reached us from unknown sources changing many hands... and not rarely from our immediate neighbours with whom we are at loggerheads. We all have borrowed from each other, and the smarter of us has borrowed more! We realize more and more that no culture or civilization is a perfect human product. Even the most advanced
societies are feeling diffidence about the absoluteness of the values of their civilization, and beginning to notice its limitations.

Those who recognize this limitation, readily see the importance of fostering not ideas of confrontation, but of collaboration. Those who propagated philosophies of contention and led movements of struggle against other classes, communities, and the Established Order are beginning to rethink their propositions. They see that every human struggle in history has been in the larger context of ‘collaboration’, and those who reconcile and motivate others for collaboration make the greatest contribution to human growth and social development.

Conflict is an aberration in human affairs; collaboration is the law of natural human processes, and collective self-enhancement. Can people be assisted to bring a non-confrontational approach to problems? Ancient epics were about daring conquests and empire-building. Modern epics have been about struggle for freedom, emancipation and equality. Time has come for us to move to enacting and recording for future generations grand “Epics of Reconciliation”. Can we build up the ‘Creative Minority’ that will take this initiative?

It is against this background that we are able to understand that what one gains is not necessarily lost to the other: e.g. two communities in collision; or the Government machinery and movement representatives. In the same way, even those who are most vocal about rights realize that there are limits to one’s rights. And, that there are duties too; duties to one’s community, and duties to humanity.

The Spiritual Dimension that Cannot Be Ignored

In human history, the rejection of the spiritual always provoked an exaggerated reaction for the restoration of the spiritual, which ultimately ended up in various types of fundamentalism, or led to strange beliefs in the weird, the sensational, the curious, or the odd. “No civilization ever prospered that ignored man’s daily concerns, nor survived that was blind to his/her spiritual destiny”. The spiritual element has brought the great civilizations of the past into existence, and its motivating and strengthening power cannot be ignored even today.
Historians have traced out an “unpredictable element” in the development of civilizations. Some have referred to it as ‘chance’ that gives an unforeseen opportunity to communities and nations, Adam Smith saw an ‘invisible hand’ in economy; Mahatma Gandhi spoke of the ‘inner voice’. Recently some thinkers proposed the ‘chaos theory’ presenting what appears like chaos as a creative force transforming the entire old order and bringing into existence a new and happy state of things.

Spiritually minded persons see a Deeper Design in everything leading history’s processes to an Ultimate Destiny. After the painful experiences of the present days, we need to hold on to a Spiritual Hope that gives us confidence.