

National Unity (I)

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National unity is a subject that is being discussed everywhere today. Everyone is thinking about it because India, our country, got divided into two a few years ago. Is it the end of the story, or will the country face similar tragedy again and again? This India was so vast in the past. But unfortunately it has become much smaller now. The question is: Will it still get fragmented and break into pieces? How to keep India united—that is our main concern.

Perhaps everybody can well understand that the sense of unity is not something that can be imposed. You can frame laws, you can browbeat people, all the same you can't bring unity among the people. For that we need to follow another path which is uniquely Indian.

It would seem apparently that we are different and separate from one another. It seems as if India is not a country, rather a conglomeration of diverse lands. In this connection, a statement of Mohammad Ali Jinnah comes to mind. It was the time when he was vehemently demanding the creation of Pakistan. The statement I am going to refer to is one he made at Darjeeling. While talking to newsmen, he asked: Where are Indians in this country? They are either Bengalees, Punjabis, or Gujaratis or something else! Show me one 'Indian'.

In fact, here Jinnah made a mistake. Many of us also do the same because we forget that integration or Indianness does not mean the absence of diversity. We Indians

believe in diversity. Diversity there must be, but there should be no enmity and disharmony. I shall be as 'I' am. You too shall be as 'you' are. The Bengalees will remain the Bengalees and the Punjabis will remain the Punjabis. What's wrong with it? The unity and harmony we want is internal, not external. It is the integration of the mind. I shall respect you in spite of the fact that you are somewhat different from me. Similarly, you too respect me though I am not entirely like you. Indeed, variety is the sign of life. Swami Vivekananda says, we would have turned into Egyptian mummies in no time if each and every individual thought in the same manner. Therefore both difference and diversity will exist. That is natural. But there should be no discord and disharmony.

I don't want to use the word 'tolerance' here, as it has a negative connotation. It carries a subtle hint that I am greater and stronger than you; but since I am very generous I will just put up with you; I will not crush you. Behind this kind of 'tolerance' is hidden an overriding attitude that I am superior to you; I am more powerful than you. If I wish I can force you to adopt my language, dress and everything I consider proper. However, as I am liberal and tolerant I don't prevent you from living the way you like, according to your taste, temperament and distinct lifestyle.

The keynotes of Indian life

This kind of attitude never prevailed in

our country. Mutual respect and love have all through been the keynotes of Indian life. You believe sincerely that you can learn many things from me. I too do the same. Such mutual reverence is the characteristic of India. There must be diversity which is natural. Why should one be a carbon copy of another person? Imitation retards individual growth, development of talent and all creativity. What happens when a nation imitates another nation or a person apes another person? It will be found that they are losing their originality; all potential possibilities of theirs are getting suppressed. Of course I shall learn from you if you have some good qualities. I shall accept eagerly and respectfully all noble things, no matter where they come from; but never I shall be a 'carbon copy' of anyone, giving up my distinctness.

Receptivity is the sign of good health. This is as much true of individuals as it is true of nations. Those nations or people who don't want to receive, know and learn, who keep the doors and windows tightly closed and don't allow light and fresh air to come into the room, they are more dead than alive. After some time they will find the air inside the room has become so polluted that they can't live there anymore. Therefore, doors and windows have to be kept open. This is what India has always done. Hordes of people belonging to different nationalities and different countries had come to India with various intentions and we had accepted them all. Poet Rabindranath Tagore says: No one knows whose call stirred up streams of humanity to surge in, to merge into the ocean [ie India]. It is exactly what had happened. If our blood is clinically tested now, we will not be surprised to find that our blood somewhere matches the African blood. Indeed, we have always welcomed people of different countries of different

faiths, dress and so on.

We often say, 'Indian culture'. But what do we mean? Do we mean to say, it is Hindu culture? No. Indian culture is a mixture or fusion of many notes drawn from various sources. Basically it is Hindu, no doubt, but the Muslims, the Christians and even the so-called aborigines have contributed to it. The Bengali we use contains many such words which are of Portuguese, Dutch and French origin—not to mention English! This receptivity, this spirit of acceptance and assimilation are signs of good health. In India all along we have given shelter to those who have come from other lands and made them our very own. They had lived here with honour and the same trend continues even today. Here are Muslims, Christians and even Parsees. Though a few in number, the Parsees have been living here honourably enjoying the same status and freedom like any other citizens. Besides, till recently, many Jews happened to be in India. They had no shelter, no land of their own. They were always on the run and forced to live the life of refugees, wandering here and there. Fortunately, today they have their own homeland, Israel, where they have shifted.

I had a number of Jewish friends who lived in India. They used to tell me, 'Though we have got Israel now, we are not going there. We are fine here without any problem. Why should we go now to a new country for trying our luck? Perhaps the climate won't suit us, or we may feel uneasy in that new social setting. It is also possible that people there will find it hard to adjust with us. We are quite at peace in India, living with dignity.' So they have continued to live here. Some families who had gone to Israel eventually returned to India. They didn't feel well there. They say, 'We happened to be in India. India is our country and we will be happy here'.

Truly, this is our speciality. From time immemorial India had greeted all with cordiality, respect and love. Long ago our sages declared—‘*Ekam sadviprāh vahudhā vadanti*’ which means ‘God is one, Truth is one, though scholars call Him (It) by various names’. The Upanishads say in the same strain, ‘*Neha nānāsti kimcana*’—‘There is no duality in this universe’. We see many, multiplicity. But actually manyness is a delusion. All that we see is One in essence. Variety is only apparent, on the surface. Within all and everything exists the same Reality. In this sense, humanity is one, the world is one. Political leaders of different countries are slowly understanding this truth. Now they too admit that no country, however big and powerful, is self-sufficient. Every country needs the help and cooperation of other countries. Every nation must learn to live with others amicably, for it is a necessity.

Mark, these leaders are now forced to accept this truth for the sake of *necessity*, as they find themselves in a fix. But India always believed in unity or oneness. Her perennial attitude is that there may be some difference and dissimilarity on the surface, but behind that, there is embedded a grand unity and that unity is the Truth. I give an example. In India there are so many places of pilgrimage—in the North, South, East and West. Many pilgrims, especially the sannyasins, walk all the way to these holy places because they have no money. They don’t know even the local language. Yet they never have to starve. They get food free of cost. Not only that, they are highly honoured. If you go to ‘Kumbh’ fair or the Himalayan holy spot, Amarnath, you will find there an ocean of people coming from diverse regions, who are differently dressed and who speak different dialects. Despite these seeming differences, they have become

one. Everybody is greeting the other with a benign smile as if they are old friends. This broadness, this love, this friendliness, this spirit of accepting everyone is the characteristic of India. And this characteristic has sprung from the realization that the same God is present in all, in everything. Perhaps the person standing in front of me is exactly my opposite, yet we know that God has appeared in his form, for there is none except God. One indivisible Brahman dwells in all beings. God has infinite forms. He is present in countless images. Man is one such image. Indeed, man is none other than God. This understanding, this attitude has kept India alive and intact. External differences are there; that is natural. But in the spheres of thought, culture and heart there is an abiding unity and so it will remain.

Diversity is reasonable. It is found in all countries, not just in India. In many countries today there are people who practise different religions, who belong to different sects and communities, who speak different languages. England, for example. Many people from different countries are now living there and, curiously enough, many of them continue to use their mother tongues. Again, take the case of USA, which is an immensely large country, as if an archipelago. Among its inhabitants are Italians, Germans, French, Africans, Indians and so on. What a variety of colour and dress! They speak English, but if you listen to them you will discover promptly that they have come from other countries, maybe one or two generations ago. Possibly after a few generations their language too will change. But the English they speak right now is not American English. It is quite evident that English is not their mother tongue. Nevertheless, the Americans have accepted them. It is desirable. Thus the people of all

countries are gradually appreciating the ideals of acceptance and peaceful co-existence because they realize that otherwise neither they can survive, nor their country go ahead. India's strong point is that her faith in diversity is age-old, it is not the result of any compulsion. Other countries are perhaps trying to follow these ideals out of compulsion. Maybe they need to increase their population of skilled labour to run their mills and factories; that is why they are recruiting workmen from India, Pakistan, Africa and other countries. So there is a motive, a sense of necessity that works behind their policy. But India has not embraced the ideal of acceptance and diversity to fulfil any self-interest. She has accepted the principle as the ideal, as the sacred *mantra* of life. The Shakas, Huns, the Mughals and a host of people had come to India. They plundered and pillaged the Indian soil recklessly. In spite of that India has given them a place to live in, loved them and ultimately absorbed them in such a way that they soon forgot that it is a foreign land.

Go anywhere in India and you will notice a wonderful variety of people everywhere. It is as if a colourful garden of flowers! Everyone is equally and respectfully treated and loved. Everybody is being given equal opportunity. Do you have talent? Ok, go ahead and develop it in your own way. Love your language, evolve your literature. But don't be smug. Never think you are self-sufficient, what you have is enough. No, that is not the right attitude. We must also learn from others. A few years ago English people ruled us. Then we used to consider them our enemies. But at the same time we felt at heart some of their good qualities and respected them for that bright side. Today they are gone! Yet we love their language and literature. We have retained them in all eagerness because we think they

will help us improve our language and literature. In this openminded receptivity lies our strength, a strength that has saved us. Mainly because of this receptivity India has been able to weather many a storm age after age and is still alive and vibrant. We had realized long ago that humanity is one and we have to move ahead with all amiably.

Historical awareness

It is true of course that in political field never we had unity. But in this context we should also remember that the history of India is not simply an account of wars, kings and emperors and their rise and fall. Many people complain that we have no historical awareness and this is why we never cared to write a chronological history of India. In other fields, such as literature, they allege, perhaps we have manifested our talent, but this can't be said with regard to the preservation of history. This allegation is not true because the sterling characteristic of our country lies in the realm or '*thought*'. We had never given importance to such political events as the coronation of kings and how long they reigned. Rather we focused our attention on those thinkers and personalities whose thoughts were original and ground-breaking. Them we have remembered and revered as *Rishis* or saints. Therefore, our history is the history of ideas and philosophy and India has shown her remarkable originality and genius in these fields. If you care to see you will find an uninterrupted flow of history from the Vedic times till Sri Chaitanya and Sri Ramakrishna. We have always believed that human mind and its power of contemplation is of the highest value. Thoughts reflect the true humanity of man. In our view, he is a real hero who can think freely and discover the truth. In this respect she has proved her sagacity.

Indian history, as I said already, is not the history of gross material world. It is the history of very subtle mental spheres. Therefore we judge a hero by this yardstick and not by the ability to usurp the territories of others and the number of persons he has killed. This is not the image of our hero. To us, a real hero is one who can face bravely the problems of life, and the great problem of life is living amicably. As such, India has given topmost priority to creating a happy meeting-ground where all irrespective of their status, qualities and nationalities could live in peace. Suppose I set up an empire by the power of my sword, subdue everyone, bring everyone to their knees expecting they will worship me; no, that won't happen in India. To us, it is of no consequence. 'Truth' commands our highest respect. That is why we call the seers of Truth, Rishis or philosophers. We are preserving with great care even today the history of their most valuable ideas through the Upanishads, the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mahābhārata* and different Purānas. Indeed, the real leaders of our common people are not the kings, but the Rishis who are spiritual giants. Kings had fought each other, but such conflicts and warfare had not touched the people. They were always influenced and inspired by the religious leaders. It is their influence that has made Indians so liberal, loving, receptive and peace-loving.

We are told that St. Thomas, a disciple of Jesus Christ came to India in the first century A.D., when Christianity itself had not spread to the West, especially Europe. St. Thomas came to the Malabar coast, ie modern Kerala, and it is said that the local king of that state received him with due honour, gave him land and allowed him to preach his new religion, although he himself remained a Hindu. This is the typical Indian character that enables us to respect others.

Your faith may be different from mine, but what does it matter? In India, in our society, even in the same family, we know there are Shāktas and Vaishnavas. Again, there are worshippers of God with form as well as without form. If there are five brothers, it is not impossible that they hold five different attitudes, but they live amicably—no enmity exists among them. It is also found that the followers of Hinduism and the adherents of Buddhism respect each others. It is natural because Buddha himself admitted that he was not preaching any new religion, but only presenting the ancient religion in a new way. There is no proven record of big armed clashes between the Hindus and the Buddhists though there were enough intellectual debates. At the time of preaching his *dharma* Buddha used to invite his opponents to argue with him. But there was no bloodshed. At first it seemed Buddha was preaching altogether a new religion, but it was discovered later that Hinduism contained the views voiced by Buddha. So Buddhism is essentially Hinduism in another form. Some people think it is due to the oppression of the Hindus that the Buddhists fled India and, as a result, Buddhism is non-existent in this land. But far from it, Buddha is today worshipped as one of the great Incarnations of God. No Hindu thinks that Buddha belonged to a different religion.

And what about Christianity? Christmas is no more a celebration of the Christians, it is also a great festival of the Hindus. In many homes Christ's picture is specially decorated and honoured. This is India! This love and goodwill is found nowhere. The scourge of communalism is a very recent phenomenon, for we had welcomed Islam heartily when it came to India. We all know very well that Akbar couldn't run his empire without the help and cooperation of the Hindus. He depended on the intelligence and

efficiency of the Hindus for conducting his administration.

If it is true that Indians always lacked political unity, it is also equally true that culturally we remained always one, both before and after the coming of the Muslims. But this unity doesn't mean one kind of dress, religion and rituals; that is lack of diversity. Our religions and doctrines are different, but the goal is one and the same, as Sri Ramakrishna said: You may go to a destination on foot or by steamer, boat or train. One chooses one's transport according to one's capacity, though the goal is same.

Variety can't be wished away. It is impossible to bring unity by steamrolling all and putting the same coat on everyone. Man is not machine-made that everyone will be of the same nature. So differences and diversities will always exist because that is natural. However, this *many* or manifoldness is only external, within we are all one. Look from any religious angle and you will find we are not essentially different. If we think we are nothing but Brahman, then of course we are one. Again, if we believe we are all children of One God, then also we are one. India believes in this unity. Therefore, if I hurt you I hurt myself. None can live alone. None is separate from others. Law cannot help develop this kind of attitude. It is possible by imparting spiritual and moral education. India strongly believes in this integration based on love, respect and equal dignity.

Political designs

The division that we notice today is political. The common people are not responsible for this cleavage because their minds have been poisoned for political

purposes. This problem couldn't exist at all if all political organizations wanted otherwise sincerely. In that case there could have happened a few stray incidents accidentally, but they were bound to be short-lived. In fact, behind the current separatist disposition are hidden greed, ego and ambition to strengthen one's predominance over others. In spite of all this, I don't think India will be divided again. I do believe good sense will prevail and we shall be able to overcome this crisis. As we walk on the streets we find love among the Hindus and the Sikhs are so deep. Very recently I was in a cab driven by a Sikh. Seeing my ochre robe he refused to take the fare. I said: 'Please accept it as I am able to pay.' But he said politely, 'Nehi rakh dijiye' ('No, no, keep it with you'). So, where do you find animosity?

The word 'Sikh' means 'shishya' or a disciple—disciple of Guru Nānak. But where did they originally come from? From the Hindu families. From each Hindu family one son will become a Sikh. Moreover, look at Nānakji's *Gurugranth*; you will find that it is all about Hindu deities. Again, the Sikh monks (Nānakpanthis) are also Vedantists. So many couplets and parables belonging to them are popular among *Dashnāmi* Hindu sadhus. The Nānakpanthis also study the *Gītā* and the Upanishads. They also chant the name of Lord Rāma. But today it seems as if they have become different. You may ask how this has become possible after so many centuries. This is due to political reasons and misunderstanding. They have misunderstood us, we too have misunderstood them. However, this error can be corrected. We can bring back the loving relationship that existed in the past. ■

(To be continued)

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