

National Unity (II)

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A few years ago when Bangladesh came into being as an independent state, I had gone to Dhaka on behalf of the Belur Math to do relief work. There I heard an incident from a Muslim advocate. He narrated thus: Then the freedom movement was going on and the Pakistani soldiers were torturing us like anything. Thousands of Hindus and Muslims were fleeing in all directions in search of a safer place—India. I too was thinking whether I should go to India. But I took too much time to decide. Ultimately I realized it would be impossible to stay here anymore. So my wife, our three children and myself started walking desperately and somehow reached Agartala which was then full to overflowing—no shelter anywhere! Suddenly I chanced to meet a gentleman. When he came to know that I was helplessly seeking a shelter, he said, ‘Come with me.’ We followed him and found his courtyard was teeming with people. The verandah and all rooms were packed. All were refugees and he gave them shelter without discrimination. As there was no more vacant space, he took us inside his shrine-room and said, ‘You stay here’. Although I am a Muslim, I knew what a shrine-room means to a Hindu. So I said, ‘This is your shrine! How can I stay here?’ He answered, ‘You are my Thakur (God). Please stay here.’

There is no reason to suppose it is a concocted story because this type of fabrication serves no purpose to a helpless Muslim gentleman. He told me finally: ‘We spent there a couple of days and the love we

all received there is simply unforgettable!’

I give you some other examples. During the Hindu-Muslim riot both the Hindus and the Muslims had taken shelter in our Math (‘Udbodhan’) at Bagbazar and they ate their meals together. The same thing happened at the Institute of Culture. At that time the Institute was located at Wellington Square. Many Muslims lived in that locality and they all took shelter in the Institute building. The interesting aspect of this was that the Muslims were kept so secretly that the Hindus got no hint of their presence there. The monks always guarded them.

The same thing happened in our Math Headquarters at Belur. There was a jute mill adjacent to the Math. Many of its workmen were Muslims. Out of fear they had taken shelter inside the Math premises. Surawardi was then the Chief Minister. So he was informed over the phone and requested to take away the Muslims because it was feared that the Hindus could attack them anytime and in that case they would not spare us also. So Mr Surawardi sent police and rescued them.

Love carries the day

Let me narrate another personal experience. We were then conducting relief work in an area in Bangladesh where no trace of a Hindu family could be found. So a Muslim came forward and provided shelter to one of our monks in his house. Not only that, day after day the family cooked food separately for that sannyasin. They took so much care of him and gave such kind

attention that is unforgettable. They later came to our place many times and we also visited them. So, you see, man is same everywhere. Everyone wants to love and be loved as well. Love ultimately carries the day and unites all.

There is a saying of Sri Ramakrishna—‘To know many things is *ajnāna*, ignorance. To know only *one* thing is *jnāna* (knowledge).’ That is to say, the knowledge of oneness is true Knowledge, the knowledge of multiplicity is ignorance. This is the eternal message of India—the same God is in everybody. If we see ‘many’, everything different, that is a sign of foolishness. God is One, Ātman is One and indivisible—not two. If someone says, ‘*Anyā aham anyo’sau*’, ie he and I are different, then, the Upanishad declares—‘*na sa veda*’—he doesn’t know the Truth, the Absolute Reality; he is ignorant. Indeed, we are all one. Man and all lower animals are essentially the same Reality. ‘*Eko devah sarvabhuteshu gudah*’—‘One God dwells in all.’ The one indeed has become many, as it were! ‘*Eko’ham vahusyām*’—*Ishvara* thought ‘I am One, I shall become many’. He thus divided Himself and assumed various forms—‘*Rupam rupam pratirupo vabhava*’. Therefore Swamiji says,

‘Who loves all beings without distinction,
He indeed is worshipping best his God.’

The truth is, the thief is none other than God; so is a sannyasin. God is both good and bad. Rāmprasād sings, ‘O Mother! You are good, You are bad’. In the same strain the Upanishad declared, ‘*Tvam stri tvam pumānasi tvam kumāra uta vā kumāri, tvam jirno dandena vancasi tvam jāto vishvatomukhah*’—‘You are woman; You are man; You are boy; You are girl; You are old, moving around with the help of a stick; again You are the newborn babe; all that exists is verily You.’ The Vedas declare—

‘*Sarvam khalvidam brahma*’—‘Everything in this universe is Brahman’, different only in names and forms. Sri Ramakrishna expresses the same truth with the help of a simile. He says: Pillows are of various kinds! Some are meant for sleeping, some are kept on the side, some are placed under the leg. Some pillow is flat and some round; but inside the same substance—cotton. Similarly, the same God is within everyone; the difference is only in terms of manifestation. The same moon is seen daily in the sky. But on the first lunar day of the month it is visible partly. On the second day it appears to be bigger, while on the full moon night it shines resplendently in all its fullness. Or, take the case of the sun—sometimes it is dazzling bright, sometimes covered by the cloud; nevertheless the same sun.

This deep-seated conviction, that One has become many characterizes India. This philosophy of unity in diversity has kept India united in the realms of thought, attitude and social mixing. Integration means togetherness or being together, not just becoming an exact replica of others. Forms, types, languages etc are bound to be different, for no one is like another person in every respect—neither externally, nor internally. And it is not desirable either.

Sometimes I meet Christian friends and talk to them about religion and related issues. I tell them: You are a Christian and perhaps your companion too belongs to the same faith. But do you, two, view Jesus Christ in the same light? Are your approaches and attitudes exactly same without slightest difference? Is it possible? No, it is not. India admits this reality. Therefore one religion and one language for everyone will never be feasible. The same kind of dress and food for everyone—that also will not be practicable. Even if all of us become Hindu, or Muslim, or Christian, or

say, Bengalees, Punjabis, or Gujaratis, the problem will not be solved. Integration will still remain a far cry. If one language, one community, and one religion could be the panacea, why then riots erupt in Pakistan? There all are Muslims. They use the same language. They follow the same religion. Yet they fight each other.

Everyone knows that recently there have been some clashes between the Sikhs and the Hindus. But how many of you know that there has been fighting among the Sikhs? There is a sect called the Nirankaris. They clashed with the other Sikhs only a few years ago. Therefore, one religion, one language and one kind of dress can't bring integration. In other words, you can't bring integration by rubbing out all differences and varieties from the country, from society. The key to the solution of the whole problem lies elsewhere.

Sectarianism must go

Swamiji has made a remarkable statement. He says: Why should the sects disappear? Let the sects remain. Sectarianism must go; hatred and animosity among sects should come to an end. Let there be more sects, for that will increase opportunities of human development. In fact, if we look closely we find that each individual is, in a sense, a sect because each person is different from others. But difference does not mean we must be enemies. For instance, we are all Hindus. But do we follow the same track? You perhaps go to temples, while I do not. North and South India are, as it were, poles apart. They are Hindus, so we are. But there are between us lot of differences. Take for example the marriage custom prevalent in the South. In Bengal and North India, a niece is considered to be one's daughter. But in the eyes of the Aiyar and Ayengar Brahmins of South India, marriage between

a maternal uncle and his niece is the ideal one, the most covetable one. We in the east cannot think of such wedding. So it is but natural that differences exist among the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and others, perhaps in every field. Therefore variety has to be accepted. Suppose I want to be an engineer, but everyone wished that I must be a doctor. Is it ever possible? No. Therefore we must respect variety, differences in taste and temperament.

Why conversion?

Our country has always followed this ideal and there lies the secret of integration and harmony. Our scripture declares: '*Rucinām vaicitrāt rijukutīla nānā patha jushām; nrināmeko gamyastavamasi payasām arnava iva*'. That is to say, our tastes are different. Accordingly, we have chosen different paths—some crooked, some straight. But our destination is the same—God. Just as rivers follow different courses, but in the end all merge into the ocean. Therefore, variety has to be recognized and accepted. We do not expect and wish that we must give up all individualities and be like a machine product. Swami Vivekananda said emphatically: 'Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid. . . . The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his law of growth'. Swamiji stressed that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim should be a better Muslim and a Christian should be a better Christian.

A devotee once came to Sri Ramakrishna and said that a Christian gentleman held Hindu religion in very high esteem and he was going to embrace

Hinduism shortly. Sri Ramakrishna, far from being pleased, said solemnly: Why should he give up his own religion?

He meant to say all religions are equal; as such they are to be equally respected. Conversion was unnecessary. This is the Indian tradition and viewpoint. It will be a gross mistake to call this attitude *tolerance*; it is *shraddhā* or respect. Swamiji voiced this conviction when he said he was against the use of the word, 'tolerance'. Instead, he preached the principle of 'acceptance'. India had always fostered this ethos of unity and harmony by accepting everyone with due respect and love—not just paying lip-service to the ideal. That is how integration becomes possible. If that spirit is missing today, it will come back through the same process.

Let me recount an incident. Swami Premananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, had once gone to Puri. He used to visit the Jagannath temple there every afternoon. On his way to the temple, he noticed everyday a Christian padri would dub the Hindus illiterate, barbarians and what not. Everyday he would keep on slandering the Hindus at the roadside meeting, close to the temple. One day Swami Premananda could not tolerate this tirade. All of a sudden he cried out '*Hari bol, Hari bol*' ('Shout the name of Lord Hari'). No sooner had he uttered these words, all the Hindu bystanders who were so long listening to the harangue of the preacher, than they started dancing and singing the glory of Lord Vishnu. The meeting thus got disrupted. Do you know what happened thereafter? Sri Ramakrishna appeared in a vision to Swami Premananda at night and told his disciple: The padri was preaching his religion; why did you oppose him? Go and beg his excuse. Accordingly, the swami went to the preacher next day and begged his forgiveness.

Now, it is altogether a different matter if

India should now show this extreme humility. Even if she does, mind you, it is not her weakness, it is rather the sign of her strength. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: '*Sha, sha, sa*'—he who forbears remains safe and he, who does not, perishes. Truly, forbearance, forgiveness and liberalism are never signs of weakness because the weak does not and cannot bear and forbear. The strong can and he ignores others' shortcomings. India has done it all along and it is not that we have become reduced to a total wreck on that account. Many people complain that other religions are taking advantage of the liberality of Hinduism. That is, they are converting the Hindus to increase their numerical strength. I do not say the allegation is entirely baseless. Nevertheless the solution of the problem is not the fightback. The first and foremost remedy is to set our house in order. This is to be done by embracing those people whom we have so long considered to be untouchables belonging to the so-called low caste. First show the greatness of Hinduism. If you can demonstrate through your conduct the true character of Hinduism, then the whole world will be attracted to us.

The Hindus regard the *Gītā* as the essence of all Hindu scriptures. But what does it preach? It preaches the glory of samesightedness. When you are established in samesightedness neither you will have any friend nor foe. India upholds this culture which treats the Hindus, the Muslims, the Christians and all others equally. India is still alive because of this culture. Swami Vivekananda often said: Why do I love India so much? I love India because of her noblest thoughts and lofty ideals. If India dies, all these noble ideas will die down.

The unity of India is based on these noble thoughts, thoughts which have not remained as idle theories, but which have been practised for centuries. This subtle sense of unity, this love, this magnanimity,

this open-heartedness, this spirit of acceptance—these are palpable realities in India and the flower of integration will bloom on this rich soil. Swamiji says, a selfish person or a community can never become moral. Our Hindu scriptures always say—do not be small and narrow, try to become great. They proclaim—‘*Nālpe sukhamasti, bhumaiva sukham*’—Attain *bhumā*, enlarge yourself to the maximum, because being small does not give us abiding happiness. The more we will like to lower ourselves, remain confined within a narrow groove, the more unhappy we will become. Swamiji says, ‘Expansion is life, contraction is death’. If we make us small, it amounts to death, for life demands that we should expand ourselves, we should live for others. Naturally we want to live together with every Indian and, if possible with those who live elsewhere. We should not think that the minorities will say and do exactly what the majority community says and does. On the contrary, we have all through history, at all times, shown respect to the minorities, received them warmly, given them freedom. Had it not been so, the immense variety that we see all around could not exist in India.

India will therefore seek to achieve a kind of integration that will be like a symphony. Various instruments will be played, but all keeping with the tune producing a rapturous melody. Varieties will be there, but not hostility and conflicts. It will be much like a bouquet containing flowers of many colours and fragrance. Each flower belongs to a different species, but beautiful all the same. None disturbs the beauty of the other. Rather they play a complementary role creating an altogether new loveliness. There is the moon in the sky, but there are also stars. The sky is all-inclusive. It shelters all. In the same way, both the majority community and minority communities will live in

India. India excludes none.

This composite character, this mixture and fusion have made our culture so great and so beautiful. Truly, it is a symphony and, for this reason, the tune of her life’s song is so sweet and blissful. Life is not static. Our motto is therefore ‘*caraiva*’—‘Go forward’ or ‘keep going’. The river that does not flow, which is stagnant, is as good as dead. Similarly, a nation cannot stand still. We shall accept and imbibe all the good qualities of the Muslims, Christians, Sikhs etc. Even if there are certain good things outside India, we shall also welcome them. In fact, we have been doing so. And with the help of all these positive elements we shall further enrich our culture and fund of knowledge. We shall thus invite more diversity in our culture. Indeed, why should we be monotonous? Integration will come through this love, respect and amiability. We must see that there is no dearth of these qualities in us.

India’s eternal message is oneness. We have said, ‘*Vishvasya ekam pariveshītāram jñātvā devamucyate sarvapāshaih*’. That is, One Godhead holds the entire universe; He surrounds everything. We shall be free from all fetters or bondage when we realize this truth. We have to recognize that ‘One’ which is the substratum of everything. We must understand that behind all diversities in terms of caste, religion, language and appearance, lies a common Truth. We call that Truth Brahman, we call that Reality God or *Ishvara*. He dwells in all. That is why I am not separate from others and none is separate from me. I cannot lay anyone aside and live. If I do that I sort of disown myself, as it is said, ‘No man is an island’. No man can live alone, completely estranged from others. If I hit you, that would mean I am hitting myself. Integration is based on this realization that I am happy when all others are happy and I suffer when they are in distress. ■