

Education for Peace and Reconciliation

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Abstract: The author describes a new venture where education is used to promote personal growth that is integral, communal harmony between religions, and reconciliation between groups. This is a personal experience that promotes values and reconciliation through direct living encounter.

Keywords: peace, reconciliation, Dharma Bharathi, education, value education.

The urgency and importance of education for peace and reconciliation is the result of increasing conflicts in human life. The very existence of traditional institutions such as family, religion, state and society is being questioned. Their foundations are shaking. Globalization has not only affected the economic life of people. It has influenced culture, faith and human relations. Individualism replaces a sense of community. Commitment and responsibility to society and family is replaced by individual competence. Competence without developing character makes people arrogant, insensitive and intolerant.

Another characteristic of the market culture is consumerism. Market which is flooded with goods has created unlimited greed and lust in human beings. The noble virtue of the 'ethic of enough' is not understood by many. A person is valued for what he/she 'has' and not for what he/she 'is'. Status is given more importance than identity. Hence, everyone is busy increasing his/her possessions to ensure his/her status in the society rather than developing an identity

which will give him/her an imperishable place in history. In this context even university degrees are considered material possessions which can be bought.

In the market culture competition replaces cooperation. In cut-throat competition might becomes right. The weak and the marginalized get eliminated. The outcome is a dehumanized society where a small minority of the rich and the powerful rule over the majority, depriving them of their human dignity and right to live. Today eighty per cent of the resources of the world are possessed by twenty percent of the population. At the global level we see a broken world. Humanity is wounded and bleeding! Ethnic quarrels, communal riots, terrorism and threats of war create tension in the lives of people. Even the poor countries are spending millions for strengthening their defensive and offensive forces, while a vast majority of their population is starving.

The Indian situation calls for our immediate attention. Even after 55 years of independence the country has 460 million illiterates and 375 million who are living below the poverty line. Primary education has not reached a large number of people. Economic liberlization has benefited only a handful of people. Hence what we need today is a shift from the culture of greed and hatred to a civilization of love and peace. Educating the youth of the country in values of love, brotherhood/sisterhood, justice, peace, sharing, tolerance, respect etc. is an excellent means for building a new humanity.

India is blessed with 'unity in diversity'. It is a land of religions, cultures, arts and literature. It is the oldest living civilization in the world. But religious fundamentalism, communalism, regionalism and casteism are threatening to tear apart the fabric of the nation.

Value education is not religious education

It is important to know that value education is not religious education. Every religious community is busy giving religious education to their students. Some of them become over-zealous and go out of their community to impose it on students and teachers belonging to other communities. This creates tension and conflict between the communities. In religious education what is taught are the be-

liefs and rituals of that particular community. Values are common to all just as truth is common to all. Truth is beyond the walls of church, temple and mosque. Nobody can monopolise it. Hence the need to clarify that value education is distinct from religious education. The eternal values are derived from the original spirit of the religions. Institutionalized and politicized religions promote more rituals than values. It is in this context that Dr. Radhakrishnan has said: 'This place would be much more religious if all the religions go'.

Paradigm shift from religiosity to spirituality

Since education for peace is based on the fundamental and original values of all religions, it is important to see the distinction between religiosity and spirituality. Understanding this distinction is the key to solving much of the conflicts and tensions which take place in the name of God and religion.

Religiosity promotes *rituals*, rules and regulations, whereas spirituality promotes *values* such as justice, peace, love, brotherhood/sisterhood, equality, freedom, forgiveness, sensitivity etc. Religiosity promotes and builds structure and hierarchy. Spirituality concentrates on charism and the original spirit of the founder. When religiosity gets prominence religion becomes an institution. Originally all religions started as a way of life. Later they not only got institutionalized but vested interests politicized them to meet their selfish ends. Spirituality makes efforts to keep the religion a movement, a way of life. When people blindly follow religiosity there is a danger of fundamentalism which leads to intolerance. Spiritual people are more flexible and respectful of other faiths.

Religiosity divides people because it concentrates on rituals and practices. It looks at people in terms of their dress, food, language, place of worship, names of gods etc. On the contrary, spirituality unites people. Is there any difference in emotions of love, honesty, justice and appreciation according to one's religion or caste? Emotion of love is same for Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Who can prevent a Muslim girl feeling love for a Hindu boy? Is there a special meaning of honesty and peace of mind for people of different religions and caste? Feeling of frustration and joy is one and the same

for anyone irrespective of his/her religion and caste. That is why we say that spirituality, which is founded on values, unites people.

Religiosity makes people stagnant forcing them to follow the old traditions without reviewing them. They go with the crowd and cultivate a culture of 'everybody is doing, so we also should do'. Those who are rooted in spirituality and uphold values will be creative and refuse to accept traditions blindly. Instead of going with the crowd they make a difference by a life of values and make the world go with them. They will get involved in the struggles of society as proactive citizens with great altruism and set new trends by living by values.

The most significant of all differences is the attitude to pluralism. Religiosity promotes uniformity in belief, worship, language, culture, behaviour, dress, food etc. It does not tolerate any differences. Most of the religious and ethnic conflicts have resulted from an ignorance of this basic difference. More people have died for their beliefs than for truth. Religious leaders and priests promote religiosity which has nothing to do with the original teachings of their founders. They manipulate religious institutions and misinterpret the holy scriptures; this is an unholy exercise and a crime against humanity. Priests of all religions promote religiosity to oppress people by exploiting their religious sentiments. The need of the hour is to have prophets who defend eternal human values and liberate the common people from the fear of God's punishment. God is love and he/she does not punish people. God liberates his/her people. The role of spirituality is to liberate people and make them creative so that they may bear fruit, fruit that will last forever.

The founders of all religions opposed religiosity which did not make people spiritual. Surely a religious person can be spiritual. One can be true to his/her religious practices if they do not stand in the way of spiritual values. In fact the worship in the church, temple, mosque or *gurudwara* should enable a person to recognize God in the poor and the hungry whom he/she meets in the streets. Truly spiritual people will recognize God in their enemies, in the strange fellow passengers in the train and people who suffer famine and war in a far away country.

The aim of education for peace is to promote reconciliation. It has to break the walls that divide people in the name of religion, caste or colour. It should give birth to enlightened leaders who are rooted in values and have clarity of vision which is broad, inclusive and lasting. The purpose of value education is to build responsible citizens with commitment to the nation and concern for the whole universe. The test of authentic education for peace is the heritage of this great nation. Pluralism is our national heritage and a unique gift of God. Unity in diversity is not just tolerance of differences, it is acceptance, appreciation and promotion of differences. Only a person with genuine spirituality can do this. Our education should aim at this herculian task. This is only possible when there is a paradigm shift in the mind-set of teachers, parents and policy-makers. This is the only way to save this great nation from disintegration and degeneration. The religious and political power brokers have hijacked Mother India. The time has come again for the birth of Krishna, Rama, Buddha, Mahavir, Jesus, Mohammad, Gandhi and Tagore to save human civilization from killing each other. The aim of education for peace and reconciliation is exactly this.

While presenting the fundamental duties, the Constitution of India (*Article 51 A*) especially mentions the significance of spirituality which goes beyond narrow religious divisions: promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood/sisterhood among all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional diversities'. This could be the basis of our education for peace programme. The NCERT document recognizes this important dimension. 'Value based education would help the nation fight against all kinds of fanaticism, ill will, violence, fatalism, dishonesty, avarice, corruption, exploitation and drug abuse'.

An effective Experiment in Value Education for peace and reconciliation

The Indore based Dharma Bharathi National Institute of Value Education for peace has been experimenting successfully with some practical and innovative modules in value education during the last nine years. Though Dharma Bharati is an Institute its functions are a movement to make value education a way of life. It has experimented

with two practical modules for personal transformation and for national reconstruction. It is worth mentioning that the movement has reached six hundred schools and colleges across the country affecting positively the lives of thousands of students and teachers.

Value Education for peace promoted by this voluntary association is a positive response to the conflicts and chaos which threaten the very existence of human society. It aims at building a civilization of love based on a pluralistic spirituality. While it promotes such a spirituality it also expresses concern for universal solidarity. Narrow patriotism and destructive nationalism block our creativity.

The value Education which Dharma Bharathi promotes has an additional term, 'for peace'. What is so unique about this additional term 'peace'? By this expression Dharma Bharathi wants to communicate the significance of the value of peace in human life. Perhaps peace is the most sought after value today. Modern life with its consumeristic, individualistic and competitive style has lost the precious gift of peace. Through its programme of value education, Dharma Bharathi wants to promote peace within the individual, peace within society and peace with nature. When a person is able to experience these three dimensions of peace, he/she will have peace with God. Hence the programme of value education for peace consists of four important dimensions, namely, psychological, sociological, ecological and theological (divine).

Vision of Education for Peace and reconciliation

Value education promoted by Dharma Bharathi is based on the spiritual foundations of all the world religions. The vision statement is inspired by some of the unique and positive values of these religions. The statement promotes a paradigm shift from a narrow understanding of religiosity to a broad and liberative spirituality. Dharma Bharathi aims at building a nation with the universal family spirit of the Hindus and the Bahais; the discipline and fellowship of the Muslims; the courage of the Sikhs; the compassion of the Buddhists; the non-violence of the Jains; the creativity of the Parsis; the indomitability of the Jews; the cosmic solidarity of the Tribals and the self-sacrifice and forgiveness of the Christians.

Goal of Education for Peace and reconciliation

Education for peace and reconciliation is a dream that the world be blessed with enlightened leaders and responsible citizens who care for the welfare of humanity in the years to come. It is a hope that humanity will be rebuilt when the students who sit in the classrooms today will take up responsible positions in their homes, community, government offices and other fields. They will be agents of peace and builders of a universal family.

The movement has long-term and short-term goals: the long – term goals are to prepare the youth to take up the leadership of the nation in their own life situations; to enlighten their conscience and character; to make them responsible citizens who will work for inter-religious harmony, global solidarity, moral regeneration and nation-building. The short-term goal is to bring about attitudinal changes in the young minds by effective animation and follow-up. Literacy programme for the illiterate people by students, building houses for the poor and the homeless in the neighbourhood of the school, making personal sacrifices and collecting funds to help the needy and establishing discipline and order in the school, ecological preservation like tree planting and anti-deforestation campaign, inter-religious conventions and cultural programmes which promote unity and harmony irrespective of caste, creed and culture, etc. are the main activities proposed for this purpose.

The specific objectives of the movement of value education for peace are: training of enlightened leaders, educating the youth to be responsible citizens, generating universal solidarity and ecological consciousness, working for harmony among religions and ethnic groups and making education a means for social transformation and nation building.

The vision and objectives of Dharma Bharathi are realized through the practice of five paths for personal transformation.

Pray daily for peace according to one's religious tradition, to be an agent of peace and reconciliation.

This looks very simple and silly for intelligent adults. To say a prayer like 'God give peace in my mind, my family, my country and

in the whole world' does not take much time and effort. It can be said within a few seconds anywhere. Saying a prayer alone has no value. Peace is not possible without forgiveness and reconciliation. One needs to pray for peace and joy of his/her enemy. He/she will have to take the name of his/her adversary and pray daily, 'God bless (N) and his/her life'. A true prayer for peace will make one desire the welfare of all especially of those who have damaged one's reputation. The result would be an experience of true peace within oneself. When individuals experience peace in their hearts there will be peace in the country.

Skip a meal a week to express solidarity with the hungry and contribute the savings to the poor and the needy.

Fasting is not strange to the Indians. People of all religions undertake this noble discipline as part of their religiosity. This module is with a special purpose. It is to be conscious of the millions of our hungry brothers and sisters who are deprived of food and other necessities of life. To skip a meal is not a big sacrifice for those who are used to fasting for the whole day. The money saved by this act is to be given to the poor in need.

This rule is not strictly applied to the students. What is important is the spirit and attitude. The students are asked to sacrifice something from their money. They skip an ice cream or a chocolate. Thousands of students practise this very faithfully and use the amount saved to help people in need.

Do a good deed a day without any selfish motive to develop a loving concern for the nation.

Nation building is not only the responsibility of the ministers and social workers. Every citizen, every student, every child can be a partner in building the nation by performing ordinary acts with extraordinary intention. Through this module, teachers and students are made aware that they build the nation when they save electricity and water. When one deliberately helps a stranger in the street, giving a helping hand to elderly person to board the train or pick up a piece of paper from the school corridor to deposit in the dustbin, he/she is sharing in the noble task of building the nation.

Honour parents, teachers and all human beings

According to ancient Indian culture and tradition, parents and teachers are respected. They are considered to be visible gods on earth. Even with the influence of the market culture this good tradition is still alive. What is significant in this module is the expression of 'honouring all human beings'. Respecting parents and teachers is common. Even murderers and thieves do the same. What about honouring the maid servant who cleans the house, the driver, the peon and all those who are junior to us? Do we honour them?

There is a clear distinction between honour and respect. Respect can be a show of social obligation and politeness. Honour comes from the heart as a result of genuine spirituality. Only a person who has discovered his/her identity can honour others. Status conscious and petty minded people cannot honour others especially the poor and the weak. 'When one learns to honour all human beings he/she will start accepting and appreciating diversity, the otherness of others.'

Respect the earth and save its resources

Earth is our mother and she needs to be respected. This is expressed by saving her resources like water, tree, etc. One who respects mother earth will not dirty her face by throwing plastics and waste materials that pollute. Through this module students and teachers learn to keep the earth clean as part of their self-discipline.

At first the self-revitalization programme appears to be rather simple and suitable only for primary school students but as one takes it up seriously it really becomes challenging and even difficult. As one carries on with it, it penetrates the deeper self and begins to make the programme more meaningful. With acts of kindness, respect for others, one will enjoy inner serenity. Where teachers and animators practised the *five paths* sincerely, Dharma Bharathi took root and grew. Where teachers merely imposed it on others without practising it themselves, it withered away and rigidified into a mere ritual. The programme is a panacea for the dehumanized society of today and has the potential to bring more meaning to human lives, according to the experience of many individuals who practise it.

Action programme for national reconstruction

When individuals experience the realities of society at a deeper level and analyze them they become aware of the causes of poverty, exploitation, violence and fundamentalism. Deeper awareness leads to reflection and contemplation of issues which gives birth to convictions. These convictions help persons to formulate a vision of life which enables them to set their goals, determine their policies and priorities. This was the process which helped many saints and great personalities to make a difference in the world by their life of vision and values.

The impact of the sincere practice of the *five paths* is also very radical. Hundreds of students and teachers have given testimony of the changes that took place in their values and attitudes. Personal transformation urges a person to be proactive, to go out and make things happen in the world. He/she will search for and find opportunities, time and resources. This can be done individually or collectively. In schools and colleges this takes place in groups of students and teachers who have had a similar experience by the practice of the *five paths*.

This action programme is directed towards national reconstruction and social transformation. Involvement in these activities provides food for reflection. These activities are undertaken in groups. They can be also performed by individuals in their personal capacity.

1. *Enlightened Leadership*

To promote leadership qualities of self discipline, fellowship, universal vision, courage, compassion, selfless service, self-giving, love and respect for all religions. These qualities are developed by the practice of the five paths, the study of the lives of great women and men, developing organizational skills, etc.

2. *Empowering women*

To undertake activities which will promote the dignity of women and empower them by giving more opportunities for them and creating a healthy attitude of respect towards them.

3. Caring and sharing

To promote a compassionate and caring attitude towards needy fellow beings. This programme is realized by giving financial support, extending personal help to the needy, sharing meals with the poor, building houses for the homeless, etc.

4. Art and culture

To develop creative talents inherent in individuals for personal growth and the good of humanity. This objective is achieved through creating opportunities to exercise the talents in music, dance, drama, art, painting, writing, public speaking, etc. with special emphasis on one's own cultural tradition.

5. Light and Life

To promote life and uphold human dignity. Eye donation, blood donation, human rights and anti-abortion campaign are some of the means for realizing these objectives. Eye is the light of the body and blood is its life.

6. Literate India

To create awareness among the students to use their talents and to create infrastructure to eradicate illiteracy at all levels.

7. Green India

To create an awareness of the need to protect the environment and maintain ecological balance. Tree planting, gardening, organic farming, anti-pollution campaign, campaign against consumerism, formation of eco-clubs, etc, are the activities suggested.

8. Clean India

To promote a sense of cleanliness in personal and public life. Keeping the home and surroundings clean, undertaking cleanliness drive in schools/colleges and public areas, etc. are some of the activities recommended.

9. Knit India

To promote national integration and communal harmony. Joint celebration of religious and national festivals, interreligious prayer

meetings and dialogue, organizing regional and national youth camps etc. are proposed.

10. Heal India

To promote health care for all. Visiting the sick, organizing health camps, sponsoring rural dispensaries, promoting the use of herbal medicines, anti-drug campaign, etc. may be adopted.

Education for value – based living should not be compartmentalized. The conscientization of the triangle of education - students, teachers and parents - is envisaged to assure their integral development as enlightened leaders. The Value Education for Peace which Dharma Bharathi promotes is rooted in the personal practice of the five paths for self-revitalization.

Generally, there is a feeling that value education is for the students. Teachers and elders speak eloquently of the urgency of value education keeping the students in mind. In fact teachers, principals and parents need value education more urgently than the students. The youth experiences a value conflict everywhere in society. The student sees scams in the school administration. He/she witnesses contradictory values practised by the parents at home. Yet all of them preach values to him. He/she ends up in frustration and anger.

The consequence of this hypocrisy is the alienation of the youth from family, religion, and the mainstream of the society. They may even form terrorist and mafia groups.

Text books, classroom teaching or sermons of godmen cannot make the youth moral. They need help to formulate a vision, a dream, for life which is lasting and will bear fruit. This is possible only when the students are brought closer to the realities of life. They need to study and analyze the socio-political and economic context of the country in the general context of the world. There should be a political will to get into the real business of education. Politicians and parties should keep away from the school/university campus. Leave campus to true educationists. The *Saraswati* temples should not be a place to reward the party loyalists and power brokers. Education can never be reformed without reforming the quality of teachers. Party loyalties and religious beliefs should not be the criteria to

appoint teachers in the school and colleges. There should a system to test the quality of life and wisdom of the teachers more than his/her degree/certificates while appointing them.

What Unites the Members of Different Religions?

The unifying element in the movement is its spirituality. Dharma Bharathi basically is a spiritual movement. It respects and recognizes the uniqueness of all religions. It goes beyond the rituals and structures which divide people. It clearly distinguishes between religiosity and spirituality. Religiosity has to do with rituals, rules, institutions and hierarchy. Spirituality promotes values which unite people. It liberates human beings from fundamentalism and futile conflicts. The spirituality and fundamental positive values of all these religions unite the members and give them direction to work for a common cause.

What is Unique about the Dharma Bharathi?

There are innumerable associations and movements involved in various types of developmental activities. There are organizations which cater to the needs of students, children, women and other sections of the society. There are movements that work for protecting the environment, human rights and other social and political issues. But Dharma Bharathi is a movement which has a holistic and integral approach. While it works for the welfare of students and youth it also has pogrammes for teachers and parents. It includes programmes to create ecological consciousness as well as empower women and protect the values of democracy and human rights. In short it is a movement for all sections of society responding positively to all the issues which people face.

It is an inter-religious movement both in content and structure. The movement is not only rooted in inter-religious spirituality but its functions are managed by an inter-religious governing body. The members of this movement belong to different religious and cultural backgrounds. The seven member governing body of the movement consists of persons belonging to different religions.

It is a movement which genuinely practises values of transparency, accountability and democracy at all levels. Frequent evalua-

tion by the team members both at the local and national level is a special mark of the movement. The democratic and decentralized working style promotes the growth of each member. Financial integrity of the movement through transparency and accountability is known to all who are associated with the movement.

Dharma Bharathi is rooted in the cultural traditions of the country. While scientifically analyzing the changes affecting the life of modern society, the movement also preserves the noble traditions and values of the past. This is very visible in the vision and practical modules of the movement.

It is a movement which promotes patriotism. But at the same time it warns people about the dangers of narrow nationalism which generates hatred and hostility towards other communities and countries. The movement promotes the universal vision of considering the whole world as a family.

Preaching only what is practised

Dharma Bharathi insists on practising what is preached. The movement does not allow anyone to talk about values to groups if the person himself/herself does not live by them. This is the strength of the programme. The movement has made a deliberate option not to own land or building for its functioning. Its national office in Indore and regional office in Bangalore function from rented apartments. The expenses are met by the schools and institutions which are associated with the movement. Well wishers and friends sponsor items in times of need. The entire financial affairs are conducted in total transparency. As part of accountability the income and expenditure are sent to all the donors. The annual General Body is kept open to non-members and invitees. All are given freedom to express their opinions and ask for clarifications.

Book of life as Text for Value Education

The reason for explaining the inner dynamics of the Dharma Bharathi is to show how the whole functioning of the school/college becomes an education in value development for the students, teachers, parents and neighbourhood. Creating an atmosphere in the school for participative management and transparency in finances and de-

cision-making will motivate the students and the teachers. They in turn become the heralds of value education. This is the most powerful pedagogy to meet the present culture of dehumanization and discrimination.

According to this programme value education starts from the office of the Principal. The policies and programmes are based on the broad principles of participation, transparency, team work, open and frank evaluation. If implemented in true spirit the teachers, the students and the parents would become partners in sharing responsibilities and commitment.

Impact of Value Education for Peace

As per feed back received from beneficiaries

A teacher says: “through the practice of the five paths I have become a person more caring and sharing, ready to accept even hostile persons. ‘Forget and forgive’ has become my motto’. (*Mrs. Kawaljit Kaur, Ranchi*)

A psychologist says : ‘In my several years of experience I have come across many social movements with creative vision which have captured my attention. But what seems so special in Dharma Bharathi movement of Value Education for Peace is that it has a personal dimension for self-revitalization geared towards social transformation. Dharma Bharathi takes out “ the plank in one’s own eyes before taking out the speck from others eyes”. (*Dr.Loretta Pinto*)

General public reports

“Dharma Bharathi has brought many changes in my life. The greatest change being peace of mind”. (*Vinay Dhanani, Punasa, M.P.*)

“I have become more patient, self-controlled, disciplined and service-minded after joining Dharma Bharathi”. (*Madhu, Noida, U.P.*)

“I have learned to care and share by developing a feeling of solidarity with the poor”. (*Neha Sahani, Sagar, M.P.*)

Earlier I used to destroy plants inside the school campus. But now I have learnt to respect the earth and protect the plants”. (*Usha Rani, Karur, T.N.*)

“As per my religious practice I used to fast. But never shared the savings with the needy. But now I can experience the pain of hunger when I fast and so I understand the agony of hungry people. I have developed love for these people”. (*Hafsa Siddiqua, Hyderabad, A.P.*)

“I have learned to respect all religions according to the vision of Dharma Bharathi in this fanatical world”. (*Rajan, Etawah, U.P.*)

“I used to throw away food and did not know the value of it. The ‘skip a meal a week’ exercise has changed my habit of wasting food. I am very happy to help the poor and needy by doing this exercise”. (*M.Surekha, Kurnool, A.P.*)

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