



GLOBAL CONNECTIONS XVII SEMINAR

“Peace Education within Faith Diversity”



Daly College, Indore, India

PEACE & RELIGION – INDIA



There are many who have strived for personal gain often at the cost of others. These would include most kings of yore and business tycoons of today. And certainly our education systems tend to encourage that satisfaction and success is measured in terms of position and wealth. We talk of what we will become not who we will become.

In sharp contrast are those who sacrifice for others, for peace and for humanity. Such giants have lived in all parts of the world in all ages and we in India are proud of Ram, Mahavir, Gautam Buddha, Ashoka, Guru Nanak, Kabir, Gandhi and Mother Teresa, amongst others.

Ancient India was a cradle of civilization five thousand years ago and its greatest assets were its culture, its morality, its cumulative knowledge and its tolerance and acceptance of those who believed and lived differently.

The genesis of this thought springs from Hinduism which was not always a religion, but simply a way of life. Thinkers laid down that man does not know the truth and he must search for it. That in this search he must not dismiss the beliefs of others but need to look for the truth everywhere.

This then precludes the possibility of conflict over religion or spiritual beliefs. It helps that the Hindus have no 'book' and so no defined text to follow. They believe there is only one God and he is depicted through the sound 'Om' and that he appears as and when required in different forms male and female. There is then acceptance of a possible truth in all the different Gods of humanity and of the texts their followers live by. Interestingly, scientists have now recorded the sound of the Sun and it is 'Om'.

Judaism has the Old Testament, Christianity the Old and the New Testament, Islam the Kitab or Quran and because these are there in black and white, and open to

different interpretations there is scope for conflict. For example, Islam is interpreted by most of its followers as a religion of peace but by others the same text justifies violence.

The texts of the Hindus are older than the written word and when these were finally penned close to four thousand years ago, they consisted of treatises on conduct, on ceremonies, on math, astronomy, medicine, on stories that taught morality and values, and even one on the science of sexuality and love. The religion spread through traders who settled in Indonesia, Cambodia and so on.

The temples were centres of all cultural activity; dance, music, architecture, sculpture etc. and festivals were celebrated there. Wealth through donations was also stored there. The caste system was not rigid or exclusive, and a man could change his caste which merely signified the sort of profession he practiced. A man of cerebral work, be he a priest or a teacher, was a Brahmin, he who was a warrior or a ruler was a Kshatriya, he who was a tradesman, a shopkeeper or landed peasant was a Vaishya and those who did menial and unskilled work were Shudras.

Hinduism does not lay down that a follower has to visit a temple or even pray. The emphasis is on conduct.

In the course of time the Brahmins and Kshatriyas, to their mutual advantage, consolidated their hold on society. They made caste rigid and hereditary and overloaded religion with expensive ceremonies. Prayers could only be conducted by them in a language neither spoken nor understood by the common man. Religious ceremonies became more elaborate, expensive and time consuming. Cruel animal sacrifice was encouraged, over time those not part of the caste system were declared untouchable.

The 6th century BC saw a reaction to rigid religions in different parts of the civilized world. India was no exception. In Nepal and Bihar not only did we see the emergence of half a dozen Republics but in one of these a Kshatriya Prince attempted reformation.

In fact the 6th century BC saw two reformist princes, Mahavira and Siddhartha. The former's followers become Jains and their population is estimated at 4.5 million. Mahavira taught equality of man and so rejected the caste system, elaborate and expensive religious ceremonies used the language of the masses and preached an extreme form of non-violence.

Because the Jains could not follow careers that involved violence of any nature they were restricted mainly to trade and business. Today the Jains form 0.20% of India's population and control 25% of the GDP. The Jains remain by and large vegetarians and philanthropic, encouraging the buildings of educational institutions and hospitals.

The second prince's teachings were very similar to Mahavira's, but not as strict in defining living creatures and also with a strong belief in the middle path or moderation. He believed that desire is the cause of all sorrow and to move away from desire and possession is to find happiness. There are now an estimated 350 million Buddhists worldwide.

Hinduism embraced both religion and also reformed itself. As some religions were persecuted elsewhere, i.e. the Zoroastrians and Bahais in Iran, their followers came and settled in India where the ancient scriptures taught the 'world is one family'.

India first saw conflict through religion when the Muslim mercenary invaders in the eleventh century pillaged and destroyed temples. The Muslim raiders were Turks, not civilized, and were after the gold accumulated in the Hindu temples. The mercenaries were told that they would receive a share of the booty and in the process would get to destroy idols which are anti-Islamic. If a mercenary died in this holy war (jihad) he would go to paradise. The result was a series of almost twenty raids and the rules of war and prisoners, as known to the Indians, were not followed.

This initial exposure to Islam led to bitter relations between Hindus and Muslims and this has lasted till today. In due course the Muslims ruled India in the form of the Mughals of Uzbekistan. The last of the greater Mughal Emperors was not impressed with the efforts of saints for peace (both Hindus and Muslims) - Bhaktis and Sufis, who tried to bring about peace between the two religions. The followers of one such saint were the Sikhs, a tolerant and non violent group. But when Aurangzeb offered conversion or death to the Guru of the Sikhs, the Sikhs changed under their saint soldier Guru, Gobind Singh, into a militant religion and took on the traditional Rajput symbols of headgear, sword and surname of Singh.

The second wave of converters came in the form of the Christian Missionaries. The earliest like St. Thomas (an original disciple) did not breed conflict. But when the British ruled India for a hundred years and the missionaries became active, relations deteriorated. It did not help that when the British arrived England had 5% of the world GDP and India had 25%. When the British left India they had 25% and India 5%.

Today India is one of the 'Secular' nations in the world like Canada and the USA and unlike England, Denmark, Greece and Pakistan which are not.

In India Hindus comprise approx. 80%, Muslim approx. 14%, Christian approx. 2%, Sikhs approx. 2%, Buddhist approx. 1% and Jains approx. 0.5%. The others are mainly tribal. Other sufficient data is that the Zoroastrians and Baha'is have their largest number of followers concentrated in India. The population of Jews is 6000. India is the second most populous Muslim nation in the world.

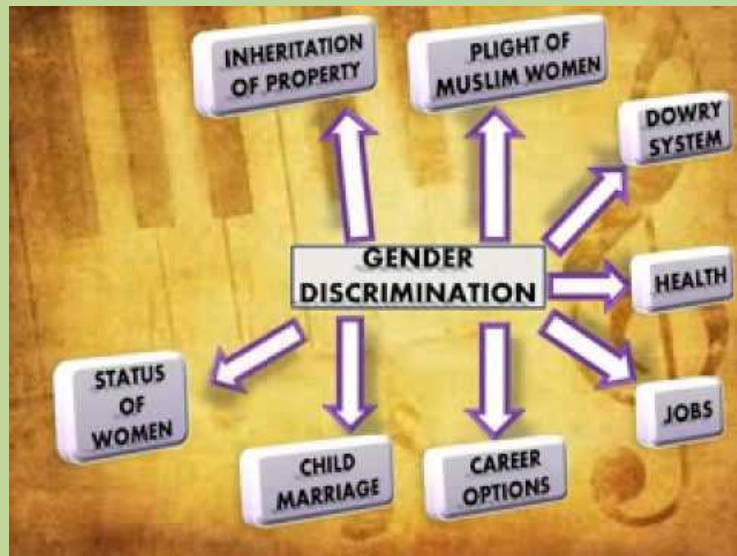
As religious conflict rears its ugly head elsewhere, India is not left unscathed. As a result, religion which is meant to unite has become the greatest threat to peace.

Dr. Sumer Singh

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GENDER SENSITIVITY-

NOT THE SAME BUT EQUAL



Thank God we are different otherwise life would have been very boring. Most women are more attractive than men and many men are physically stronger than women. Women appear to mature faster and are emotionally stronger. Most men never really grow up. But we simply can't do without each other.

In the traditional Hindu home the lady is responsible for religious and family affairs and the men for financial and business matters. Both receive great respect from all others and also from each other.

However, in countries like India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and so on, some parents believe that sons are more important to them. This is because the son carries the family name forever, feeds the ego of the father, is considered to be a bankable asset in the parents' old age and provides, if necessary, a home for the aged parents. It is therefore considered wise to invest in the boy by way of food and nutrition, education and medical care. Indian boys are generally spoilt by their grandmothers, their mothers and by their sisters. By virtue of their very existence they are owed a living.

And if they don't happen to appear within a year or two of marriage, the family resorts to elaborate prayers, abstains from something they enjoy to appease the Gods, consult astrologers and wise men and make donations. Daughters that may be conceived along the way are in some ignorant families, disposed off through abortion or female infanticide and if born are not often celebrated. The reason for this is that daughters are extra mouths to feed

and are considered guests till they go to their destined families taking with them a dowry that is not happily parted with. It is therefore not necessary to nourish and educate them. Of course, this is changing with education and with girls doing well in all professions.

Furthermore, daughters must look after the brother who may eventually arrive. This sets the tone for gender insensitivity. The brother begins to believe that the female is there to serve him and the girls begin to believe boys are superior and need to be looked up to.

It is therefore at home that the gender inequality manifests itself and strange though it may seem, Indians believe it is the mother who is to blame if the child she bears is a girl. Scientific fact has no place in sex determination.

Over the years the boy to girl ratio is becoming lop sided; there are just not enough brides available.

Now to switch to a different tack: In educational institutions, be these schools or colleges, girls perform better than boys. This is a world- wide phenomenon. However in India girls do not often get the same educational opportunities.

If resources are less, it is the boy who is educated; if a girl qualifies to study in another city or abroad even on scholarship, many will not be sent as it may damage their acceptability when it comes to an arranged marriage. In the State of Madhya Pradesh, which is typical of most States in India, 64% Government schools do not have toilets and so most girls drop out once they reach puberty and desire to protect their dignity. When they can't study they are deprived, their potential is snatched away and they become dependent forever on a male, be it father, brother or husband, dependent socially, economically and educationally.

Given all this, and the fact that migrant labour consists largely of men in cities who have left their families in villages, who have no legitimate sexual outlet since prostitution is banned, who can see in video parlours farfetched and warped depictions of female wantonness, there is a large incidence of eve teasing, staring and stalking. The woman is seen as inferior and is there to satisfy the male and the consequences, though exaggerated greatly in the media, have done no good to the reputation of our society.

The first step must be taken by mothers at home to ensure their daughters are not brought up serving their brothers and that brothers pull their own weight.

Having been rather harsh in an attempt to give you an insight, I will now share the views of French journalist, François Gautier on how foreign journalists view India:

"I have had the privilege to live for more than 40 years in India. To my knowledge, only two foreign journalists have stayed so long in this country: Mark Tully, who as you know was for long the South Asia BBC correspondent and myself. It has long been my opinion that India is a very difficult country to grasp for a foreign correspondent, as it is so different from the West, full of contradictions, paradoxes, baffling parameters, etc. Going from Delhi to Madras, for instance, is like flying from Paris to Athens,

because there is absolutely no comparison between the two, as if you have passed from one continent to another.

Thus, for a Westerner, say from Europe, where all the countries share more or less the same religion (Christianity), more or less the same ethnic origins (Caucasian), more or less the same food habits (meat) and more or less the same dress code (ties and dresses), India can be a very enigmatic country.

Yet, not only do we find that Western correspondents are generally posted only for three, maximum five years in India – too short a time to really start getting the ABC of the subcontinent; but also, that most of them have – before even reaching India – very strong and biased ideas, prejudices, misconceptions, on the country they are supposed to report about in an impartial and fair manner. The film #IndiasDaughter will only add to the misconceptions.

Forget the fact that by the time they leave India, these foreign correspondents have even been more reinforced in their prejudices: the Hindu “fundamentalists”, the “persecuted” minorities of India, the “Human Rights” abuses performed in Kashmir by the Indian Army, plus the usual folkloric the stories about India: the “dashing” maharajas (who are absolutely irrelevant to modern India), the “atrocities” on Indian women, as portrayed in a warped and skillful manner by #Lesleeudwin, who has a Pakistani father (see my previous post: no country in the world as India has given such an important place to its women), or the “horrible” sati and bride burning (an old British trick to show Hindus in a bad light).

I was lucky. First I came to India when I was very young, with hardly any prejudices, because I had never really thought about India; I was also immensely fortunate to have spent my first eight formative years in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram of Pondichery, where I met the Mother, a formidable Presence and read at length Sri Aurobindo, India’s modern Avatar, Revolutionary, (the first Congress leader to have advocated India’s Independence, if necessary by force), immense Poet, Philosopher and Yogi (yet totally ignored by today’s Indian youth); I was also extremely lucky that when I started journalism in the early 80s, I did freelancing assignments in rural areas, particularly in the South: Kerala’s extraordinary Kalaripayat, the ancestor of all great Asian martial arts; the beautiful Ayyappa pilgrimage, also in the jungles of Kerala; the Ayanar sculptures in the villages of Tamil Nadu.

And this led to my most important discovery, which endured to this day: namely that the genius of India was (and still is) in its villages – and not in the cities — where an arrogant intelligentsia and a more and more westernized youth, have less and less idea about their roots and culture.

Even so, it took me ten years to feel that I was beginning to understand India and to discard the ideas I had somehow picked-up along the way: that the Congress was the best party to lead India out of communalism; that secularism was the best option for the country, given its incredible ethnic and religious diversity; or that the RSS, the VHP and other Hindu groups were “violent” and dangerous. On a more positive note, it also took me ten years to understand what a wonderful culture and civilization Hindu India had been — and still is in some way: how Hinduism never tried to use the might of its armies, as Islam and Christianity did, to convert other nations; how Hindus always recognized the divinity of other religions and never shied from also worshipping in Buddhist temples, Christian churches, or Muslim mosques; how India, since time immemorial, has been the land of refuge for all persecuted minorities of the world: the Jews, the Parsis, the Syrian Christians, or today’s Tibetans.

It also took me ten years to see, that far from being the fundamentalists described by the British and today’s Indian Marxists, Hindus have been at the receiving end of persecution for 1,600 years: first wave upon wave of Muslim invasions, which tried, in the most ruthless and horrifying manner, to wipe-off Hinduism from the face of the earth; then the more insidious European colonisation – but no less harmful – witness the Portuguese who crucified

countless Brahmins in Goa, or the British under whose “enlightened” rule 30-million Indians died of famine. And it is not finished: today’s Hindus are still killed in Kashmir, in Bangladesh (see Taslima Nasreen’s book *Lajja*), Pakistan or Afghanistan.

It also took me a long time to understand that Indians -Hindus sorry – are sometimes their worst enemies: Indian journalists have often taken-up like parrots the slogans coined by the British to divide India and belittle its civilisation; Nehru blindly adopted most of the set-up left behind by the English, without bothering to borrow from India’s ancient genius and, as a result, India’s constitutional, judicial or educational system is totally non-Indian and only produces western clones.

This is why today, instead of trying to counterbalance the very untrue and negative image that the film #Indias Daughter is spreading around the world, #NDTV & other Indian Medias are only stoking the fire and adding to the damage.

*Cry O my Beloved India. Look at what Thy children are doing to Thou”—**Francoís Gautier***

Dr. Sumer Singh

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