PUNE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

Strengthening Social Harmony in India

for Rapid Economic Growth

Abhay Vaidya

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Synopsis

None can deny the multi-faceted progress achieved by India over the last 75 years in various sectors such as space, IT, horticulture and dairy development, to mention a few. This has been achieved in spite of the numerous inter-caste and inter-religious upheavals, small and big, that the country has witnessed from time to time.

Seventy-five years after Independence, India still needs to come to terms with its identity as a liberal, secular, inclusive democratic republic and pave the way for the harmonious co-existence of all communities who constitute the Indian identity. The uplift of the scheduled castes, resolution of inter-caste conflicts and the harmonious co-existence of Hindus and Muslims are the three big challenges of social harmony in India.

A vibrant, throbbing and populous nation like India will necessarily be argumentative in its character. However, as long as the fundamentals are sound, the free flow of debate and opposing viewpoints will remain constructive and not destructive.

The fastest way to make the caste system irrelevant is through economic growth and we are already a witness to that over the decades since Independence.

Social harmony can be effectively maintained if a nation has a professional law enforcement machinery, as is seen in many developed Western nations. India has been deprived of this for far too long. Social harmony and economic prosperity go hand-in-hand. As a country progresses economically and there's growth for all, social tensions begin to decline as people become aspirational in their outlook towards life. The pathways to achieving social harmony are as clear as daylight, as are also the consequences of social disharmony for a nation the size of India.

Abhay Vaidya is Director, Pune International Centre. He has worked as a journalist for over three decades with prominent media houses in India.

The significance of social harmony for a large and complex multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation like India cannot be underestimated in any measure. Social harmony-- the peaceful co-existence of people in society in the pursuit of collective well-being-- is the essential lubrication that facilitates a society in motion. Higher the social harmony index of a nation, greater will be its ability to achieve its objectives. Lower the social harmony index, higher will be the disharmony in society, and consequently, discord and disruption, which cause impediments in the paths to progress. By and large this has been the story of India in the last 75 years.

Social disharmony, especially in the border states, coupled with Maoist violence, could provide an opportunity to enemy states like China and Pakistan to covertly promote instability. India stands at a critical juncture today and must fire all its engines to focus on economic growth targets. It cannot afford to be distracted by social disharmony.

None can deny the multi-faceted progress achieved by India in various sectors—be it space, IT, horticulture and dairy development, to mention a few. This has been achieved in spite of the numerous inter-caste and inter-religious upheavals, small and big, that the country has witnessed from time to time. Seventy-five years after Independence, India still needs to come to terms with its identity as a liberal, secular, inclusive democratic republic and pave the way for the harmonious co-existence of all communities who constitute the Indian identity.

Social Harmony Challenges

The uplift of the scheduled castes, resolution of inter-caste conflicts and the harmonious co-existence of Hindus and Muslims are the three big challenges of social harmony in India. A vibrant, throbbing and populous nation like India will necessarily be argumentative in its character and suffer from some amount of disharmony as it advances to realize its destiny. However, as long as the fundamentals are sound, the free flow of debate and opposing viewpoints will remain constructive and not destructive.

These challenges are an opportunity to once again reinforce the Idea of India and one definitive pathway towards this is that of broad political consensus, as was practised by the late Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. This spirit stands reflected in the Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas (Collective Efforts, Inclusive Growth) slogan of the Narendra Modi government although there is a strong need for the government and the BJP to demonstrate its commitment to the letter and spirit of this promise.

Rapid economic progress, the creation of jobs and the inter-mingling of people from all sections of society will lead to greater social cohesion, social harmony and 'Sab Ka Vikas, Sab Ke Saath."

On July 29, 2014, the then US Secretary of State John Kerry said: "The new Indian government's plan, 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas', together with all, development for all - that's a concept, a vision that we want to support. We believe it's a great vision, and our private sector is eager to be a catalyst in India's economic revitalisation." Kerry was delivering an address at the Center for American Progress, a US think tank, on the eve of his departure to India. [1]

The Chinese aggression in Galwan in May 2020 and the escalation of border disputes leading to new geopolitical alignments came with the realization that if India is to rise to the China challenge, the pathway is through aggressive economic growth. The nation will be able to focus on economic growth, attract investments and undertake key reforms only if there is a certain degree of social harmony on the domestic front.

Caste and Social Disharmony

The divisive caste system continues to have its iron grip on Indian society even though the nation has come a long way from the time when untouchability was practiced, inter-caste dining was non-existent and inter-caste marriages were taboo.

The politics of the caste system fundamentally revolves around two main causes of social tension and disharmony:

- Demand for jobs, and
- Demand for reservations in professional educational courses.

The poorest of the poor in India from all sections of society, and irrefutably those who have suffered for centuries on account of the caste system, deserve affirmative action policies in education and employment. At the same time, these deficiencies will be addressed on their own through economic progress and a gradual dissipation in the demand for reservations in jobs and education.

Towards the end of his undelivered speech, 'Annihilation of Caste', which was to be delivered before the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal, in Lahore, in 1936, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, states categorically that inter-caste marriages is the real remedy to the caste system. As he noted:

"I am convinced that the real remedy is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin, and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling – the feeling of being aliens—created by caste will not vanish…The real remedy for breaking caste is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste." [2]

The caste system will not die or disappear altogether from Indian society. However, as India progresses economically in all spheres, the country is bound to witness greater degree of

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[1] 'Modi's Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas is great vision: Kerry'. India Today. July 29, 2014. https://www.indiatoday.in/world/americas/story/narendra-modi-sabka-saath-sabka-vikas-john-kerry-202063-2014-07-29)

[2] B.R. Ambedkar, The Annihilation of Caste. (First published on 15th May, 1936. The Annotated Critical Edition, Navayana Publishing, 2014.

inter-regional migration for education and employment, rising numbers of inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, greater tolerance and embracing of liberal values. A lot of this has already happened across India, in the various states and cities like New Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore and Chennai, which have witnessed rapid economic growth since liberalisation.

The fastest way to make the caste system irrelevant is through economic growth and we are already a witness to that over the decades since Independence.

Economic Liberalisation and Inclusive Growth

Milind Kamble, a self-made entrepreneur who established the Rs 200 crore-plus Fortune Construction Company, is the founder of the Pune-headquartered Dalit Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI), which seeks to promote entrepreneurship among Dalits—people who belong to the lowest castes of India.

Kamble, Chandra Bhan Prasad and other founder members of DICCI now see a new messiah in globalisation and economic liberalisation, after Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar who is literally worshipped by Dalits for his struggles for their uplift. Prasad noted in a television interview that in the post-liberalisation phase, "food sources have become common for Dalits and upper castes." [3]

According to him, Dalits, in the previous decades, ate millets or coarse grain, which was a low social marker because Dalit food was equated with cattle feed. But now, Dalits, upper castes and OBCs had common sources of food such as wheat and rice. "And jeans and T-shirts have become new weapons of emancipation. I see in villages Dalit youth sporting jeans and T-shirts," Bhan said, adding that Dalits were now dressing well and eating well. [4]

Kamble pointed out that the spurt in manufacturing triggered by economic liberalisation had opened up opportunities for thousands of vendors, suppliers and entrepreneurs. A large number of Dalit entrepreneurs had benefitted from outsourcing. He noted that a census carried out by the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) indicated that 10 per cent of MSMEs registered with the Government of India were Dalit-owned. The number stood at 1,64,000 across the country in 2013.

Kamble named some of the biggest Dalit entrepreneurs such as Rajesh Saraiya with businesses in Ukraine and London and a turnover of over Rs 2,000 crore; Kalpana Saroj, founder of Kamani Tubes and many other entrepreneurs who supplied automobile parts to prominent two-wheeler and four-wheeler manufacturers.

Speaking on the impact of economic reforms and globalisation on Dalits, Kamble said: "Earlier, there were only a few companies that used to make cars, two-wheelers and spares, because only they had the licence. As the licence raj was dismantled, new players entered the market. The existing firms had their vendor-base fixed, and the dealings used to happen only with them. As new players entered, there was a need for new vendors, new suppliers, a new supply chain and that is how more entrepreneurs got an opportunity."[5]

Prasad, a former Naxalite, said he gave up violence after he was disillusioned with the Maoist ideology and felt inspired by Dalits becoming entrepreneurs and opening sweet shops and

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[3] Shekhar Gupta, 'Capitalism is changing caste much faster than any human being. Dalits should look at capitalism as a crusader against caste' Walk the Talk, Indian Express, June 11, 2013
[4] *ibid*
[5] *ibid*

restaurants in the new, liberalized economic environment. "Now Dalits in several parts of India are running good restaurants," said Prasad. According to him, capitalism was changing caste much faster than any human being. …Dalits should look at capitalism as a crusader against caste," he said.[6]

Inspired by Ambedkar's economic thought and black capitalism in the USA, DICCI has been providing all-out support to the Dalit youth to take to entrepreneurship. Through various initiatives, the DICCI leadership has been urging the Dalit youth to become job-givers and not job-seekers.

Hindu-Muslim Disharmony

Hindu-Muslim disharmony in parts of India is triggered mostly by a politically-driven agenda. Barring this Hindu-Muslim equation which is influenced by factors both internal and external, there is comparative harmony amongst all other communities and religious groups of India. This in itself is evidence of the secularism, tolerance and liberalism that is germane to the Indian subcontinent, not since Independence in 1947 but over the millennia.

In today's India, issues relating to Hindu-Muslim disharmony, social inequality and inter-caste tensions need to be addressed on priority if India is to achieve all-round progress and welfare for its people.

The challenges before India are manifold, be it in the realms of national security with specific attention to China, achieving economic growth of 8%, employment generation, reduction of rural distress, and better healthcare, to list a few. How can a nation become cohesive and achieve progress on the economic and other fronts if the very air it breathes becomes increasingly toxic with social disharmony? Every aspect of life and governance then suffers, and like a cancer, spreads and weakens the very innards of the body politic.

In its extreme form, disharmony can lead to rising levels of disillusionment and distress, as was seen in the build-up to Partition in the 1930-40 decades. There is a stark difference between what happened then and what is being witnessed now: Then, the two-nation theory and the politics of separatism was promoted aggressively by a section of the leadership of the Muslim minority and it was fed into by a section of the non-Muslim leadership too. Today, however, it is the pro-Hindutva and anti-Muslim rhetoric that is fast gaining traction in the majoritarian, mainstream sections of society. Right down to influencing children who are found parroting the divisive opinion of their parents.

On the eve of India's 74th Independence Day, the eminent social commentator Pratap Bhanu Mehta recalled the social disharmony of the pre-Partition India. He noted: "The moral of the 1930s was clear. Once unleashed, communalism always breaks nations. It took the sheen off India's renaissance in the 1930s; it will again corrode new India's energies."[7]

It is not just politics and elections that have been poisoned by this disharmony, but the polarization is seen even in other arms of society, notably the media. Such an observation was made by the

Chief Justice of India Justice N V Ramana when he noted: "The problem is, everything in this country is shown with a communal angle by a section of media…The country is going to get a bad name ultimately."[8]

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[6] *ibid*
[7] Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'The 1947 we choose', The Indian Express. 14 August 2021
[8] Krishnamdas Rajgopal, 'CJI flags communal content in media', The Hindu, 2 Sept, 2021.

Social Media and Disharmony

Fuelling this polarization in mainstream Indian society in no small measure is the communally-charged hate messaging that one sees on the internet-based social media. Take the case of what happened in Amravati and parts of north-eastern Maharashtra in November 2021. On November 13, internet services were shut down and curfew was imposed in Amravati city after Hindu and Muslim groups indulged in stone pelting and violent acts in reaction to communal clashes in Tripura. Commissioner of Police Arti Singh said internet services would remain suspended for three days to prevent the spread of rumours that fuel violence, the Business Standard reported.[9]

The violence had been triggered by reports on social media that a mosque had been vandalized in Tripura, which was witnessing intense communal tensions over the attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh. However, on 13 November 2021, the Union Home Ministry issued a statement that this was fake news and a complete misrepresentation of the facts. The statement said that this fake news had triggered violence and unsavory statements in Amravati and urged people to maintain calm. Violence was also reported in Nanded, Malegaon, Washim and Yavatmal districts.[10]

One of the longest internet shutdowns in any country, of more than 160 days, took place in Jammu and Kashmir from the night of August 4, 2019, hours before the special status of J&K was abrogated by the Central Government and the state was divided into two union territories.[11]

The circulation of politically and communally-charged fake news has become rampant in India in recent years and the problem is expected to worsen with greater penetration of the internet and smart phones. Often, IT Cells of political parties and of politically-affiliated groups have been found to be creating and spreading fake news and hate posts to denigrate their political opponents and to advance their political agenda. This has been the subject of many studies and credible media reports.

In an interview to The Quint on October 6, 2018, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford and a professor of Political Communication, said: "I think we have many reasons to believe that the problems of disinformation in a society like India might be more sophisticated and more challenging than they are in the West." According to him, valuable insights could be gained by studying "what the problems of disinformation look like in a society that is politically polarised, suffers from great economic inequality, poverty and low trust in institutions…"

In November 2021, some critical observations were made in multiple reports disclosed to the United States Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and provided to the US Congress in redacted form by the legal counsel of ex-Facebook employee and whistleblower Frances Haugen. On November 12, 2021, the Indian Express reported: "Multiple internal Facebook reports over the last two years red-flagged an increase in "anti-minority" and "anti-Muslim" rhetoric as "a substantial component" of the 2019 Lok Sabha election campaign. A July 2020 report specifically noted there was a marked rise in such posts in the preceding 18 months, and that the sentiment was "likely to feature" in the coming Assembly elections, including West Bengal.

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[9] PTI, 'Internet switched off, 4-day curfew imposed in Amravati amid fresh violence', Business Standard, 14 November, 2021
[10] Livemint, 'Reports about mosque demolition in Tripura fake: Govt' livemint.com, 13 Novermber 2021
[11] Outlook Web Bureau, "'Fundamental Right': All You Need To Know About Longest Internet Shutdown In Kashmir", Outlookindia.com, 10 January 2020

The increase in hate speech and inflammatory content was mostly centred around "themes" of threats of violence, Covid-related misinformation involving minority groups, and "false" reports of Muslims engaging in communal violence."

The social media in India is being flooded with motivated and communally-charged hate messaging.

This works well for India's enemy states and non-state actors as India has already paid a heavy price over the decades since Independence on account of politically-driven Hindu-Muslim discord.

However, if this trend continues and is not arrested soon enough, the consequences in terms of social disharmony will be disastrous for India, ironically even as the country is celebrating 75 years of Independence.

Social Harmony and Police Reforms

Social harmony can be effectively maintained if a nation has a professional law enforcement machinery, as is seen in many developed Western nations. India has been deprived of this for far too long. One of the most critical reforms, Police Reforms, are yet to be initiated by the Central and State governments. Fifteen years have passed since the landmark September 22, 2006 order of the three-judge bench of Justices Y K Sabharwal, C K Thakker and P K Balasubramanyan in the Prakash Singh v. Union of India case of 1996. The Supreme Court had upheld the petition and directed the central and state governments to undertake structural changes in the police force to free it from political and other influences and make it accountable to the people.

"If implemented, they will be game-changers for the citizens of India and the police," observed Meeran Chadha Borwankar, a retired IPS officer who was Director General of Maharashtra's Bureau of Police Research and Development. Borwankar made some critical observations in her opinion piece, 'For a citizen's police', published in The Indian Express on September 22, 2021-- the 15th anniversary of SC verdict. She blamed politicians and corrupt police officers for obstructing the implementation of the reforms. The reforms would empower honest police officers to concentrate on their professional work of crime prevention, investigation and maintenance of public order, instead of being used and abused by those in power, said Borwankar. According to her, one major cause for the tardy progress of police reforms was the lack of public awareness and sustained interest in law enforcement.

Borwankar noted that as directed by the SC, the reforms would bring in citizen-centric policing, merit-based postings, transfers and promotions of police officers, instead of political appointments and protection from unwarranted political pressures.

"Presently, small-time criminals gradually become dons due to political patronage. Initially, they are used to threaten "inconvenient" persons. Gradually, they start their own extortion rackets or take to violence, adulteration or hoarding of essential commodities as local politicians successfully neutralise the police and other enforcement agencies. Entering into dubious land deals, real estate, hotel and restaurant businesses flushed with black money, they form dangerous criminal gangs. Giving protection to these illegal activities and collecting money from them enriches officers of different departments as well as politicians. It is a vicious cycle. And it is this politician-officer-criminal nexus that the SC tried to demolish in 2006," Borwankar said in her commentary.[12]

India's Intrinsic Strength

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[12] Meeran Chadha Borwankar, 'Creating citizen-centric police', Indian Express, September 23, 2021

The inherent and intrinsic strength of the idea of India as a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society lies deeply embedded in the ethos of the Indian nation. This idea has been shaped by the forces of history over the millennia in the vast region of the Indian subcontinent. It lies so deeply entrenched in the psyche of the Indian people that it has become an integral part of their identity over the centuries. In ancient times, the land across the Himalayas was fabled as the land of milk and honey, endowed with plenty of water, fertile soil and a salubrious climate, compared to the harsh terrain of west and central Asia. The idea of India as a nation-state emerged only after the British Raj consolidated its power pan-India after 1857. And yet, large parts of the subcontinent were united in thought and spirit, and by geography, even as empires rose and fell since the first, pan-Indian empire of the Mauryas. Established around 321 B.C.E., this empire covered most of central and northern India and stretched right up to Iran. This empire, which ended in 185 B.C.E., saw legendary emperors such as Chandragupta Maurya, Bindusara and Ashoka rule over large parts of the subcontinent.

It is blatantly unjust to say that the ideas of liberalism and secularism came to India from the West and became a defining part of the Indian Constitution under the influence of Western ideas, Western education and philosophy that had influenced many of India's founding fathers who were well-read in English and who were exposed to Western thought of freedom and equality in England and the USA.

What was it, if not liberalism and secularism, when the Parsis, fleeing persecution in Iran, secured refuge in India on the coast of Gujarat in around 8th century A.D. and lived harmoniously with the Hindus.

Likewise, in the case of Jews, be it the Bene Israelis who settled on the coast of Mumbai 2000 years ago, or the other ancient community of the Jews of Cochin who found refuge in India from Hindu rulers. The Ashokan empire of the 3rd century B.C. is a symbol of strength, peace and tolerance and very aptly, the national emblem of India is adapted from the Lion Capital of the Ashoka Pillar at Sarnath, U.P. The message of tolerance towards all religions finds engraved very clearly in King Ashoka's Rock Edict XII.[13]

Hinduism, in its most ancient form, brought in the idea of the oneness of the soul in all living beings and the concept of the entire world as one family. As the author Pavan Varma has noted in his book, 'The Great Hindu Civilisation - Achievement, Neglect, Bias and the Way Forward', "If hatred of the other was Hinduism's dominant emotion, why would the Upanishads say — Anno bhadra kritavo yantu visvatatha: Let good thoughts flow to us from all directions? If religious exclusion was the defining belief of Hinduism, why would our ancient seers stress — Udar charitanam vasudhaiva kutumbukam: For the big-hearted, the entire world is a family?"[14] (The extraordinary relevance of the concept of vasudhaiva kutumbukam in these times of Climate Change stands emphasised by the government in global assemblies such as COP26 and the United Nations.)

As noted by Varma, while resentment against some of the injustices done to Hinduism in the past may have its reasons, hatred and violence "cannot become the defining features of a religion which rejects them both. Moreover, these sentiments are completely counterproductive in a modern republic whose stated goal is respect towards all faiths, and which aspires for progress and prosperity, whose sine qua non is social peace and harmony." It is therefore not surprising why NR Narayana Murthy, the legendary IT entrepreneur, categorically states: "The founding fathers of

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[13] Page 351, Pavan Varma, The Great Hindu Civilisation, Westland, 2021
[14] Pages 350-351, Pavan Varma, The Great Hindu Civilisation, Westland, 2021

independent India wanted a nation where every religion would flourish and every voice would be heard. Thus, India very rightly adopted secularism as its credo."[15]

Adi Shankarachyarya, one of the greatest proponents of Hinduism, was born in Kochi around 8th century C.E. He traversed the length and breadth of India and established four mathas (monasteries) in Odisha, Karnataka, Gujarat and Uttarakhand.

Sant Namdev (1270-1350) is not only revered as a saint in Maharashtra but also in Punjab and 61 of his hymns are included in the holiest of Sikh scriptures, the Guru Granth Sahib.

Empires in the south, had their own identity and culture distinct from the north and were yet united with the rest of the subcontinent by a common religion, trade and geography. Repeated invasions from the north, brought in the Mughals and led to the spread of Islam in large swathes of India over the 800 years that the Mughals ruled over India. But even that powerful influence driven by the sharpness of the sword under some regimes had to give way to harmony, co-existence and cultural amalgamation of a people even as they practiced their individual faiths over the centuries.

The purpose of religion is meant to be constructive, not destructive, and it is meant to spread harmony and not disharmony in society. Delivering a lecture at the 22nd Foundation Day Celebration of Vivekananda Institute of Human Excellence, Hyderabad, Chief Justice of India NV Ramana said, 'There is greater need today, in contemporary India, to pay heed to the words spoken by Swami Vivekananda as early as in 1893." The CJI said Swami Vivekananda "was prophetic. Long before the painful churning that took place in the subcontinent during the freedom struggle, resulting in framing of an egalitarian Constitution of India, he advocated secularism as if he foresaw the events to unfold. He firmly believed that the true essence of religion was the common good and tolerance."[16]

Swami Vivekananda and his historic speech delivered in Chicago at the World Parliament of Religions in September 1893 was also cited by the well-known economist and columnist Dr. Ajit Ranade while reacting to the phenomenally vitriolic hate speeches delivered at the three-day Haridwar Dharma Sansad in December 2021. "Vivekananda's speech was refreshingly inclusive, not divisive. He said: 'I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true." Not tolerance, but acceptance, and all religions as equally true and valid.'"[17]

Dr Ranade noted that Vivekananda quoted a popular hymn in that speech which emphasised the Hindu belief in the oneness of all religions: "...As the different streams having their sources in different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."[18]

Thus, inspite of the two-nation theory and the horrors of Partition in 1947, it was only natural for India to adopt a secular, liberal Constitution which guaranteed the right to the freedom of religion. The deep polarisation on Hindu-Muslim lines in Indian society today is undeniable and yet the liberal and secular ethos of India stands reiterated by the government at international assemblies like the United Nations.

Exercising India's Right of Reply to Pakistan Prime Prime Minister's references to Kashmir in his United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), virtual speech, one of the things that Sneha Dubey, First Secretary at the UNGA, said was: "India is a pluralistic democracy with a substantial population of

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[15] Page 351, Pavan Varma, The Great Hindu Civilisation, Westland, 2021
[16] Express News Service, 'Swami Vivekananda advocated secularism, religion for common good, says CJI Ramana', Indian Express, 13 September 2021
[17] Ajit Ranade, What Haridwar can learn from Vivekananda's Chicago speech, 31 December 2021. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/what-haridwar-can-learn-from-vivekanandas-chicago-speech/article show/88615493.cms
[18] *ibid*

minorities who have gone on to hold the highest offices in the country including as President, Prime Minister, Chief Justices and Chiefs of the Army Staff." [19]

The social fabric of India created by the multitudinous threads of a thousand faiths, thoughts, ideas and philosophies has weathered enormous wear and tear over the centuries, and under the Divide and Rule politics of the British Raj. It has come under enormous stress and strain, and yet, by and large it has remained intact. To go against this is to go against the grain of the idea of India that lies embedded in its soul, right down to the last of the 649,000 villages where people of various faiths have been living in harmony over the centuries.

The classical Hindustani music of such maestros as the *Bharat Ratnas* Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, Ustad Bismillah Khan and others is a symbol of the inter-faith synthesis and the essence of the spirit of liberalism, secularism and communal harmony which defines India. Can one separate the individual constituents of this synthesis called Hindustani music? Or Indian culture, language, cuisine, literature and everything that comprises Indian society as it stands today? Is it even necessary?

The ancient wisdom of India tells us that all can prosper and co-exist peacefully if we respect each other's religious faiths in the least. The faceless Indian in this land of 1.3 billion people may be poor and illiterate but he is educated enough to understand this wisdom. Thus, 150 years after the seeds of communal politics were sown in India by the British Raj; 75 years after Independence, and after the trauma of violent Hindu-Muslim clashes, big and small, people at the grassroots end up accepting that the way forward is through communal harmony.

This can be seen even in the Kashmir Valley-- the worst, communally-disturbed part of India since Independence. The cold-blooded murders by terrorists of a number of migrant workers, Kashmiri Pandit pharmacist Makhan Lal Bindroo in Srinagar in October 2021, and another Kashmiri Pandit businessman Sandeep Mawa's Muslim salesman Mohammad Ibrahim Khan as a result of mistaken identity, has been viewed by the common people there as an assault on Kashmiriyat-- the spirit of communal harmony in Kashmir. An NDTV report quoted Mawa as saying that despite pressure from his family to leave Kashmir, he was "not going to run away."

"I am staying here and I am not going to run away," Mawa said, adding that the people of Kashmir -- Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Sikhs-- have to collectively fight it (terrorism)."[20]

As the scholar Dr. V K Sazawal explains: "Kashmiriyat came to be characterized and expressed by religious, cultural and social harmony in a land blessed by Gods as a paradise and where a confluence of Sufism, Shaivism, Buddhism and Sikhism in magnificent and naturally beautiful surroundings provided an ideal sense of brotherhood, resilience and inter-dependency to fight physical isolation as the region used to be cut off from the rest of the world for nearly 6 months a year. That sense of fraternity and isolation has led to both pride and patriotism among Kashmiris and it has become fashionable to use Kashmiriyat both as societal and political expressions."[21]

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[19] Livemint, "Watch: IFS officer Sneha Dubey's befitting reply to Pakistan's Imran Khan at UN" 25 September 2021

[20] NDTV, November 10, 2021. "Not Leaving Kashmir": Businessman Whose Salesman Was Killed By Terrorists".
https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/not-leaving-kashmir-businessman-whose-salesman-was-killed-by-terrorists-2605713

[21] Vijay K. Sazawal, 'The True Meaning of Kashmiriyat', 2009.
https://www.kashmirforum.org/the-true-meaning-of-kashmiriyat/

There is little doubt that the people of J&K have been enveloped by the fatigue of the seemingly unending cycle of violence and there is a cry for a return to normalcy.

Restoring Communal Harmony

Genuine efforts need to be taken by Hindu and Muslim community leaders to reach out to one another to build bridges and dispel the deep distrust and miscommunication that has gripped this relationship over the decades. In July 2021, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat spoke against violence and hate speech targeted at Muslims. At a book release function in Ghaziabad, he said, the DNA of all Indians is the same. "People can't be differentiated on how they worship," he said, adding, "We are in a democracy. There can't be dominance of Hindus or Muslims. There can only be dominance of Indians." The RSS chief admonished those who spoke disparagingly of Indian Muslims, asking them to leave India. "If anyone says that Muslims should not stay in India, then he is not a Hindu," said Bhagwat.[22]

Two months later, on 6 September 2021, Bhagwat once again sought to reach out to the Muslim community during an address to Muslim intellectuals in Mumbai. He said that the distrust between Hindus and Muslims in India was the result of the divisive politics of the British Raj. The British sowed the seeds of mistrust, they provoked conflict and promoted miscommunication between the two communities. "We need to change our vision," Bhagwat said, adding that we need "to go to the root cause of this disease" to find a permanent solution.[23]

Economic Reforms, Jobs and Social Stability

In October 2017, Viraj Mehta, Head of Regional Agenda - India and South Asia, and Member of the Executive Committee, World Economic Forum, Geneva, made some cryptic observations in his analysis titled "India can bring prosperity and social justice to a fifth of the world." [24]

He drew a contrast between the India of the 1980s and the post-liberalised India of 2017, showing the stark benefits of economic liberalisation and reforms. In the 1980s, the country had one Black & White television channel, inferior quality goods and services offered by domestic companies protected by the 'licence raj' and a country that progressed at a sluggish pace of growth, "affectionately known by economists as the 'Hindu rate of growth'.

People marvelled and envied their NRI friends and relatives who brought with them "out of this world" products, be it electronic gadgets, kitchen equipment, cosmetics or simple stationery. Almost every middle class family aspired to become a part of the American Dream by doing well in studies, getting a scholarship abroad and flying out of India, by and large, for good. Contrast this with the situation in India in 2017, 25 years later.

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[22] 'DNA of all Indians same, irrespective of religion: RSS chief Bhagwat', The Tribune, July 4, 2021 https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/dna-of-all-indians-same-irrespective-of-religion-rss-chief-bhagwat-278183

[23] Express News Service, 'Britishers created communication gap between Hindu and Muslims, claims RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat', Indian Express, September 6, 2021

[24] Vijraj Mehta, 'India can bring prosperity and social justice to a fifth of the world', World Economic Forum, 2017. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/10/india-can-bring-prosperity-and-social-justice-to-a-fifth-of-the-world/

"The India many of us grew up with has disappeared completely. Self-assured, dynamic, assertive, armed with ubiquitous cell phones, numerous TV channels, nuclear weapons and a world-class IT industry, India is today one of the fastest-growing economies of the world," said Mehta.

The new economic environment saw Indian companies embark on ambitious growth plans and trajectories within and outside India, especially in sectors like IT and telecom. There were new highways, airports and digital pathways coming up in India and the country had emerged as one of the fastest growing economies of the world with a forecast for GDP growth in 2017 at 7.2 per cent.

Indeed, India's economy grew at 8.26% in 2016, 6.8% in 2017 and 6.53% in 2018.[25]

In 2017, HSBC Holdings Plc said that by 2028, India was likely to see a $7 trillion economy and overtake Japan and Germany, provided the country was consistent with its reforms and greater focus on the social sector. The HSBC economists said: "In over the next ten years, India will likely surpass Germany and Japan to become the world's third largest economy in nominal USD and the transition will happen even more quickly on a PPP (purchasing power parity) basis." Demographics and macro stability were highlighted as "key strengths" of the country and India needed to apply a lot of focus on ease of doing business "and related aspects like contract enforcements."

The social capital spending was insufficient and India needed to increase its spending on health and education. This was "not just desirable for its own sake, but is also central to economic growth and political stability", the HSBC economists said.[26]

Economic Prosperity and Social Harmony

Social harmony and economic prosperity go hand-in-hand. As a country progresses economically and there's growth for all, social tensions begin to decline as people become aspirational in their outlook towards life. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in the post-liberalisation period, Maharashtra, which is one of the economic engines of the country, saw a reduced frequency of social tensions in the form of strikes, bandhs, incidents of vandalism and destruction of public and private property. In 2008, for example, Maharashtra — and Pune in particular — witnessed a construction slowdown after north Indian labourers were attacked by activists of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) political party as a part of their agitation against "outsiders". To cite the case of just one company, the expansion plans of Infosys were delayed in Pune as a result and 3,000 jobs that were to be created in Pune were diverted to Chennai.[27]

This point was underscored by senior journalist Tavleen Singh in her column titled 'India can defeat jihadi Islam': "As someone who knows the Islamist republic next door well, believe me nothing frightens Pakistan more than the possibility that India will race so far ahead of it economically that it will make ordinary Pakistanis realise that religion is a weaker glue than prosperity." The columnist

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[25] Source: World Bank Data, Macrotrends,
https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/IND/india/gdp-gross-domestic-product#:~:text=India%20gdp%20for%202020%20was%20%242%2C622.98B%2C%20a%208.62%25,2017%20was%20%242%2C651.47B%2C%20a%2015.54%25%20increase%20from%202016.

[26] HSBC sees India as a $7 trillion economy by 2028, overtaking Germany, Japan17 Sep 2017, / PTIhttps://www.livemint.com/Politics/0IMc34nX7x8aJFOSuUatnL/HSBC-sees-India-as-a-7-trillion-economy-by-2028-overtaking.html

[27] Nilanjana Ghosh Choudhury, 'Pune loses 3,000 jobs as Infy looks at Chennai',
https://web.archive.org/web/20090302062913/http://sify.com/finance/fullstory.php?id=14754530

then says in the concluding para: "Never has India needed more to show that it can become the economic hub of the subcontinent."[28]

Conflict and Development

Research shows a strong co-relation between conflict and poor economic growth, although there are other factors too that are causative of conflict. By and large, countries with low per capita income have a higher conflict rate, although this relationship is not very tight, say Ejaz Ghani and Lakshmi Iyer in their paper 'Conflict and Development—Lessons from South Asia'. [29] India, for example, is among the countries that has higher conflict rates than expected for its state of development.

The paper notes that conflict is higher in lagging regions with a close relationship between higher poverty rates and greater conflict. Some parts of eastern India have both high levels of poverty and high levels of conflict. Social divisions constitute another driver of conflict and this can be seen in India's northeastern states which are socially and ethnically different from the majority of the Indian states and have seen long-running separatist movements.

The consequences of conflict on development are most severe in lagging regions due to weak institutions, poor geography, and weak integration with global markets. In contrast, leading regions are able to better contain and manage conflicts although they too suffer on account of conflict.

While insurgencies can be dealt with negotiations and signing of peace agreements, the expansion of welfare programmes in economically-backward areas aimed at reducing poverty is also an economic solution to conflict resolution. Cross-border cooperation between countries should also be an integral part of the strategy to reduce conflict as many of the internal conflicts in South Asia have cross-border dimensions, the researchers have noted. This is particularly relevant in the India-Pakistan and Hindu-Muslim context.

Promoting Social Harmony Through Education

The preamble to the Constitution of India bears four words which form the bedrock of Indian democracy: Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Section 29 of the Right to Education Act, 2009, calls for imparting Constitutional values to children. The National Curriculum Framework, 2005, drafted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) outlines its vision at the outset:

While these lofty goals had been identified, was there an appropriate structure to specifically impart the Constitutional values to children? It was this quest that led prominent Pune-based social activist and philanthropist, Shantilal Muttha, to design the 'Mulyavardhan' (Imparting Core Values) educational programme, which was launched in association with the Maharashtra government in 2015 in 67,000 government schools in the state. The programme was later introduced in the state of Goa. Pointing out that education is the key to development and good citizenship, Muttha explained that there was a need to anchor children in strong values at a time when they faced numerous distractions over the internet, social media, and were exposed to crimes against women and other social issues.[30]

Based on constructivist, activity-based pedagogy with the use of cooperative and evidence-based learning, the programme has been supported by the Tata Trust and the Shantilal Muttha Foundation.

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[28] Tavleen Singh, 'India can defeat jihadi Islam', The Sunday Express, August 29, 2021.
[29] Ejaz Ghani and Lakshmi Iyer, Conflict and Development—Lessons from South Asia', September 2010, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/10157/566100BRI0EP310Box353729B01PUBL IC1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[30] Abhay Vaidya, 'Mulyavardhan: Creating a structure to impart constitutional values to children', February 16, 2020, Hindustan Times.

Designed for primary school children and teachers, it has been implemented by the state education department in 67,000 government schools in Maharashtra since 2015. One of the feedbacks reported by teachers was that "there is a spirit of inclusiveness where children have become more accommodative of one another." [31]

Taking this initiative throughout the country would go a long way in fostering the Constitutional values and thereby help promote social harmony.

Social Harmony, Democracy and the Constitution

Given India's multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic diversity, social harmony in the country is inexorably linked to the secular spirit enshrined in the Constitution. Community leaders from all faiths—most essentially, from amongst the pre-dominant faith of the land—need to echo the sentiment expressed by the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat quoted earlier: "We are in a democracy. There can't be dominance of Hindus or Muslims. There can only be dominance of Indians." As noted by Faizan Mustafa, vice-chancellor, NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad, the RSS can indeed "lead the battle against communalism and prevent today's ruling dispensation from continuing the British policy of divide and rule." [32]

This sentiment that we are Indians first and foremost needs to be echoed by the other sections of society too: be it we as parents, school and college teachers, heads of educational institutions, working professionals, businesspersons, media organisations and the Civil Society at large.

The pathways to achieving social harmony are as clear as daylight, as are also the consequences of social disharmony for a nation the size of India. The future of India depends on the pathways that we chose for ourselves, individually and collectively.

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[31] Abhay Vaidya, 'Imparting Constitutional values: A silent revolution is on in Maharashtra's 67,000 govt schools', March 12, 2020, Hindustan Times.

[32] Faizan Mustafa, 'Why Mohan Bhagwat is right about the Raj', Indian Express, September 25, 2021.