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Human Development in the Indian Context – Religious Convictions, Social Reconciliation and Collective Action

Vinu Aram spricht als im Shanti Ashram – einer hinduistischen geistlichen Gemeinschaft, die in einer großen entwicklungsmäßig zurückgebliebenen indischen Dorfgruppe bildungsmäßige, landwirtschaftliche und hygienische Aufbauarbeit leistet – engagierte Ärztin aus mittelbarer Erfahrung über das Spannungsfeld zwischen alten hinduistischen Traditionen, Idealen der Gandhi-Bewegung und den Einflussfaktoren moderner Entwicklung beim Kampf um Reduzierung von Armut und Analphabetentum. Sie macht deutlich, wie am indischen Beispiel exemplarisch multiple Faktoren für die Versöhnung sozialer Gegensätze studiert werden können und wie die spirituellen Grundlagen in neuer Anstrengung zu beleben sind.

Introduction

The contemporary understanding of Human development is multifaceted. Various streams both intellectual and experiential have contributed their own understanding of Human Development. While the area most impacted by Globalization is the economic realm, it is realistic to state that almost every aspect of life seems affected including health, environment, education, communication and social behaviour. Lifestyles and attitudes to life have been influenced and impacted too. The reduction of space and time by modern communication and our increasingly diverse living contexts has created a new situation… a situation that calls for reflection, dialogue and cooperative action. *Religious and cultural Diversity complemented with emerging pluralism has brought with it many opportunities and challenges to our societies!*

I recall a personal experience that goes back to 1989, when I first had the chance to participate in an inter-religious gathering - the 5th. World Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) in Australia. I was still in medical school then. In most of our colleges in India it is mandatory that a medical student has attended atleast eighty-five percent of all theory and practical sessions. The trip to Australia for attending the WCRP/ International youth camp took ten days and this meant that I had to meet my academic advisor to sort out the issues that would arise out of my absence from school. So when I came back, I had to go through the process of getting my leave recommended by my advisor and sanctioned by my principal. I remember standing outside the principal's office, when my Professor of Pathology walked by. He said: 'Vinu, have you been up to trouble? Why are you standing in front of the principal's office?" And I said: "No, no…..." But I was shy to say why I was standing there. I was only nineteen… I looked at him and said:. I need my leave of absence to be cleared." He said: " Why? For what reason ?" Now I continued with some strength "I was away to attend a youth meeting in Australia." He immediately said: Very good! Then he continued: But what was this conference about?" And I said: "It was an

*interfaith conference." He again looked at me and said: Vinu, now, now, now… you should concentrate on medicine. You are doing very well and medicine must be your focus. **You can do Peace Work … and interfaith work when you are sixty.**" I share this experience often, because it captures for me the common stereotyping that is associated with interfaith work and lack of acknowledgement of the importance of peace building which includes Inter-religious cooperation.*

The Indian context

India's ancient civilization- its rich cultural and religious tradition, contemporary experience with democracy, growing population and rather important standing in the world of technology, makes it an important case study for the global community. India, on her part has to pause and see what are the underlying convictions and conditions that have influenced India's growth and human development. It has to examine its religo-cultural roots and reexamine the association that it has and can have with political institutions. This interaction will provide a unique opportunity…for redefining India's journey in the 21st century.

Growing communalism and religious fanatism pose great challenges not only to peace and stability, but also to political, educational, cultural and economic institutions. Even as India becomes part of the 'Global Billionaires Club' demographically millions still are affected by poverty and violence. India's experience is relevant to the world because of its unique experience….because of both what it has achieved and what it has failed to achieve!

This paper is a viewing of HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT by a young Indian professional….a young Indian woman. It is a personalized understanding of the impact that 'religious convictions' play in the everyday lives of Indians, the seeds of reconciliation that it provides and impetus it gives for social action for human development.

Human Development – Multifaceted Understanding

In this section I discuss three streams of current thinking on Human Development that influence the Indian context.
• The UN led global discourse on Human Development
• The Ethical discourse
• The Religious and Spiritual discourse

The UN led global discourse on Human Development

For over a decade the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), through its Human Development Reports has been in the forefront of an effort to generate, in the current development discourse a policy focus on the broader attributes of human well-being. It has defined Human Development as a process of enlarging people's choices, as well as raising the level of well-being. In principle, these choices can be infinite and vary over time and context. It is now widely acknowledged that the realization of these choices for individuals and communities is mediated largely through personal means

and access to public provisions and transfers. However, in most of these cases the underlying social and political process, are perhaps as important for translating the available means to socially desirable outcomes, both at the individual and at the societal level. It therefore becomes necessary to view as the process of development in terms of socially desired outcomes and not merely as material benefits. Values (*both religious and secular*) and culture have a major role to play here.

The conventional measure of well-being such as GDP or per capita income and even their distributionally sensitive variants are limited in capturing these wider aspects of well-being and the multifaceted process of development. The components included in the Human Development Index (HDI) include attributes of health as represented by life expectancy at birth, education as reflected by Literacy and Economic status as indicated by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Renowned economists Mahbubul Haq and Amartya Sen put this index together in the 1990s. The HDI ranking of countries is an annual affair and the Global Human Development publishes this list each year. It has been interesting to see that economic strength of a country always does not translate into good human development ranking. But of course this expanded definition and exploration of human development is new in the economic world. The biggest value addition of this exercise is the interface it provides for an inter-sectoral conversation … a basis for a more integrated approach to human development.

The Ethical discourse

In all our cultures, freedom and development have been defined in many different ways. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, in his inaugural address to free India said, and I quote

"*The achievement we celebrate today is but a step…to the greater triumphs and achievements that await us. Are we brave enough and wise enough to grasp this opportunity and accept the challenge of the future? The future is not one of ease or rest but of incessant striving so that we may fulfill the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. The service of India means the service of the million who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity. We have to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell.*"

The ethical discourse still strongly draws from the religio-cultural roots of India. However a very distinct presence of this in the socio-political field started with the Indian Independence struggle in the first half of the 20th century. The struggle for political freedom from the British was closely intertwined with an equally important struggle within the Indian society. This was the struggle for social justice and human dignity. This ethical framework still finds place (*silenced though sometimes like in the recent Gujarat riots)* in the governance structures and civil society of India.

In a country where poverty is still a majority experience, the ethical dimension of all Developmental work is critical. To quote my father Dr. M. Aram on Gandhiji's leadership

"*It was the genius of Mahatma Gandhi that made the constructive programme a major dimension of the Indian Freedom Movement. Gandhi was able to generate countrywide enthusiasm and many educated leaders moved from towns to villages and started centers of rural re-*

construction. Mahatma Gandhi set up several All India Organizations in order to promote specific programmes of rural development such as Khadi, Village Industries, new Education, Cow protection, Harijan uplift, Tribal Welfare, Leprosy work and welfare of women and children, Gandhi saw that these organizations were working in isolation without a total perspective. So he called for "Samagra Seva" (Integrated service). This was the beginning of the concept of integration in the history of rural development in India. Subsequently, "Samagra Grama Seva" (Integrated rural service) became a popular expression.

It is the early thinking of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi that continue to be a reference for how human development can be viewed.

To quote Gandhiji himself ,"***India of my dreams.*** *I shall work for an India, in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country in which making they have an effective voice, an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people; an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room in such an India for the curse of un-touchability or the curse of intoxicating drinks and drugs. Women shall enjoy the same rights as men. Since we shall be at peace with all the rest of the world, neither exploiting nor being exploited, we should have the smallest army imaginable. All interests not in conflict with the interests of the dumb millions will be scrupulously respected, whether foreign or indigenous. Personally I hate distinction between foreign and indigenous. This is the India of my dreams…I shall be satisfied with nothing less.*
*My Swaraj is to keep intact the genius of our civilization. I want to write many new things but they must all be written on the Indian state. I would gladly borrow from the West when can return the amount with decent interest. The Swaraj of my dreams is the poor man's **Swaraj**. The necessaries of life should be enjoyed by you in common with those enjoyed by the princes and the monied men. But that does not mean that you should have palaces like theirs. They are not necessary for happiness. You or I would be lost in them. But you ought to get all the ordinary amenities of life that a rich man enjoys. I have not the slightest doubt that **Swaraj** is not Poorna **Swaraj** until these amenities are guaranteed to you under it."*

The dream of a Sarvodaya society is probably the best expression of this ethical discourse, which began with the freedom movement. The Sarvodaya society is one where the prime objective of all development work is "*sarva*" (all) "*udaya*" (awakening or development) – awakening of all or development of all. This combines in it both the physical, the emotional and if I may dare say, the spiritual well-being of all. All of these components help in extending the rich of social justice through governance and works towards societal reconciliation amidst disparity and poverty.

The Religious and Spiritual discourse

India has always cherished the religious and spiritual dimensions of Human development. On one side emphasis is on individual growth from the gross to the subtler self and on the other the emphasis is on caring for the greater humanity … guided by the vision of "*Vasuydeva Kuttumbakam"*. I share with you two quotes of Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, which capture the essence of this Indian spirit of higher development.

"The science of yoga claims that it has discovered that it has the laws which develop this personality; and by proper attention to those laws and methods, each one can grow and strengthen his personality. This is one of the great practical things and this is the secret of all education. This has a universal application. In the life of the householder, in the life of the poor, the rich, the man of business, the spiritual man in every one's life, it is a great thing, the strengthening of this personality. There are no such realities as a physical world, a mental world, a spiritual world. Whatever is, is one, Let us say, it is a sort of tapering existence, the thickest part is here, it tapers and becomes finer and finer; the finest is what we call spirit; the grossest, the body. And just as it is here, in the microcosm, it is exactly the same in the macrocosm. This universe of ours is exactly like that; it is the gross external thickness, and it tapers into something finer and finer until it becomes God" **Swami Vivekananda**

"A life of service must be one of humility. He, who would sacrifice his life for others, has hardly time to reserve for himself a place in the sun. Inertia must not be mistaken for humility, as it has been by modern readers of religion. The humility means most strenuous and constant endeavour entirely directed to the service of humanity. God is continuously in action without resting for a single moment. If we would serve him or become one with Him, our activity must be as unwearied as His" **Mahatma Gandhi**

I share the thoughts of these two karma yogis, because both of them have influenced Indian Life in historic ways. They set forth value-centered discourses on human development, inspired by their personal and spiritual experiences. Even today, millions of Indians use their life and message as reference points.

The religious discourse provides one of the strongest and most internalized source of values, experiences and models in working for human development. The inter-play of this is seen in the everyday lives of Indians.

Roman Rolland a biographer of Gandhiji said:

"To understand Gandhiji's activity, it should be realized that this doctrine is like a huge edifice composed of two different floors or grades. Below is solid groundwork, the basic foundation of religion. On this vast and unshakable foundation is based the political and social campaign. It is not the ideal continuation of the invisible foundation, but it is the best structure possible under present conditions. It is adapt4ed to conditions. Indeed the India experience has been a continuous process of CONTINUITY INNOVATION AND CHANGE".

In other words, Gandhiji is religious by nature, and his doctrine is essentially religious. He is a political leader by necessity, because other leaders disappear, and the force of circumstances obliges him to pilot the ship through storm and give practical expression to his doctrine. The experience is particular of the greatness of Gandhiji but at the same time reflective of the greater Indian perspective.

Of all dimensions of a religion, its social dimension is usually regarded as most problematic in relation to human rights. Yet one must avoid premature pessimism in the area of reconciliation. In order to justify cautious optimism, we will provide concrete instances of how socio – legal structures associated with certain religious traditions can undergo. 'of the Indian religions have also influenced the thinking of the Indian mind. The role of a religion in the context of human rights will depend to a large extent on which

dimension prevails. In fact, juxtaposing human rights and religious traditions may help a faith community to focus more on the universalist dimension.

The Scriptural Dimension also has an important place in the religious and cultural discourse. I mention this here because in modern Indian writing and work, positive drawing from scriptures have often strengthened the human development work by focusing on:

- *values*
- *providing ethical frameworks*
- *creating a climate of inspiration and motivation*
- *presenting successful models*

The Duties vs. Rights – framework also is another special dimension of this discourse. The need for thoughtful subtlety has extended beyond the ideal of selfless action. It has provided a very important ethical framework indeed for the world to look at rights and responsibilities in tandem.

The Indian Experience: Religious Convictions and Societal Reconciliation

When one thinks of India – some thoughts and images often crosses one's mind. I once asked a young student from North America the same question, and she said:

- *Ancient history*
- *Population*
- *Mahatma Gandhi*
- *Poverty*
- *Poor sanitation*
- *Beautiful and friendly people*
- *Bright colours*
- *Hindu Nationalist Party*

…………….and the list went on

It is true – it is an amalgamation of many different ideas, cultures, experiences – good and different. It has the best of what human culture and human work has to offer – But also facets that question the very core of human values. Set in backdrop where Ancient history is a Continuing life experience, where "Sanathana Dharma" is way that religion is viewed, where a population of a billion is made up mostly by young people, where Mahatma Gandhi is still relevant, where Poverty afflicts nearly 30% of our population and only 65% can read and write, where basic facilities like sanitation is enjoyed only by 30% of the population, where beautiful and friendly people celebrate a rainbow of experiences and 50 years of uninterrupted democracy

We have to look deeply though to see what we have achieved in the five decades of political independence but also in what we have failed to achieve. You may ask …why is this relevant to the rest of the world? When we look at where we want to go as a global family in the new century, I think some of these challenges and questioning has to be done together…..for now more than any time before the notion of a 'common destiny seems real'.

Religious Convictions and Societal Reconciliation are closely intertwined one influences the other. A lot of young people in my generation are not bound by geographical boundaries. Our professions and our vocations take us to different parts of the world - sometimes by choice, but sometimes also by necessity. One begins to wonder then, what roles is this interaction between *Religious Convictions and Societal Reconciliation* doing in public life and private life. If you ask many young Indians today: Are you religious? Many of them would say: No! Then they answer: that "culture & tradition" has an important role to play in their private lives. They seem to be uncomfortable with the old model of coming together for societal action in the name of religion.

In public life Religion has almost been restricted to the political domain. And then again you find many disconnecting themselves saying: "It is politics and we cannot be engaged in it." Religion has played an important role in national politics in India over the past decade. It has shown almost the most negative sides of religion of what fanatism and communalism can do. During this time we saw some of the worst communal riots. Many Indians sat back in their living rooms and said, but this cannot happen in India. We cannot kill ourselves in the name of Religion. And suddenly we had to wake up, because these communal riots and these communal problems were affecting our economies. I believe even before reconciliation, religious groups and organizations have to be more proactive in bringing in positive ethical values in public thinking in peace times itself.

The framework of Human development has to include ethics. And today when the world is shrinking, and we are becoming a global village, the need for a global ethic is even more relevant.

In many ways India is a microcosm of the diversity of the world; and a central question for each of us living in this microcosm is: How do we relate our individual, spiritual and religious experiences to societal practices and outcomes?

Here are some areas that we need to focus on to ensure that the relationship between Religious convictions and societal reconciliation:

- ✓ **Human Development with a human face**: The strength of our religious and spiritual resource has much to contribute to this people centred development approach. But at the core of all our work we must ensure and respect human dignity. And that is why I think we need to talk together, we need to reflect together and we need to see how we can work together constructively. Because I think human dignity provides a meeting point between spirituality and social action

- ✓ **Social Distance** : We have often heard the gap (mostly economic) that exists between the developed and developing countries . About a disconnect in life and experience that is happening, not only between developed and developing countries, but also within our own societies. Inequities and lack of interaction within our own communities is probably one of the most worrying aspects in a time of globalization. Religious institutions and practices can positively impact

this situation…they can provide unique 'common space' for meeting, sharing and working together.

- ✓ **Poverty Alleviation :** Swami Vivekananda once said " God dare not appear in any other form but bread to the hungry and the poor". Poverty is one of the greatest challenges to the Global community. Amidst plenty, we still have large numbers of people below the poverty line, people who struggle for their basic needs of shelter, food and clothing. Unless the impact of poverty on the lives of little children, women and men are alleviated, we will have social unrest ... and societal reconciliation will be a far-fetched dream. The values that our traditions offer surely gives us an ethical framework to see what is the "Right path"

- ✓ **Climate of indifference**. I find a lot of people not only in my own country but also around the world saying "But what can I/ we do?" There seems to be a strong tendency of the new individual-centered culture to look at what is best for me? This of course must not prevent us from asking each other what will be best for us? What I find more disturbing is, that there is a distancing of successful professionals from public institutions and working. We have to find more opportunities and means where in the rich and the poor, the old and young, the educated and the not so educated can come together. Not just within a little community but across professions and generations.

- ✓ **Spiritual Motivation – Social Action:** I am happy to see Dr. Ariyaratne is here. People from the Sarvodaya Movement have been role models for us to see how this connection between spiritual motivation and social action can be made. This is supported by a thought I heard from Prince Hassan of Jordan once. He said, "We are in need of a way in the world today where the human development experience is seen as a continuing process. Continuity, Innovation and Change must all form part of the Human Development experience. Many of our Religions and the values they give us provide that continuity. An encouraging sign today is the engagement of religious institutions in holistic human development endeavors.

Conclusion:

Sometimes looking around problems seems to dominate the Indian horizon. But when I do a more "conscious" looking around I can also say that India has more solutions to offer. We need to find a strong, honest and meaningful connection between our religious & spiritual convictions, our societal challenges and the potential we have to pursue human development.

In conclusion I share an incident from Mahatma Gandhi's life.
Someone asked him: *"When would India be said to have attained complete independence?"*
He replied: *'When the masses feel that they can improve their lot by their own effort and can shape their destiny the way they like'.*