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Sangamam: Inter-religious cooperation, innovation, learning and working for HIV/AIDS in India

Dieser Beitrag hat einen doppelten Fokus:

- den Blick auf die dynamischen Entwicklungen des modernen Indien und der Einflussmöglichkeiten der pluralen spirituellen Traditionen des Landes, besonders inspiriert von den Grundsätzen und der religiös-politischen Wirksamkeit Mahatma Gandhis;
- das Beispiel der epidemischen Entwicklung von HIV/AIDS als einer globalen Herausforderung, die neben medizinischen auch ökonomische, bildungsmäßig-aufklärende und dazu spirituell-religiöse Anstrengungen und Kooperationen erforderlich macht.

Dass Religionsgemeinschaften nicht selten durch die verengte Sicht der Verbindung von AIDS und Unmoral und durch Tabuisierung eines offenen Diskurses über Sexualität frühe effektive Kampagnen behindert haben, ist ein problematisches Faktum, wie andererseits festzustellen ist, dass religiöse Mitwirkung und interreligiöse Zusammenarbeit in diesem Feld für die Bewusstseinsbildung, die Aufklärung und den Kampf gegen die Epidemie entscheidendes geleistet haben und leisten. Insbesondere WCRP/*Religions for Peace* hat sich z.B. im Programm für AIDS-Waisen in Afrika in großer Breite engagiert.

Die Weise, auf die im Gefolge von Gandhis Prinzipien *Sarvodaya* – „Wohlfahrt für alle“ – und mitempfindender Einsatz in interreligiöser und religiös-säkularer Kooperation geleistet werden kann, ist ein Prüfstein dafür, Menschen vor der AIDS-Geißel zu bewahren und den unendlich vielen unter der Krankheit Leidenden und Sterbenden, den Waisen und Vereinsamten Hilfe und Würde zu geben. „Die Spannbreite der Arbeit muss multidimensional werden: von präventiver Beratung bis zu Sterbeseelsorge, vom offenen Gespräch über HIV/AIDS bis zur konkreten Fürsorge von und mit den Infizierten und Erkrankten.“

1. Introduction

At the dawn of India's Independence, Mahatma Gandhi spoke of **Poorna Swaraj**¹. The concept of Poornam or fullness of life was beautifully prefixed to the notion of freedom by Mahatma Gandhi. In his many addresses to the people of India, he emphasized that freedom has many dimensions and it goes beyond the immediate victory of winning political freedom. This reminder is not time specific, for every individual, family, community or nation stands to benefit from this eternal call to realize the fullness of life.

¹ Swaraj in Hindi refers to freedom.

The divides we speak about in modern India today are many ... yet in the first decade of the 21st century, there is a striking optimism about the emerging India. The country which only had (some say in a cynical way!) a past is beginning to be seen as a country with a future. The land of scarcities is being thought of as a land of opportunities ... the land of traditional crafts is increasingly perceived as a land of Information Technology. This dramatic change is widely palpable in India. There is a similar change in the thinking about India in the outside world.

The mood of a successfully emerging India is real & is contagious, even though the images are sometimes larger than life. Perceptions about India therefore, one can confidently say, are changing rapidly. The realities at the micro-level are changing too, but with a slower pace. Some say ... the perceptions, as also the realities, depend on who you are, what you do and where you live².

What happens in India is important for not only are we leaders in the billionaires club of demographics world-wide, but are also continuing participants in a societal experiment of different cultures, religions, socio-economic experiences co-existing together tempered by scientific development & participatory Democracy.

It is always a challenge therefore to look at the canvas of contemporary human life experience from close proximity & attempt to make an analysis of how – the ‘art of making visions come true’ can be realized – even a greater challenge is to see it from an ethical perspective.

The sector I have chosen for analyzing the forum theme is **Health** - *the particular issue HIV & AIDS*.

2. Health as a building block for Human Development

Health as a necessary requisite for human development is widely accepted today. The Human Development Index that the U. N. adopted as a measurement of progress of people within nations has as one of its variables, life –expectancy³. Life expectancy was chosen as the health variable because it is influenced by and is a product of preventive, promotive, curative & rehabilitative health services

Health has been described as a state of physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being by the World Health Organization⁴. Our own faith traditions have described **Arokyam** or a state of healthy well-being as a harmonious blend of the mental, physical and spiritual dimensions of life. People influenced by their schools of learning have focused sometimes falteringly on one particular aspect of health. For example, modern physicians have been long accused of being pre-occupied with disease rather than well-being, with individual patients rather than affected communities. The same can be said also of religious communities, which have been alleged to have spent great energy on philosophizing health rather than looking at structural issues and physical environments that influence disease and well-being.

² India 2025: Illusions, Realities, Dreams-Deepak Nayyar

³ UNDP /Annual Human Development Report Series

⁴ Parks Textbook of Preventive Medicine

Medical students are taught throughout the world, the triad of disease causation namely - **agent, host and environment**. This simple triad however, is very complexly inter-related. For example, poverty has a deep and disturbing impact on the host, poor infrastructure has an influencing role on the spread and mobility of infectious agents and illiteracy and poor health behaviour, a direct influence on personal hygiene and disease burden.

HIV/AIDS is a new infectious disease that has made global rounds from North America to South Africa, from Presidential offices to local parishes. HIV is the human immunodeficiency virus that damages the body's immune system, weakens it until it can no longer fight the disease and till recently was causing innumerable deaths of adults and children alike around the world⁵.

Some Facts to remember about HIV/AIDS

- *The agent here is therefore the HIV virus.*
- *The host is the human being - man, woman or child.*
- *The environment is a vulnerable setting where interaction is facilitated between the agent and the host through the following routes – sexual, infected blood products and parent to child (as the virus crosses the placental barrier). Much discussion has happened, since the disease was first recognized in the 1970s, about what makes the environment vulnerable. Poverty, ignorance, initial lack of medical research, absence of a medical cure, stigma and discrimination, low status of women, silence on issues related to sex and sexuality dominate the list of issues influencing vulnerable environment.*
- *More than 20 million people have died of AIDS since the disease emerged in 1970s. More than 42 million people were reported to be living with HIV or AIDS by 2003.*
- *Of the new infections about half have been among young people, aged between 15 to 24, and over two-thirds being women.*

In the absence of a complete cure and the feeling of stigma and discrimination by incomplete and uninformed thinking and practice of many, including, religious leaders, HIV/AIDS has come to become a global challenge. Today world over, many men, women and children are affected by the epidemic.

3. Community Response

The education of India is to enable her mind to find out truth, to make this truth its own, wherever found and to give expression to it in such a manner as only it can do. For this, our minds have to be made conscious⁶”, said one of India's most respected poet and Nobel Laureate, Rabindra Nath Tagore.

⁵ What Religious Leaders Can Do for HIV/AIDS in Tamil Nadu/Action for Children and Young People/UNICEF-WCRP and Shanti Ashram

⁶ The Centre of Indian Culture/ Rabindra Nath Tagore./ Rabindra Rachanavali series

The expansion of the mind and the conscientization of the human heart is an essential requisite for people's mobilization. This holds good also to developing of a response to a global epidemic like this. HIV/ AIDS is not a disease alone; it is a threat to family life and spiritual well-being. As young men and women fall ill from the disease, they often suffer spiritual anguish, physical and economic hardship. They also leave behind grieving children, spouses and friends who call out for comfort and practical guidance². The former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called it a threat to Human Security!

In many places, still a culture of silence surrounds HIV/AIDS. Often the silence is caused by a religious association between HIV/AIDS and immorality, in the form of certain sexual behaviour, sexual orientation, drug and alcohol abuse. But we also know from past experience that where people are stigmatized they remain silent out of fear and do not seek support that could help them lead fuller, healthier and responsible lives⁸.

Therefore, HIV/AIDS is a threat to the growth of the community. As the epidemic spreads, every affected country loses (*as is already evident in some parts of Africa*), its most productive and vibrant citizens, including farmers, teachers, spiritual leaders, health care workers and members of religious organizations.

- *The pro active engaging of religious leaders and communities,*
- *The conceptual & experiential aspects of this work are what I attempt to share in this Paper.*
- *Inter-religious learning of the impact and spread of the epidemic as well as new conceptual contributions to inter-religious groups working together has helped in alleviating the impact of HIV/AIDS in India and around the world.*
- *It has also contributed to the emerging of new partnerships between civil society & religious communities.*

4. Giving a human face to HIV/AIDS

My introduction to HIV/AIDS came through my medical education. But it was with the work of The World Conference on Religions for Peace (WCRP) in Africa that I first saw the impact the disease had on the community. WCRP had brought together religious leaders of Africa with the goal of working with them to increase awareness and mobilize resources for the care of people affected by the epidemic.

A young child called Salim spoke at the inauguration of the conference. He asked us, "Where is my father? Where is my mother? Where were you when I needed help?" The entire assembly of religious leaders was moved into silence for a few minutes ... The same question I have heard in many languages and in many settings while working with men, women and children affected by HIV/AIDS.

Meenakshi, my esteemed colleague and the Head of the Positive Mothers' Network in Coimbatore, has often asked me, "Why does it take so long for us to accept the reality of HIV/AIDS ... When so much can be done together, why should we work in iso-

⁷ Why Religious Leader s/WCRP, UNICEF & Shanti Ashram Handbook

lation? Why can't we have more leaders & communities working together for this challenge also?" The human face of the epidemic has left a deep personal impression on many like me working in the field. Each initiative, each endeavour, in some ways is a response to this human call, for respect, compassion, care and support. *It is indeed about realizing the vision of compassionate care come true through cooperation*

5. Community as a resource for theory & practice of inter-religious cooperation

My limited expertise & the vastness of this discussion therefore, will be an exercise I will not attempt to do.

However using the following pillars I will make an attempt to discuss the resources our communities have to offer for inter-religious cooperation:

- Understanding Hinduism ... Understanding India

- Inter-religious and inter-cultural learning

Understanding Hinduism ... Understanding India

Hinduism or Sanathana Dharma as some still prefer to refer to, is the tradition to which a significant number of Indians belong (over 80%). The Indian landscape has always been enriched with more than one religion; Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism originated here & Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism & the Bahai Faith, finding home here. Christianity was brought to Malabar in South India as long back as 52AD by the apostle of Jesus Christ, St. Thomas & what remains is one of the very old churches in the world. The Arab merchants also brought Islam to Malabar in the lifetime of the Prophet. In both cases, there was willing acceptance of the new faiths by the local communities. This was not the case in the northern & eastern part of India. Invasions, armed conflicts, power struggles & loss of lives saw violent introductions of new religions- Islam & Christianity in particular. The Jewish communities came to the west coast in two or more waves a thousand or more years ago to seek refuge, Zoroastrians like the Jews also found safe haven in Gujarat. Local rulers and people alike respected their ways. *A spirit of accommodation seems closely bound to this early experience. It also exemplifies the tolerance of Hindu society all along history despite episodic rivalries and strife.*

Cross-cultural influences permeated every department of life from food to clothing, language to architecture & fine arts, thus making of an Indian society that was unique. Purists may cite exceptions. These may dent but not essentially alter the larger reality of a vibrant society. India today is without doubt one of the extraordinarily diverse countries in the world, not a pot-pourri put together in recent times, but a subtle blend of distinctive communities that have evolved over time. It is not a melting pot, homogenized and made to fit one size, but a garden with an infinite variety of flowers & foliage, colours & fragrances⁹. As Dr. Stephen Schlensog discusses in his paper on

⁹ B.C. Verghese

Hinduism as a factor in World Politics, 'For non-Hindus, India & Hinduism are often difficult to understand, much less to comprehend: many gods, thousands of castes, hundreds of languages and many life views ...'

The Hindu identity is built on shared gifts the tradition offers her & that includes: Core of common beliefs derived from ancient scriptures including the Vedas, the Upanishads, the epics including Ramayana & Mahabharata, the understanding of life as a cycle – *brahmacharya, grahastha, sanyasa & vanaprastha*, the relationship between Atman & Brahman, the notion of dharma or right conduct, liberation or the freedom from rebirth (*Moksha*) of the self as well as the possibility of realizing the dream of a global family 'Vasudeva Kuttumbakam,' all coexist. The fundamental commitment to realizing the divine through one of the margas (paths) Bhakthi, Gnyana or Karma has also found voice & words in the many masters who have influenced transformation & understanding among Hindus about the purpose of her tradition.

Vivekananda the great saint philosopher spoke of practical Vedanta in the 19th century: *India has a long and unique heritage of peace. From time immemorial, Indian saints and seers have devoted themselves to the pursuit of peace. Perfect peace of mind, the peace of the soul, was their goal in life and to achieve this they have striven hard and suffered many hardships*¹⁰.

Swami Vivekananda through his inspiring talks, writings & work aroused a generation of Hindus, of Indians to look at the interface between personal salvation & social ethics. His interactions with the west allowed him (*and through him a generations of Indians*) to see the new context of multi-religious co-existence & the intersection of modern politics, science & spirituality."

Inter-religious and inter-cultural learning

The distinguishing aspect of Gandhiji's life and work was that he not only sought his personal liberation, but also sought the liberation of his fellow humans. He conducted his spiritual sadhana in the social realm. He said, "Do not believe that an individual may gain spiritually and those that surround him suffer. I believe in the essential unity of man and for that matter of all that lives. Therefore I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him, and if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent". Gandhiji offered a new contribution to religion and spirituality by combining personal sadhana with social action¹¹.

The contemporary interfaith movement of India owes much to the freedom movement of India, led by Mahatma Gandhi. Inter-religious cooperation was not only an aspiration but a reality. Leaders from different faith communities came together, willingly under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership. Many issues were debated and addressed collectively during these times. Some of the key areas include social marginalization, inter-religious relations, women's empowerment, poverty, right to worship, freedom of speech. These debates have contributed not only to building up of a matured democracy but also to a

¹⁰ Collected Works of Vivekananda

¹¹ Apostle of Peace/Dr. M. Aram

society committed to social upliftment. While leaders first came together on platforms to address the nation, religious communities were sensitized, even called upon to live harmoniously in every-day life. There have been a few instances of painful communal clashes in the six decades since India won her Independence. The most recent Gujarat riots are still fresh in the minds of many Indians.

It was in 1969, the year which marked the Birth Centenary of Mahatma Gandhi that the World Conference of Religions for Peace found its first seeds of purpose. WCRP has since fostered inter-religious cooperation in areas of shared commitment. This practical aspect of working together has given strength to the theoretical aspects of the need for religious people to come together in times of peace, rather than in times of difficulties alone.

This coming together has been within the framework of mutual respect, the growing diversity of our immediate society, the need for educating our communities about the other, the onus of religious leadership to be open and respectful of civil society, the practical application of faith in concrete situations and needs.

6. Learning points from the interfaith learning & cooperation in working for HIV/AIDS

The pro active engaging of religious leaders and communities

Building on the existing framework of interfaith cooperation, willing religious and inter-religious leadership and organizations were exposed to information about HIV/AIDS. As a sequel to this the organizations were invited to brainstorm on what they would like to do. In these brain storming sessions PLWA representatives, technical experts, UN Agencies and state health department officers were also invited, paving the way for a focused and honest discussion. The desire of PLWA wanting to work with the religious organizations was evident. This led to organic partnerships in some situations and strategic inter-organizational partnerships on the other.

The conceptual & experiential aspects

*There is no virtue equal to compassion and no sin worse than causing pain to the other. This is the essence of all the scriptures, says the Hindu epic, Ramayana*¹². This meeting ground on common compassion and shared vision allowed for conceptual exploration of why and how religious organizations can be part of the HIV/AIDS work. There were some areas of disagreement as well between certain religious groups and the other partners. However, what was constructive was the clarity on the reasons for accord or discord. This helped in the way the partnerships continued further.

What can we do to bridge the sacred–secular divide as people of faith?

The experiential aspects of the work for HIV/AIDS have been very positive. It is indeed heartening to note today that at the forefront of caring for affected and infected

¹² HIV/AIDS : the Human Dimension , Voices from the Hindu World / WCRP & Shanti Ashram

people are religious organizations. The tradition of caring for the most vulnerable and most affected allowed for the natural inclusion of HIV/AIDS on their work list. Religious organizations have often been accused of being quiet on issues of discomfort or discord. In this case, the sexual mode of transmission made many religious organizations shy away from the work-ground early on. But following some pilot initiatives today, many inter-religious organizations including WCRP, WCC are addressing this issue. The range of work has been multi-dimensional, spanning from preventive counseling to death counseling, from speaking about AIDS to living and caring for people affected by HIV/AIDS.

It has also contributed to emerging of new partnerships between the civil society & religious communities.

A key learning point in this work for HIV/AIDS is the new trust and interest that civil society organizations have the levels of me shown in seeking partnership with religious organizations. Even while mutual understanding (philosophical, organizational and work) at the beginning was limited, today many partnerships exist at the international, national and local levels.

SARVODAYA

Commitment to working for the less privileged and in achieving “SARVODAYA” (welfare for all) was what made Mahatma Gandhi unique. He led his fellow sisters and brothers in a journey of self-introspection, spiritual renewal and constructive social action during India’s freedom movement. This frame-work was found relevant in the work for HIV/AIDS as well, because this experience provided space for transformation of the soul and the body at the individual and collective levels. Many attribute the success of India’s stabilizing the HIV/AIDS epidemic to this spirit. The honesty and speed with which religious organizations have responded to the work for HIV/AIDS is an experience worth sharing and learning from.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion I ask: **Can goodwill & understanding be the contribution of Religions and faith communities to global challenges, including HIV/AIDS?** Can the Vision of inter-religious learning help in solving common challenges?

The answer is a clear “Yes”.

Religious leaders can be a especially instrumental in eradicating the stigma and discrimination faced by people living with HIV and AIDS. Religious leaders and communities combined are key to mitigating the epidemic because they are trusted and respected members of society and are influential in shaping social values and public opinion. Moreover, they can help find resources for spiritual and social care and promote action through their local and global communities.