

## **Fostering Religious Harmony through Education – As Enshrined in the Great Pervasive Indian Culture**

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*“Sarve sukhinah santu, Sarve santu niramayah,  
Sarve bhadrani pashyantu, Ma kashchidduka mapnuyat”*

(Let all be happy and all be healthy. Let all see the good in all and let none be afflicted with suffering and pain.)

***Katha Upanishad 2:6:19 – India 1400bc***

The very essence of humanity is that it underlines the unity of human race, universality of human values and dignity of human being. It upholds universal perspective towards life with a sense of high sensitivity, universal attitudes, humanitarian values and a deeper feeling of world citizenship for the welfare of the entire human race. This necessitates a happy, peaceful and harmonious coexistence of all societies and civilizations on this planet. The humanitarian thought of establishing a harmonious global society, abounded with deep feeling of world citizenship, beyond the boundaries of narrow nationalities, racial identities and religious divisions, is not entirely new to our Indian society. It is something that different nations and people across the world are emphasizing today. The concern is to bring in peace, develop peace and harmony and essentially save humanity and our mother earth from selfish, destructive motives of human activities. The roots of these compassionate thoughts can be traced to ancient Indian philosophy which speaks about the integrity of human soul, ‘*Aatman*’ with the ultimate divine, universal consciousness, ‘*Brahman*’ thereby addressing the unity of human beings, in fact everything that is a part of the universe. Without the need for referring to any religious identity, it underlines the achievement of universal harmony and peace for the welfare of every tiny creature on this globe. Embracing the pervasive concept of ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’ i.e. ‘*Global Family*’, it offers the entire humanity a very realistic approach for harmonious integration of human societies across the globe.

India has always been a global society in terms of a variety of cultures, religions, associations of people, trade, education, and so on. In its very sense, India has always been truly a plural society with variety of cultures, different religious groups, many languages and ethnic groups achieving unity in diversity. Despite the many variations and the sectarian historical past of India as a nation, common Indians are united as one and this is the intrinsic feature of Indian culture which has its influence upon Indian people who predominantly value the dignity of a human being with a high level of tolerance, simplicity, courtesy, peace, love, harmony and universal brotherhood.

Indian culture has always been broad and receptive to new ideas, new thoughts and new values. India has been tolerant to other cultures, religions and tried to assimilate the best of the cultural aspects, ideas, views from other societies, other cultures tolerantly and open mindedly. It was always open for the amalgamation of various cultures for the reason it holds the belief that every culture in this world upholds a deeper sense of human values, social cohesion with a moral foundation for a harmonious human sustenance.

India's rich cultural tradition has always respected pluralism and divergent, multifarious perspectives on human life through religious and spiritual ideas. The long argumentative Indian tradition based on dialogue and discourse has always promoted free expression and exchange of religious and spiritual ideas, recognizing different sects of believers, similarly accommodating agnostic and atheistic philosophies in the Indian thought process. Recognition to atheistic *Charvak* philosophy from ancient India based on secular, material view about the world can be an example of India's tolerance and acceptance to differing and polarized religious view points.

Today the world is progressing rapidly in all material aspects of human life but at the same time experiencing sublimation of human values leading to social conflicts, violence, wars, terrorism and many such problems that are maligning the much needed and cherished value system in human societies.

Owing to its rich and value laden culture that has always been so pervasive and accommodating, India as an exemplary global nation can contribute immensely towards preserving humanity and global harmony. We can do so by transmitting our great cultural

values across the nations of the world while respecting their own cultural identities and values. Education will be instrumental in achieving this desired goal.

The present paper is based on the author's personal experiences as a teacher while promoting religious harmony and multicultural values among student-teachers through curricular and co-curricular activities. The paper shares participative, constructive and democratic approaches to promote religious equality, tolerance and pluralism through education to strengthen national integrity, peace and social harmony.

### **Pedagogic approaches to promote peace and harmony:**

#### **Morning Assemblies:**

Morning prayers and assemblies in educational institutions before initiating the day's educative process, has an immense significance in a learners' spiritual awakening and invoking their intellectual integrity for successful learning.

Reciting '*Sarva Dharma Prarthana*', All Religion Prayers (such as "*Aum Tat Sat Shree Narayan Tu... Siddha Buddha Tu, Skanda Vinayak, Rahim Tao Tu... Brahma Mazda Tu, Yahva Shakthi Tu, Yeshu Pita Prabhu Tu...*") together during assemblies provide a great opportunity to students to respect different religions and the presence of the almighty in the universe. Teacher education institutions like ours utilizes these assemblies round the year to expose students to the religious diversity that exists in India and the common message all these religions carry for humanity.

Marking various days of significance and religious festivals celebrated in India, students get an opportunity to explore commonality of human values reflected through different religious scriptures, cultural elements associated with these festivals and to present it during assemblies.

#### **Infusing Core-elements of the Curriculum in the Educative Process:**

Curriculum execution too provides relevant opportunities in formal education to underline interreligious harmony and to foster secular attitudes among learners.

Considering education as a factor vital to national development, in 1986 The National Policy on Education (NPE) laid down, for the first time in the history of Indian education, a National Curriculum Framework (NCF). The Constitution of India embodies the principles on which this National System of Education is conceived of. NCF recommended compulsory core-curriculum elements to be taught throughout the country. Some of the core-elements from the list of NCF include – *Content essential to nurture national identity, India's common cultural heritage, Egalitarianism, democracy, and secularism*. All these core-curriculum elements are broader national goals to be realized through education. These elements are not to be treated as separate subject areas. Rather, the content is to be interwoven into the different subject areas. Textbooks which seek to fulfill curriculum objectives must reflect the above-mentioned aspects of the 'core'.

Curricula at all levels of education in India reflect these core-elements. Teachers just need to analyze the syllabi, text-books and content in the purview of these core-elements and infuse them through their instructional practices. For example: *use of multi-religious names (not always Ram or Sita but Joseph, Salma, Gautam, etc.) during language lessons, while formulating mathematics word problems, or incorporating multi-religious experiences and multicultural contexts while framing anecdotes, case presentations as part of lectures or discourses, etc. will attempt to ensure fair representation of different religions, ethnic groups, sub-cultures of India thereby highlighting religious equality and secular ideals through curriculum execution.*

Planning teaching-learning activities keeping in mind common core-elements of the curriculum thus provides a wonderful opportunity to teachers for promoting interreligious harmony, high order religious tolerance and secular values among their students.

### **Curricular Activities promoting Secular, Democratic, Argumentative Attitudes:**

Apart from exposing learners to religious diversity existing in our country, fostering secular attitudes among them through education will be another important step towards harmony. For ages dogmatic influence of religion has prevented people from asking

questions creating a culture of unquestioning faith. This leads to uninformed, irrational, closed minded attitudes towards own religion coupled with hatred or indifference towards other religions. Promotion of secular values requires shaping of intellectual abilities, high order thinking and a rational-logical mindset. It necessitates nurturing of a curious, inquisitive, open and a skeptical mindset.

Persons with secular outlook believe in peaceful co-existence of groups with differing religious views. They have an attitude of permissiveness towards each other's faith and would not intervene forcefully. Their opposition to outmoded beliefs or practices is always based on responsible judgment which does not rest on irrational prejudice and hatred. To develop such an outlook among students through education will be the best way of establishing a harmonious society based on religious equality, tolerance and secular ideals.

Use of cooperative and collaborative learning methods in teaching that ensures learners' active participation, instructional strategies like debates, panel discussions where in students get an opportunity to express their views, participate in logical arguments, listen to alternative viewpoints with democratic zeal are all instrumental in developing secular outlook among students. Educators at all different levels can effectively utilize these approaches for promoting democratic secular ideals among their students.

### **Co-curricular Activities:**

In addition to curricular experiences, co-curricular activities also provide first hand value based experiences to learners. Students can be sensitized to various issues associated with social disharmony such as religious fundamentalism, communal violence, terrorism, etc. through participative and authentic learning activities like role plays, dramas and so on. Folk performances like *Bharud*, *Powada*, *Kirtan*, etc. popular in *Maharashtrian* folk culture can be used to generate public awareness on these issues in the native community through student performances. Every region of India likewise has its own folk culture which can be utilized in educative process by educational institutions of that particular region in a similar way. Activities like book exhibitions, board display, collage competitions, etc. can be instrumental in fetching student involvement in academic thinking, research and problem solving based on these issues leading to self-awareness. These activities can also

be utilized positively to generate a sensitive and a responsible civic mind that is concerned about the integrity of our nation and harmony in the society.

### **Celebration of Cultural Festivals:**

A lot of bias and cultural prejudices are attributed to lack of knowledge or ignorance about religions or cultures other than one's own. Total isolation of religious communities from each other and a closed door policy when it comes to celebration of religious festivals, social gatherings, etc. is at times responsible for lack of interreligious understanding and harmonious interactions among different religious groups. This gives rise to unreasonable biases and cultural prejudices among people of differing religious affiliations, which in a way leads to intolerance and disharmony.

Exposing learners to rich cultural values associated with various religions and the commonality of human emotions expressed through celebration of different festivals can help to develop interreligious understanding and to enhance intercultural communication among various religious communities. Organization of food festivals, cultural stalls, and celebration of common religious festivals of India by creating multicultural and secular environment in an educative set up will be much helpful in the achievement of this goal.

### **Conclusion:**

Education based on moral values is the only way to instill peace and harmony in today's society struggling to cope up with conflicts and disharmony. Elevating the traditional pluralistic values enshrined in Indian culture through present education system can be instrumental in instilling religious harmony and tolerance among present generations of multicultural backgrounds.

The traditional Indian assembly prayer from *Gurukul* system, yearning welfare of both the learner (*Shishya*) and the educator (*Acharya*) while initiating the process of education (*Shiksha*) and hence invoking the universal peace for the good of the entire humanity can be much exemplary in this respect. It reflects our pervasive goals of ancient Indian education emphasizing the world harmony and universal peace. We may draw inspirations from these cultural roots and strengthen our education system by highlighting human values of

tolerance, harmony and universal brotherhood that we inherit from our great pervasive Indian culture.

*“Aum sah navavatu, sah nau bhunaktu  
Sah veeryam karvavahai Tejasvi navadhitamastu  
Ma vidvishavahai, Aum shantih! Shantih! Shantih!”*

*(Let the lord protect us both, make good use of us both. Let Him strengthen our efforts. Let our Vidya (Knowledge) be magnificent, we may never envy each other. Let there be Peace, Peace and Peace! Everywhere)*

***Katha Upanishad 2:6:19 – India 1400bc***

### **References:**

- Sen, A. (2006). *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. London: Penguin.
- Sharma, S. R. (2002). *Encyclopaedia of Value and Moral Education*. Vol.1. New Delhi: Cosmo.