

# PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE AS AN IDEA

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**P**eaceful co-existence seems to have caught the fancy of the political establishments in south Asia. We South Asians have been treated to such staple diet of war-mongering and hate-speech within and outside the boundaries of the nation-states, particularly for the last decade, that it is indeed heartening to listen to the peace rhetoric of the “hawks” in the wake of the recently-concluded SAARC summit. So much so that the ruling party in this country has every intention of hard-selling its “peace initiative” in the impending general elections. Obviously this is a result of its own reading of the public support for the idea. Whether they will undertake a peace initiative in domestic matters as well is a different matter.

Such an initiative will, first of all require a credible “justice” factor! (A favourite phrase in the Indian media these days is a so-called ‘feel-good’ factor). The idea of peace minus a sense of justice cannot last. This presupposes a critique of social and governmental systems, as well as of the dominant ideas in any society. Particularly so in south Asia where the international conflicts are clearly connected to domestic issues. Without such a critique, even peaceful co-existence between nation-states can at best be a “controlled” one. Peace initiatives from above are not going to be stable, as by definition these are occasioned by the political calculations of the ruling groups, who wish to keep both peace and war buttons handy – just in case! Thus, while New Delhi’s political leaders were talking of peace with Pakistan, on December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2003, in Gorakhpur, a meeting of visiting Pakistani farmers with their Indian counterparts was disrupted. The disruptionists were members of the so-called ‘Hindu-Vahini - part of the extended ‘Sangh-paruvar’. Clearly, misgivings persist, and many people thrive on generating conflict by manipulating such misgivings.

## Silent or Vibrant Peace?

**A**ny lasting peace between people and nation states depends not on initiatives rooted in the fluctuating interests of the ruling establishments but on building a commonsense in favour of co-existence which simultaneously builds upon and critiques local peace-making initiatives. *This commonsense must be based on a clear distinction between Silent and Vibrant Peace.* Silent peace is based on hegemony and dominance, while vibrant peace implies justice and fairplay. Silent peace can be imagined as co-existence between putative leaders and representatives of the people (“natural leaders of the community as the colonialist rulers named them), wherein all dominant ideas and symbolic structures of power are put beyond democratic enquiry. Such a ‘peace’ also involves threats from the state towards those who want to democratize that *peace – breakers* are violently opposed to the ideals of social justice, the

rule of law and secular citizenship. We need to study their methods and take care of concerns that they manipulate in order to generate conflicts.

Vibrant peace on the other hand does not merely mean the absence of conflict. It involves rational dialogue between contesting viewpoints, a space wherein we appeal to the adversary without intending harm, and fearing it. As a process, this kind of peace is linked to justice as a social goal, and to the institutionalization of social democracy. In other words, vibrant peace cannot be delinked from attempts of transforming political democracy into social democracy.

## Co-existence for what? Co-existence of whom?

**W**e must go beyond studying “institutionalized riot mechanisms” and “institutionalized peace mechanisms.” Such mechanisms certainly play a role in social conflicts, but more challenging is the role played by ideas and their propagation through formal and informal channels. Even humane ideas like tolerance of difference, and co-existence with diversity can be manipulated and made to serve the worst vested interests. It will be helpful, then to examine the concept of peaceful co-existence.

We may begin with the simple question: Co-existence for what and of whom? This is one of many ways to approach the present crisis, a crisis felt by anyone concerned with the future of humankind. On one hand we have a one-way flow of capital in the name of Globalization, on the other we have the perceived threat to traditions and cultures emanating (allegedly) from the same process. We have growing contests and conflicts between cultural identities and ethnicities – in some cases even making the nation-state an outdated idea. All aspects of this crisis are underwritten by implicit and explicit violence.

Ideological responses to crises of an extreme nature tend to be extreme themselves. So we have the “clash of civilizations” theory, and we have people who wish to defend ‘traditional’ cultures. In spite of the conflicting political positions of these two approaches, there is an underlying commonality of method here. Both presume ‘essential’ communities and cultures, both deny the possibility of a transformative dialogue between cultures and civilizations. This might also be the result of responding to a crisis in terms of its own logic and language, or of trying to ‘manage’ crises.

An excessive dependence on these responses proves counter-productive even for the “management” approach, to say nothing of radical change or transformation. Most of the time the

perpetrators of the crisis situation find it convenient to respond in a 'piecemeal' manner to its immediate, direct manifestations. The present communal situation in India is a case in point. A situation has deliberately been created wherein every political actor indulges in one-upmanship for proving nationalist credentials. Therefore we need some calm reflection on culture. We need to avoid extreme positions and look for transformative dialogue, to explore new ethics and new ideas about humanity. In other words, we need to face the question: *co-existence between whom and for what?*

This is a question faced by "development workers" as well as by academics. How do we see cultures that we want to co-exist? Can we see these as "inviolable individual selves", best left to develop according to their own values? From the premium put on diversity and difference these days (in the political imagery of resistance to "grand narratives" of modernity), it would seem that the value that we once placed on the classical free-born individual has been shifted to the cultural identity of ethnic groups. This glorification of primordial and constructed identities leads to a politics wherein each culture has a protected space for its identities leads to a politics wherein each culture has a protected space for its symbols and meanings. Co-existence then becomes a state wherein every culture can adhere to its own values without being subject to any critical enquiry. In fact *enquiry as such* is seen as an "authoritarian" attempt to impose alien values on the culture in question.

## Power and Culture

Concern for preserving cultural space against euro-centric enlightenment is valid, but the question of tyranny *within* cultures is no less important. Had culture been a matter only of food and dress etc., advocacy an un-interrogated co-existence would be easy for us all. But cultures are also mechanisms of controlling access to resources – not only economic ones but also political, aesthetic, spiritual and moral resources. Most people in any given culture are denied participation and agency. Power structures become accepted by people as something "natural" and normal. Their responses to situations are "borne out of their own volition", but could be the result of dominant perceptions. They are certainly linked to mechanisms of resource control. Someone who has long been denied the intellectual and moral strength to ask questions is not likely to ask for a share in economic resources and for a say in secular matters.

Unlike forms of oppression by the modern state-system that are rooted in instrumentalist conceptions of rationality, the control of resources in cultural systems is made possible by what has been described as "processes of informality" and "the currency of sentiment". *Symbols* become mechanisms for controlling resources among people who share symbols even while they have conflicting interests. Culture becomes a universe of shared symbols which provides a sweet camouflage for conflicting interests and power contests. Thus cultural mask of power is converted into something 'sacred' in a process that is not 'natural' but political. Hegemonic

value systems by which (economic, aesthetic, spiritual) resources are controlled, are turned into something commonsensical, even eternal. In other words, secular power arrangements are made to appear divine, timeless and sacred.

When we talk of peaceful co-existence, are we talking of co-existence between various masks of power? Clifford Geertz has remarked, "What all sacred symbols assert is that the good for man is to live realistically; where they differ is in the vision of reality they construct." (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, Fontana 1993). It is tempting to accord the same validity to all "visions of reality." But is this temptation ethically justified? Should we not interrogate sacred symbols? The democratic idea of co-existence can be made to serve oppressive traditions as well as the interests of the state. We see such manipulation of symbols everywhere. A critique of 'multiculturalism' as advocated by New Labour in the UK puts the same issue succinctly:

For the Asian community in Britain, Labour's decision to extend single-faith state schools among ethnic minorities, especially in the deprived areas, is a continuation of its policy of strengthening the most reactionary elements in the community. By defining 'ethnic minorities' in terms of their religion (as 'faith communities'), the state has unquestioningly accepted the claims of male religious leaders to speak for all Asians in Britain.

Is this not true of Asia even more disturbingly? In India, people who have not been put to any rational test of representation are supposed to speak for entire communities of "Hindus" and "Muslims" – and not only on so-called matters but on issues of crucial import for the political process and civil society

## Co-existence and Civil Society

Clearly there is a need to ask some ethical questions. Do we want co-existence between self-appointed representatives of cultural identities and authoritarian values that refuse to submit to questioning from within or without? As Edward Said put it, "Within each civilizational camp, we will notice, there are official representatives of that culture or civilization who make themselves into it's mouthpiece, who assign themselves the role of articulating 'our' (or for that matter 'their') essence." (*Reflections on Exile*, Penguin, 2001) The idea of co-existing cultures free from ethical scrutiny is a beneficial tool for all authoritarian representatives of culture and identity. If we go beyond their claims, it is not difficult to see that each culture contains a hierarchy of values as well as a challenge to the same. The question that arises before advocating co-existence is: what kind of hierarchy of values do we want to see?

It is important to note that much of the current discourse of co-existence seems to privilege diversity in itself. Gandhiji used to say (in a different context) that true economics is the economics of justice. Wonder if we can expand on that and say that true culture

is the culture of justice. In other words, diversity ought to be seen as a pre-requisite for ethical action towards a just social order. It is in this sense that a dialogue between cultures (and contestants in every situation) opens up possibilities of achieving truly humane universal values. These can act as a standard for evaluating practices within and across cultures. The same is true for conflict situations in south Asia, within the boundaries of nation states as well outside.

Civil society initiatives can make this dialogue happen. Such initiatives need democratic institutional structures. What kind of dialogue may we hope for when those who swear by the constitution preside over the breakdown of constitutional machinery? For us to facilitate the emergence of a vibrant peace, we need the sustained advocacy of social democracy. The focus has to shift from silent peace to vibrant peace, from the politics of symbols to the politics of resources. Without such a shift, I am afraid, we might end up advocating a zoological diversity instead of a humane one.

Finally, do we have a credible alternative to Satyagraha to achieve a diversity abase on universal values of justice and compassion? As Gandhiji put it, "Satyagraha is a method of carrying conviction

and of converting by an appeal to reason and to the sympathetic cords in human beings. It relies upon the ultimate good in every human being, no matter how debased he may be for the time being" (CWMG, Vol 45m σ, 221-222). Defined thus, attempts to resolve conflicts non-violently, with a sense of justice and fairplay, is an act of rational faith – faith that "the universe is on the side of justice", as Martin Luther King put it. Undoubtedly, violent methods bring about changes in the social situation, but more often than not, these changes end up re-inforcing the given power structures. As Hannah Arendt said way back in 1969, "The practice of violence like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world."

If there is a slowly growing climate of peace these days, let us not doubt that it is because various establishment have realized that civil society in South Asia is tired of permanent conflict and is stirring towards civic action. Ours is a small contribution to the evolution of a dynamic and vibrant peace in our country and in our region. We hope this project will help build new bridges, and think fresh approaches towards a just and humane social order. ■

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