Social Harmony is Possible Through Universal Education – A counter-view

Introduction

The world as we see today is a study in contrast. Much like Dickens’ Paris during the French Revolution, “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” So much that is around us is a cause for cheer, an occasion for celebration, a reason for jubilation. All the same, so much around us give us occasion for regret, for despair, for cursing and confusion. There never was a time

1 Beginning words of A Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens

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when so many lived for so long. When so many people relished in the prospect of enlightenment. When modern science blessed mankind with all material benefits that would have been unthinkable during a previous age. When concerns for human rights, conception of amity and cooperation were so high and acclaimed with such a level of consensus. Yet, amid this pretty picture there sit many a canker to spoil it. There never was a time when the Babel of identities divided so many to such an extent. There never was an age when societies bled through multiple ruptures, when the very existence of many peoples were threatened, when the cruelty of man witnessed caused philosophers to fulminate in anguish. It is true, indeed, that an analysis of our age, a deconstruction of its essential driving motives or a description of its perplexing realities, is a exercise in futility, or at best, an exercise in frustration.

It is not without cause today that the question of social harmony stares us in our face as a prospective solution for societal maladies. If society and nation are divided, there is need for fusion. If society is injured, it needs healing. If it is confused, it needs to be assuaged. Social harmony seems to us as a panacea that can collect the confused thoughts of the discrete individuals, and provide us with a vision for the present and future, for self-existence and self-perpetuation. Awareness of the present social realities, and a drive towards mending broken relationships can be made only through education. Education, therefore, is the medium through which we may attempt to foster greater social harmony in our world.

What is social harmony?

It is only the dearth of something that can properly teach us the meaning and importance of that thing. Given that there is lack of social harmony among us, we must pine for such social relations. So, what is this social harmony? A more mundane understanding of the concept would perhaps say that social harmony refers to greater cohesion among its various adherents. It is a situation wherein disparate units feel together, where individual identities are dissolved within a greater social reality and where there is greater attachment to the notion of a greater unity. The pretty cliché of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* is often bandied about as a metaphor for social harmony, especially as existing in our culture. We acknowledge that differing identities co-exist within the system, but we also claim that there is cooperation rather than competition or strife. Social harmony is, thus, a state of affairs where social strife is minimized through cooperation, compromise and understanding. It assumes that differences in identities are artificial, bridgeable and non-fundamental, and hence, it is a situation that is not utopian but achievable. In fact, we refer to a gradation of ages wherein social harmony had been a social reality – the notion of a mythical Golden Age where the lion dined with the deer is a part of all cultures.

Why is social harmony so essential? Has society always had social harmony?

Corruption of human character is frequently accused as a harbinger of social disharmony. The transition from a Golden Age to a Kali Yuga is a transition from nobility to monstrosity. Now and then when greatness touch our lives, we explain such aberrations as exceptions, and in a purposeful act of deification, we raise such greatness to the pedestal of divinity – thereby claiming that greatness is a function of divinity, and search for greatness within the human domain is an exercise
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in futility. Thus, every 2nd of October or the 25th of December, we pay our pious respect for divinity, and then creep back to our complacent corruption. The Hobbesian vision of the world is closer to reality where human life being ‘nasty, brutish and short’, selfish interests become the lodestone of life’s journey. With a billion different self interests fighting for limited space and resources – physical and metaphysical – it is not surprising that disharmony is a natural consequence of human nature. If society congregates, and forms a society in the first place, it is precisely because such congregation is to a man’s benefit.

We might ask, at this stage, why is social harmony so essential? Pertinent is also to enquire if social harmony has always existed? History is a long testimony to the many ruptures that societies around the world have had. To borrow from Thomas Hardy’s parlance, “happiness is but an occasional episode in a general drama of pain”. Similarly, social harmony has been witnessed more in its absence than in its presence. To take our own society first, it has been divided into four exclusive groupings called the varnas and thereafter into numerous jatis, wherein social processes are divided through pseudo-divine ascription, and the resultant societal order processed into a hierarchical system based on hereditary status. This system works through the principle of selective denial and bestowal of rights that is derived from their status – this all pervasive status is the caste of a person. A hugely religious, uneducated and status-quoist society offered few opportunities for correction of such structural defects, and the fact remains that the story of Indian society has been one of perpetual disharmony and violence, of denial of human rights, of servitude and ignorance, or a false code of honour and an artificial history of harmony. Critics might argue that for much of the time social history has been peaceful, to which one might refer the Roman historian Tacitus who said of the Romans that “to plunder, to slaughter, to steal, these things they misname empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace”. Incapacity for revolt and disinclination for reform created the peace on a precipice, and violence tumbled forth in disparate and muted expressions when limits of forbearance were crossed. The same tale repeats itself in Africa during slave trade and Apartheid, in American society, in the Middle East and elsewhere, in East Timor and Nepal. Different forms of asymmetric warfare proceeded, mostly with failure and seldom with success. An artificial history created a social psychology of servility and resignation, whereas logic paid obeisance to mythology. Education, that great harbinger of awareness and understanding, became a handmaiden of false historians. We may note how a status quo based on irrationality and alienation was fostered through administering of filtered education that sought to fortify existing impressions.

What do we mean by education?

Education is a favourite word and concept with many – with policymakers and politicians, with managers and bureaucrats, with philosophers and moralists, with spiritualists and ideologues. However, never was there such a contention over the meaning and definition of education. Never was there such a war in deciding its contents. Never was there such controversy in defining its new contours. While all agree that education is required and beneficial, there does not exist any clarity regarding its methodology, objectives, contents or prescriptions. At a basic level the difference between literacy and education is obfuscated. Often we mean literacy when we say education – thus, when we are using the term Universal Education, we are almost certainly meaning Universal Literacy. Fair degree of consensus exists that education is a much more encompassing concept than mere

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2 Concluding words of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy

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literacy, the latter of which refers to acquaintance with the written word and certain basic concepts. It is interesting to note that ‘Education for All’, the catchy phrase for universalising education has the objective of merely putting all children in school for a minimal number of years. The haste of spending allocations, of putting children in schools and making available a rudimentary amount of literacy, clouds the vision. Perpetually bloated literacy figures and failing education standards at the base level speak of the abysmal failure of a society that for long has constrained knowledge through systemic denial and false construction.

A good definition of education is provided in Wikipedia: “Education is the process by which an individual is encouraged and enabled to develop fully his or her innate potential; it may also serve the purpose of equipping the individual with what is necessary to be a productive member of society”. The article is perceptive enough to distinguish between education as a process and attainment, and an accepted method of achieving such status, called ‘formal education’. It is axiomatic that before attempting to attain rudimentary education, say literacy, it is futile to attain education proper, a process that is not constrained by age or institution. The extensive discourse regarding formal education results in obfuscation of its motives and objectives, and emphasizes unduly on the marginal benefit of basic literacy. In a social system where literacy forms the primary vehicle for employment it is perhaps too much to expect it to yield higher results – a greater understanding of society, comprehension of processes and events, acculturation, a greater appreciation of social and cultural realities, and development of a faculty for enquiry and innovation. To expect universal education, a la universal basic literacy, to create greater understanding of social realities and propel people in the direction of cooperation based on conjunction of identities, is to expect too much. Literacy, as it exists now, is a great tool for improvement of Human Development Index and for creating talented and trained manpower for absorption in industry and service sector. The NPE 1968, NPE 1986 and various other policy frameworks keep the substantive and material aspects of education in mind. Sagely so. Primarily, the function of literacy must be to foster greater prosperity through incidental and consequential benefits. Even if slowly, even if on a comparatively lower scale, such policies have begun to bring fruits. It is surprising that despite low investment in terms of resources, manpower and political response, many of the seeds of literacy are reaping fruits now. It might be rationally conjectured that further investments would bear further fruits. And yet, the expectations from explosion in literacy and consequent awareness are that it shall bring about the windfalls expected from true (philosophical) education. That is a little too much to expect.

**Democracy and education - How education is freed from control by vested groups**

While education and literacy efforts might fail in bringing about greater understanding of our society in any direct way, given the superficial way education is vended, they are really influential in other directions seldom mentioned in politically correct forums. Education and access to knowledge has been severely restricted by vested groups in power throughout history. This has taken various forms. Absolute denial buttressed by religious sanction (as in our Hindu society). Coercion. For

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3 A standard definition of an educated person is one who can read and write with understanding. For most official purposes, however, education is measured by the ability to write one’s name.


5 National Policy of Education
example, the Caliphate, after is became the pre-eminent power in Asia, destroyed the library of Alexandria – the logic was that whatever true knowledge there was, was contained in the Koran, and anything beyond the Koran is blasphemy. Such instances of *reductio ad absurdum* are numerous. The writing of history is much like the furling of flag over a newly owned territory – it provides a basis and justification of change, clears the way for making the changed reality into a status quo. In short, history is a mechanism of constructing *post facto* reality, a device whereby irrationality is veiled in logic, whereby absurdity wears the garb of justice, whereby denial of human rights is justified in the name of destiny. Theories are floated that clear the way for a new social reality. Thus, negroes are dunces because their cranial capacity are smaller. The coloured must be colonized because there is a White Man’s Burden to civilize the heathen and bring them to the arms of Christ. The Jews are not Aryans and are pests and parasites, and the Germans are, therefore, entitled to greater *Lebensraum*. The present day debate regarding evolution and Creationism in the Bible Belt of America, and the controversy regarding religious display in schools of Western Europe reflect on how there is perpetual dispute between visions of knowledge. From Copernicus to Galileo, from Vespucci to Martin Luther or Vidyasagar, people have had to pass through persecution and disbelief to deviate from the standard vision of the society.

Fortunately, democracy has brought many changes to the way knowledge is created, disseminated, and how, in the case of differing versions, critical evaluation and co-existence have become part of modern intellectual milieu. Far from the cute definition of democracy as being rule by the people, of the people and for the people, democracy provides a societal ambience wherein diverging realities can claim rights of co-existence. Democracy is a form of free society which provides opportunities for creation of different histories and without persecution. It provides the equivalent of an intellectual marketplace were a perceptive mind can weigh the merits of differing versions and come to his own assessment. Democracy provides a mechanism for selection of one among the many versions, at the same time ensuring the rights of others to exist. “But when a long Train of Abuses and Usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a Design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security”... democracy safely ensures that such a situation does not come to pass. Question is, how is the removal of restraints to the access to knowledge related to societal structures, or the changing relationships thereof?

Democratic freedom inevitably means identity assimilation and pronunciation. As and when the alienated and marginalized social groups find a space to express their ideas and vision, and construct their histories, they undergo greater internal assimilation. Thus, education and intellectual freedom fosters a milieu wherein identities are identified, nurtured and buttressed. It does not need great analysis to observe that greater awareness, garnered through education, directly leads to greater identification with suppressed identities, which necessarily contributes to greater social flux and stratification. Far from the usual understanding that education, leading to greater understanding of social realities, will contribute to social harmony, we find that education and awareness is leading to greater social stratification. As and when the cleavages thus accentuated are poked, strife ensues as a natural reaction. Ancient and contemporary history provides ample testimony to this phenomenon. It was only after Syed Ahmed Khan’s effort in educating the Muslims that the communal divide got emphasized. The greatest massacres during

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6 Living space, in German
7 United States *Declaration of Independence*
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the two Partitions\(^8\) ensued only after new histories were created and new identities ascribed. The American Civil War was fought as much in Gettysburg as in the psyche of the American grappling with the new reality and identity of the Negro. Similarly, questions of identity have been at the root of many global hotspots like Rwanda-Burundi, Kosovo, Chechnya, Iraq and most prominently, in the Middle East. More recently and closer to home, some of the greatest massacres were held in some of the most educated and prosperous parts of India\(^9\). New caste identities are getting pronounced which are inspiring new caste and regional configurations – both in society and the polity. Economic alienation and its awareness have brought vast sections of India to the brink of civil war\(^10\). The list goes on and on. We must, therefore, pay greater attention when pious observations regarding the utility of education are made and accepted without reservations.

The utility of social harmony – a counter-question: Is social harmony really that important?

It is a frequent assumption that social harmony is a desired status in society. Greater social cohesion or social understanding results in greater societal peace, and it is an empirically observed phenomenon that peace and prosperity co-exist. In fact, according to the Democratic Peace Theory, there is also a direct relation between a free society, peace and prosperity. Such theories, however, gloss-over problems of multiple identities. Many of Western Liberal Democracies are single cultural and historical units. And among those where substantial cultural diversity exist, problems are cropping up – whether in America, France, Britain or the peaceful Scandinavia\(^11\). The concept of social harmony is primarily Utopian in vision – seldom has it existed in any society that has had diversity of identities and disparity of power and other relations between various groups. It posits a perfectibility that is difficult to approach, and irrational to expect. It assumes a cohesion of interests and identities which negate the right and reality of diversity. It reduces the place of chaos, struggle and violence in the wroughting of new social relations and societies. The Quit India Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement in India and South Africa, the Civil Rights movement in United States, the American and French Revolutions were all attempts at creation of new societies witnessed by strife, violence and flux. Sacrifice and dislocation are frequent concomitants of change, but sacrifices must always be made for a better future, even at the cost of the present. It is such moments of strife which bring out the best in man (as well as the worst), which impel creativity and arouse pathos. Some of the greatest works of literature and arts are the direct result of alienation, strife and sacrifice. Exile stands as a standing metaphor of alienation, alienation that inspires vision of paradise. Stephen Dedalus, the hero of Joyce’s *The Portrait of Artist as a Young Man* says “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use -- silence, exile, and cunning”. It becomes very obvious that strife rather than harmony is more of a social reality, and that it is strife which ensures that the causes of ruptures are addressed.

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\(^8\) 1947 and 1971
\(^9\) Delhi, 1984 and Gujarat, 2002
\(^10\) Naxalism
\(^11\) All of these nations are going through stages of social stratification and increasing Xenophobia, especially in France, Netherlands and Scandinavia

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Conclusion

One place in the city stood apart from the rancour and chaos of Jerusalem, however - a little island all its own in which a handful of Jews and Arabs lived together in peace and harmony. It was the government insane asylum. After observing its inmates’ indifference to the strife sundering their peoples, Jacques de Reynier, the delegate of International Red Cross, made a melancholy entry in his diary: 'Vive les fous!' (Long live the nuts!)\(^{12}\)

Social Harmony is a desired objective, and education a credible method for achieving it. This essay is not intended to denigrate the many genuine efforts and achievements made in this field, but rather to offer a counter-perspective to the generally accepted utility of education. This essay offers to explore subaltern perspectives, and makes a humble effort to understand how education as a vehicle of social engineering has been over-hyped. Social disharmony is the expression of existing injustice, and till such time as the root causes are addressed, a superficial ministering through education will only raise awareness of such injustice, buttress existing identities and usher in greater societal flux. Societies around the world are constructed with the views of the ruler in mind. Based as they are in inequity, they hide and protect systemic lacunae – ranging for economic disparity to social stratification. What is necessary is that such lacunae are addressed. Education has always been accorded a high status in the construction of new societies – in Plato’s Republic or More’s Utopia, as well as in Congress resolutions and Education Policies. While the utility of education can never be negated, it must be kept in mind that education helps in creation of new societies in other ways than is generally perceived, and that there are sever limitations to the capability of education as a weapon of social engineering. Social harmony may or many not be desired – depending upon whether one wants the status quo or wants to change social reality – but greater social justice is everyone’s fundamental entitlement. And such social justice may be brought about by addressing the root causes of social injustice – inequity in distribution of knowledge, resources, status, and of opportunity.

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\(^{12}\) O Jerusalem! By Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins. The extract refers to the fight over Jerusalem between the Arabs and the Jews, in 1948. 

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