

On National and International Integration
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Let me begin with a little anecdote. Once, while I was taking a stroll, another pedestrian suddenly stopped in front of me. He looked at me and asked very politely, “Do we know each other?” I said, “I am a humble son of Mother India and you Sir”. He was excited, laughed aloud and said, “Me too, I am a son of Mother India. So we do know each other, we are brothers.” Ladies and gentlemen, such is our feeling about India, especially among the Indian diaspora. We are all sons or daughters of Mother India.

Love for our country is strong and deep rooted. This love binds us together and keeps us bound with the country for ever. It is like an invisible thread that has made a network trapping everybody. It is the fundamental base for national integration. Since the prehistoric days, whoever has come to India has fallen in this net and lovingly so. People from different parts of the world have thus joined the population of India to build the Nation. Rabindranath Tagore said in our national anthem: *the Shakas, the Huns, the Pathans, the Moguls, all got amalgamated into one single nation.* India is a unique country in this respect. India’s ancient charm has been most eloquently expressed by none other than the great French writer Romain Rolland. And I quote:

“If there is one place on the face of earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the very earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India.”

There are many great writers and philosophers who have spoken highly of India. Many great leaders like Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Pundit Nehru helped build India spiritually, culturally, economically and politically. All of them emphasized national unity and solidarity as the basic foundation on which a country survives and flourishes. As the population of India comprises of many different races, religions, cultures and language groups, the importance of national integration comes to the forefront. In order to establish peace and stability and ensure progress, all different societies must be brought into one single nation with a national consciousness. National integration should aim at improving socio-cultural relations, reducing economic inequalities and strengthening unity and solidarity. If we ask what the forces that challenge national integration are, the answers are not difficult to find. Regionalism, communalism, religious fanaticism, lingualism and now terrorism are the main forces among others. The patriotic doctrine that for a citizen, the country comes first and all

other issues come second, does not always work to motivate people for national causes. As we know, someone who perceives him/herself as an underdog often tries to go above others. This explains why national integration is always under threat from within the country as well as from outside. It is unfortunate that pernicious forces – often coming from a few individuals with extraordinary capability to gather and organize followers – are always present posing threat to national integration for narrow political goals.

From today's perspectives, India is facing disintegrating forces from several separatist groups such as the rebels in the north-east and many more. Our prime minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, said about one such group that they are "the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country." This group's primary loyalty is not ethnicity, nor religion or language but political ideology, supported by a foreign country. A recent article published by this country reported that by using disruptive strategies, it can attempt to break India into 20 to 30 independent states. According to political analysts, this country not only has been engaged in such strategies for a long time but may choose to intensify disruptive activities to fragment India by exploiting local dissidence, rebellions and other weaknesses.

Regional aspirations of the people, if not controlled, may be dangerous for the country as it may break it up or create more and more new states. Communalism may encourage clash between communities. In my view, no community should be placed above the nation. Lingual preferences should be peacefully dealt with so that no excessive bias or favor for any one language brings about agitation in the country. Religious fanaticism is another dangerous force that often leads to violence, not only in India, but all over the world. India is a secular country, but that hasn't solved all problems. Let us recollect what our secularist founding fathers thought about religions. Mahatma Gandhi said, "*I am a Hindu, I am a Moslem, I am a Jew, I am a Christian, I am a Buddhist*". And Pundit Nehru: "*The spectacle of what is called religion or at any rate organised religion, in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror and I have frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seemed to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition, exploitation and the preservation of vested interests.*" Rabindranath Tagore held humanity above anything else. Nevertheless, religion has become an explosive issue. Fanaticism and radicalism have to be eliminated by all means in order to ensure stability.

In order to achieve national integration, we have to first identify the forces that may blissfully bind the people of the country, create an emotional bond and help them share common ideas and values. Constitution, territorial continuity, art, literature, music, national festivals, national flag, national anthem, sports and, let us not forget, Bollywood – these are the vital aspects that may be utilized to promote national integration. Economic development of the unprivileged and underprivileged regions should get primary importance. More facilities should be extended to distant regions and tribal groups. The education system in general should be revised with the aim of fostering national integration. Some special means should be adopted within the education system to instil a sense of belonging and unity in the mind from childhood. An old American song by Paul Robeson, very appropriate in this context, comes to my mind:

*“We’re in the same boat brother,
We’re in the same boat brother,
And if you shake one end,
You gonna rock the other
It’s the same boat brother.”*

(Lyric by Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter).

I would like to mention a very special point, often ignored, that may be considered extremely vital for national integration. Exercise of power and authority to resolve problems may be successful temporarily, but fails in the long run. It is essential to attain internal freedom for the people first, by which I mean a mind free of selfish ego and aware of basic values and humanity in general, a conscience always awakened and strong, and love and true spirit in the core of heart. Only then a sense of belonging to the Nation will grow in every heart. Such a free mind remains open to other cultures, religions and languages and will easily accept all different people of the country. “Unity among diversity” will find its real meaning and make a solid national platform. United, the country will stand to face all adversities coming from within and outside. And how do we attain this? Well, that is a challenge for the great minds and great leaders of the country who truly and sincerely want to realize national integration. It may be meaningful to look back in history and ponder why throughout centuries, the hordes of invaders from far and near were successful to win over all the Indian states. It is undeniable that we need very strong and passionate leadership that will revive the nation from colonial amnesia and transform it into a unified whole, enlightened and free. Let me cite a poem, meaningful in this context, by our very own Rabindranath Tagore:

*“Where the heart is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depths of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the
Dreary desert sands of dead habit
Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening
Thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”*

Now, let us expand our thoughts to the international level. Even if a nation achieves reasonably perfect integration and stability, the question arises as to its relation with other nations. In order to sustain progress and stability, it is essential for the nation to contribute to the idea of global integration and peace and seriously work towards its realization. Our planet Earth is shared by one hundred and ninety three sovereign states – and more than six billion human beings. We all share the resources of the Earth in many ways. Obviously, many problems arise as this sharing – realized through trades and other means – is enormously complex and involve, mainly, economies of the nation-states, world politics and geographical borders and locations. Cultural and religious differences enhance the complexity of these problems and make them extremely difficult to solve. Given this complicated but realistic situation, all the nations of the Earth must work

together to live in good economic condition, good environment and peace. Global integration would mean a process that helps all the nations to live in peaceful harmony in a single global society, by successfully integrating their cultures and economies. Achieving this objective is beyond any doubt a monumental task, as there are wide inequalities among nations in many respects.

By the use of imagination, intellect and hard work, mankind has come through the dark ages to its present state of civilization. We have reasons to be proud of our civilized world where technology is progressing at a rapid pace. But if we look at the history of the world and the world of today, our pride is bound to fall apart. Scanning through the beginning of the recorded history till today, we hardly find a long-enough period when there was no war fought somewhere in the world – human beings killing other human beings. Wars may bring fortune to some, but often cause tragic misfortune and destruction to most others. We have seen in the past Europe, a most civilized continent, being disintegrated into barbarism. Imperialism, religion, border disputes, commodities like petrol are some of the main causes of conflict. It is an irony that petrol is a greater cause of conflicts than wheat.

Racial hatred and animosity and religious fanaticism also have caused much woe to the world. The greatest menace to our civilization today is the ideological concept of some groups that are too delighted to uphold their righteousness and denigrate others as wicked. It is unthinkable how human beings can be so intelligent and at the same time so madly driven by beliefs that are palpably false and harmful. In today's world, we are experiencing dreadful consequences of terrorism conducted by a handful of religious extremists. In the name of religion, they are carrying out indiscriminate violence and conflagration for which the phrase "unethical and insensible" is a generous understatement. The basic rules of international life and democratic societies are violated almost everyday. Bertrand Russell was absolutely right when he said many years ago, *"The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser people so full of doubts."*

It will be impossible to achieve global integration as long as dismal economic differences persist among nations, prejudices and hatred continue rendering states reciprocally hostile, and socialistic and religious extremists do not relinquish their profound misconception and ignorance about others. I wonder when the world will learn to accept and value the principle of non-violence to resolve all disputes. We all know too well that violence breeds violence and Gandhi's famous saying, *"an eye for an eye will make the world blind."* People from all quarters of the globe, by the common bond of brotherhood and friendship, should join together to promote the work for peace. They should think of themselves, first of all, as citizens of the world, without any sacrifice of patriotism as concerns their native lands. After all, *"We're in the same boat brother."*

The nations of the world are now moving towards globalization, which will help business and trades flourish all over the world by eliminating unnecessary trade barriers. This will establish an integrated global market and accomplish a great leap towards global integration. But here too, the nations must commit themselves to protect the world health

and environment. A few basic points should be considered as vital for global integration to be effective, such as:

1. Avoidance of all military aggressions and imperial aspirations;
2. A strong and conscientious global leadership, like the UN with larger and stronger mandates;
3. Respect for all cultures, religions and humanity in general;
4. Developmental help for impoverished nations to alleviate hunger and eradicate poverty; and
5. Binding international agreements.

A new course of study on citizenship in school and college curricula may be a good idea. Normally, meaning of “citizenship” is understood on the perspective of the nation-state. A sense of international belonging and responsibility should be asserted in such a course, showing application of principles in all arenas from playground to parliament. A sense of affiliation with the larger community of humanity and a moral foundation fostered through the arts and humanities ought to play a central role in the pursuit of global integration.

Lastly but more importantly, it is noticed with a bit of sadness that our civilization has progressed but without conscience. We live in a world where sky-high towers are built to glorify our immense economic power, where companies and individuals have the means to pay high premiums for luxury, where science and technology proudly venture into the deep space, while the ugly teeth of hunger mightily reign in its dark quarters taking high toll on human lives. This is perversity of civilization. Moreover, human beings, despite their intelligence, have caused famines and genocides in the world over and over again. These shocking contradictions mark the pages of history with shameful red tags. But, perhaps, this is how the human society evolves and the “fittest” groups survive. It will need vision and lots of courage with conscience to educate the public and set conditions required for the nations to move towards global integration. Commitments from all nation-states as well as non-state groups to be a part of the international community and to respect all cultures will help reshape world politics. It is, however, delightful to note that there have been great thinkers and great leaders in the past; so we can hope there will be such thinkers and leaders in the future who will steer our civilization in the right direction – a ray of hope amid despair. Peace and friendship may ultimately prevail in an integrated global society. Mahatma Gandhi’s words still reverberate:

“It may be long before the law of love will be recognized in international affairs. The machineries of government stand between and hide the hearts of one people from those of another.”

Author's Note: A shorter version of the article (focusing on national integration only) was presented by the author at a meeting organized to observe the National Integration Week (19 – 25 November) by India-Canada Association and the High Commission of India, Ottawa, Canada, on 25th Nov. 2009.