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CONTENTS

Editorial: Nuclear Renaissance or False Dawn?		99
Culture Deficit in Indian Society	VK Gaur	104
Freedom of speech, religion and the United Nations	Marquez Comelab	110
Rush Hour of the Gods	Meera Nanda	113
A Time to Dare	Deep Joshi	119
<i>Book Review</i>		
Ethics in Governance — Innovations, Issues and Instrumentalities	AP Saxena	123
Having Dreams and Realising Them	Deepmala	125
Kanyakumari Declaration		127
News and Notes		129
-Iranians 'execute Sunni rebels'		
-Sikhs pay Rs 2 crore as 'tax' to Taliban in Pak		
- Plight of Christians in Orissa (India)		
-Mantras to aid Agriculture		
-Untouchability alive in rural areas		

RELIGION AFTER THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION*

Narsingh Narain

So far as religion proper is concerned, there is no important development to record until we come to the period after the scientific revolution. A great part of religion has always been concerned with man's physical health and safety and his material well-being. Today, in most parts of the civilised world, for such things as better crops, cure of disease, and victory against foes, even highly religious people depend more on purely human effort than on Divine intervention. The forces of nature, though still indifferent to human needs and desires, are no longer regarded as arbitrary and beyond control. Science and technology may be said to have eliminated, or pointed the way to the elimination of, a good part of the fears and anxieties in the context of which religion came into existence. On the other hand, they have helped to produce some new fears and anxieties for which as far as one can see, they cannot be expected to provide a remedy. And the pessimism arising out of the transience and apparent futility of human life remains. Loss of faith in the traditional creeds often produces apathy, nihilism and drift. The pessimism can be observed at all intellectual levels, though it does not usually find expression in words. I quote here from the writings of two eminent contemporaries: a philosopher and a scientist, both non-believers.

The philosopher, C.D. Broad, says:- "It seemed to (Henry) Sidgwick, and it seems to me, that unless some men survive the death of their bodies, the life of the individual and of the human race is 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. The scientist, Fred Hoyle, says: "Here we are in this wholly fantastic universe with scarcely a clue as to whether our existence has any real significance. No wonder that many people feel the need for some belief which gives them a sense of security and no wonder that they become angry with people like me who say that this security is illusory. But I do not like the situation any better than they do. The difference is that I cannot see how the smallest advantage is to be gained from deceiving myself".

In this connection, we may refer to the existentialists' talk of the individual's anguish, solitude, etc. Dr. Corliss Lamont, a well-known Humanist and author of 'The Philosophy of Humanism' says: "And though I wrote an entire book, *The Illusion of Immortality*, in order to show that there can be no survival of the human personality after death, I nevertheless do want to live for ever, provided I maintain good health and a satisfactory economic standard of existence". The "tragedy of death, he says, is 'inherent in the great gift of life'
**Extract from an article titled 'Is Humanism a Religion?'*

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EDITORIAL



Nuclear Renaissance or False Dawn?

Nothing is closer to the core concerns of Humanism than the protection of Human Rights and the Environment. In fact, in certain cases, issues of environmental concern become issues of human rights as well. The use of nuclear fission for generating power is one such case. Even one nuclear accident can have a direct and catastrophic effect, not only on the current generation of human beings - leave aside other forms of life - but on future generations as well. In this, the hazards of nuclear power-generation are qualitatively different from those, for example, of transportation and industrial pollution. But there is no dearth of spurious comparisons between the risks, say, of fatalities on the road and the risks associated with a nuclear accident.

The issues are highly technical. But the human consequences of even a minor miscalculation are so drastic that matters cannot be left in the hands of experts alone. And there is some truth in the saying that, for every expert, there is an equal and opposite expert. Even very eminent authorities can sometimes be seriously off the mark. Lord Kelvin, for example, said in 1896: "I have not the slightest molecule of faith in aerial navigation other than ballooning." The British Secretary of State for War had this to say in 1910: "We do not consider that the aeroplane will be of any possible use for war purposes."

As one commentator has put it: "Who should we ask whether it is wise to build nuclear power plants? Who should we ask what is the best for our society? The answer may make you rub your eyes: We should ask ourselves! Important decisions in our life - and the question about nuclear power plants is such an important decision - must not be delegated to others. ...**We can and must always make important decisions ourselves.** This is the key issue. Only the details and the less important things like "how do I make a lot of money?", we can leave up to the experts like bankers, energy analysts, etc..."

Howsoever technical the arguments for and against the use of nuclear energy may be, the essential issues of human concern do not lie outside the scope of the intelligent and enquiring layman.

There is ample evidence to show that the whole life-cycle of nuclear power-generation - from uranium mining, reactor operation and spent-fuel handling through decommissioning and final disposal of nuclear waste - is fraught with high risks. But growing fears of global warming, and the part played in it by carbon emissions, have driven large numbers of environmentalists to abandon their earlier opposition to nuclear power. Some of them have become its strongest advocates. We have, for example, James Lovelock, described as 'one of the great thinkers of our time' (*New Scientist*) and 'one of the environmental movement's most influential figures' (*Observer*). In his book *The Revenge of Gaia* (p 116) he says: "A television interviewer once

asked me, ‘but what about nuclear waste? Will it not poison the whole biosphere and persist for millions of years?’ I knew this to be a nightmare fantasy wholly without substance in the real world. I also knew that the natural world would welcome nuclear waste as the perfect guardian against greedy developers, and whatever slight harm it might represent was a small price to pay. One of the striking things about places heavily contaminated by radioactive nuclides is the richness of their wildlife. This is true of the land around Chernobyl, the bomb test sites of the Pacific, and areas near the United States’ Savannah River nuclear weapons plant in the Second World War. Wild plants and animals do not perceive radiation as dangerous (nor, apparently, do some ‘environmentalists’!) and any slight reduction it may cause in their lifespans is far less a hazard than the presence of people and their pets.” It is hard to believe that this was not written tongue-in-cheek.

Uranium Mining

Briefly, the core issues in uranium mining are: Uranium and its decay products, buried deep in the earth, are brought to surface. Radon gas produced in the mine causes lung cancer. Leftover piles of materials or ‘uranium tailings’ contain over a dozen radioactive materials. There is no perfect storage of these radioactive materials to prevent them from finding their way into the soil, water, plants, animals, fish and humans. Apart from the usual risks of mining, uranium miners worldwide have experienced a much higher incidence of lung cancer and other lung diseases. There are several studies indicating an increased incidence of skin cancer, stomach cancer and kidney disease among uranium miners. Yet, on April 15, 2004, the Supreme Court of India dismissed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) on the hazardous impact of the uranium waste disposal by the Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL) at Jadugoda, East Singhbhum District of Jharkhand.

Despite opposition from local people - mostly tribals - the Indian Government is going ahead with plans to develop uranium mines in a number of states including Meghalaya, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh. It is a cruel quirk of geology that 80% of the world’s uranium is mined from the lands of the Indigenous People. In India 100% of our uranium comes from Indigenous lands in Jharkhand and Meghalaya. As one report says: “It is not just a coincidence that 90% of the miners who are deputed underground are Adivasis.”

One survey finds high levels of deformities and cancer near Jadugoda uranium mine. In a shocking revelation, the Indian Doctors for Peace and Development (IDPD) external link has come out with some facts regarding the health hazards faced by miners working in the Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL). The survey was undertaken by an organisation affiliated to Germany-based International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) in association with Jharkhandi Organisation Against Radiation (JOAR).

According to the survey, more children - about 9.5 per cent of the newborns - are dying each year due to extreme physical deformity, primary sterility is becoming common with 9.6 per cent of women not being able to conceive even three years after marriage. Cancer deaths in nearby villages are about 2.87 per cent and 68.33 per cent people are dying before the age of 62. (*The Telegraph March 2, 2008*) www.wise-uranium.org/umopjdg.html

Reactor Operations

The main hazards of reactor operations have to do with safety and security. It is important to make a distinction between safety and security; although the close relationship between the two must be borne in mind. Safety concerns safeguards against breakdowns, accidents arising out of negligence or mismanagement; and minimising the damage caused by natural disasters. Security relates to protection from deliberately hostile actions such as sabotage, terrorist attack or attacks by missiles or bombs.

Safety. While there have been progressive improvements in reactor design, the fact remains that nuclear power plants are vulnerable to accidents resulting in meltdown or other large radiation releases due to human error, worn out or defective parts and natural disasters such as earthquakes or flooding. Even without an accident or attack, nuclear power plants threaten public health by routinely releasing radiation into the soil, water and air. The Indian experience in this regard has not been encouraging. Early in 1995 a seminar on 'Nuclear Energy and Public Safety' was held in Delhi, co-sponsored by the India International Centre and some other organisations. A book, titled *Nuclear Energy and Public Safety*, edited by Dr Vinod Gaur, was published after the seminar, with contributions from about twenty eminent scientists, academicians and others. The picture that emerges from this, as summed up in the Preface, is disturbing. Talking of "sloppy technology and management practices" it says: "The devastating fire at Narora, the major flooding of Kakrapara, and the collapse of the containment dome at Kaiga are recent examples of failures, details of which remain unavailable to the public, causing deep concern about the hazard potential of our nuclear installations. This situation supports a lax technological culture through immunity from public exposure at the expense of public anxiety, and clearly underlines the wisdom of creating public transparency of plans and designs and of hazards and failure analyses reports of large and crucial public utilities, as practiced by most democratic nations."

A report written a decade later remains far from reassuring. Talking of India's reactors it says: "Safety systems have been inadequate in many facilities. For example, the two reactors at Tarapur shared emergency core cooling systems for a long time in violation of standards that required each reactor to have its own system. The reactors at Madras and Rajasthan had been operating for many years without high pressure core cooling systems, which would be needed if coolant is lost during an accident. The need for such systems has been

known since the 1970s but the Madras reactors, built in the mid-1980s, were operating without them until 2004". (*Nuclear safety: A poor record*, Ashwin Kumar, *India Together*, 4 Oct 2008)

Security. Security relates to protection from deliberately hostile actions such as sabotage, terrorist attack or attacks by missiles or bombs. Even if it is conceded that adequate safeguards can be instituted to prevent any catastrophic outcome in case of accident, negligence, mismanagement or natural disaster, vulnerability to enemy action still has to be taken into account - particularly for states like India, which live in a troubled neighbourhood. As Mycle Schneider says: "The idea of encouraging and promoting nuclear energy seems even more surprising in countries that are beset by armed rebel groups, many of whom have demonstrated stunning levels of unscrupulousness toward their fellow citizens. Some people have labeled civilian nuclear facilities "pre-deployed nuclear weapons." The phrase becomes particularly significant in this context" A single successful attack on a nuclear plant can be incalculably catastrophic. In his landmark book on the subject: *Nuclear Plants as Weapons for the Enemy: An Unrecognized Military Peril*, Bennett Ramberg points out that any country that possesses nuclear energy facilities gives its adversaries a quasi- nuclear capability to use against it.

Along the same lines Gerd Rosenkranz of the Heinrich Böll Foundation says, "It is a brutal fact that a state whose actual or potential enemies have nuclear power plants can spare itself the arduous path of building its own atomic bomb. Attacking the enemy's civilian power stations is as good as having a bomb of one's own because a commercial nuclear power plant holds, in order of magnitude, more radioactivity than is released by exploding an atomic bomb; long-term radioactive contamination from a "successful" attack on a power plant would be much more drastic than that from a bomb. " "The core of a typical nuclear plant" says Martin Zuberi "contains about 1,000 times the radioactivity released by the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. A high explosive bomb used against it would acquire the attributes of a nuclear weapon without its blast effect. According to an environmental impact statement of the U.S Nuclear Regulatory Commission a large truck bomb used against a nuclear reactor in a highly populated area could produce 130,000 deaths. An ordinary

Within a nuclear power plant perhaps the most vulnerable part is the spent fuel pool. Spent fuel pools for boiling water reactors are located above ground. This can make these reactors even more vulnerable. Conventional explosives, by causing a breach in the pool water connections can cause a fire worse than even a reactor meltdown. As one report says, "If a fire were to break out at the Millstone Reactor Unit 3 spent fuel pond in Connecticut, it would result in a three-fold increase in background exposures. This level triggers the NRC evacuation requirement and could render 29,000 square miles of land uninhabitable."

Waste Disposal

It is almost universally acknowledged that the problem of long-term radioactive waste storage has not yet been fully solved. Several countries have considered using underground repositories. Spent fuel rods are now stored in concrete casks close to the nuclear reactors. Plutonium, which is contained in the fuel rods, is extracted in COGEMA La Hague site (France) and Sellafield (Great Britain). In this process great amounts of radioactive waste have in the past been dumped in the sea. The practice of ocean floor disposal is now banned. The only long-term way of dealing with waste today is by geological storage; but the experience with the Yucca mountain proposal shows that this is not practicable - apart from not being desirable. "Following six decades of attempting to find a "safe" and dependable way of storing radioactive waste from nuclear plants," says David Kyler "experts still have no solution. These materials will remain a major public health threat for thousands of years. The more such materials we use, transport and store, the greater that threat be-
..... (for the Journal *Constitution*, November 02, 2008)

Decisive Factors

It can be argued that each of the following three factors, *on its own*, is sufficient to rule out, *for the present*, the widespread use of nuclear energy for power generation:

Irreversible environmental damage caused by uranium mining.

Security of nuclear power plants from sabotage/ hostile attacks.

Problems of long-term waste disposal.

The operative phrase in the above formulation is 'for the present'. As technology advances, reliable solutions may well be found for these problems. For example, advocates of 'Fast-neutron Reactors' claim: "As today's thermal reactors reach the end of their lifetimes, they could be replaced by fast reactors. Should that occur, there would be no need to mine any more uranium ore for centuries and no further requirement, ever, for uranium enrichment. For the very long term, recycling the fuel of fast reactors would be so efficient that currently available uranium supplies could last indefinitely." (William H. Hannum, Gerald E. Marsh and George S. Stanford, Smarter Use of Nuclear Waste, *Scientific American*, Dec 2005). It is also claimed that the problem of waste disposal will be very greatly reduced. However, the problems of security have not been touched upon. These are likely to remain.

As an Editorial in the *New Scientist* (12 Apr 2008) says: "We should have learned that compromising public safety for economic gain is a dangerous game. Ploughing ahead with a vast reactor-construction programme without finding a solution to the waste problem and without knowing how to deal with the additional risks of high-efficiency fuel seems irresponsible. History is full of similar compromises that were later regretted, if we only care to remember."

Vir Narain

THE GROWING CULTURE DEFICIT IN INDIAN SOCIETY

Vinod K Gaur

A diversification among human communities is essential for the provision of incentive and material for the Odyssey of the human spirit. Other nations of different habits are not enemies: they are godsend. Men require of their neighbours something sufficiently akin to be understood, something sufficiently different to provoke attention, and something great enough to command admiration.

A.N.Whitehead: Science and the modern world

The title makes a statement. But, it is not intended to express an opinion. Rather, it verbalises a perception abstracted from the felt views of a large number of fellow citizens from a variety of different life styles and belief systems. I therefore felt it to be an eminently significant statement to be explored for its representative validity and to be then analyzed for possible societal developments responsible for its fair or unfair prevalence. This is provoked both by a deep feeling of personal concern at the assumed distortion of a deeply cherished heritage and by the belief that by projecting this issue squarely on our consciousness, we may begin to reduce the burden of irrational responses and prejudices on our psyche, which also, inevitably, translate into injustice and discomfiture for some or other section of society. However, before we proceed further, it is desirable to clarify at the outset as to what is understood by the word **culture**, and in what sense is it interpreted here.

The word 'culture' rooted in the latin *cultura*, meaning 'to cultivate', was for long, meant to signify the product of social cultivation: the progressive refinement of human behaviour. Theorists like Matthew Arnold consistently regarded culture "as the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters that most concern us, the best that has been thought and said in the world".

Contemporary society, however, recognizes **cultural relativism**, that is, there are no logical criteria for judging one society to be intrinsically superior or inferior to another. Accordingly, the UNESCO (2002), described culture "as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs". It is in this latter sense that the word is used here.

Cultures are constituted of a complex set of objects, both mental and material, fashioned by their worldview and beliefs, abstracted in the form of symbols: objects of everyday use¹ or ceremonial, tools, art works, habitats, institutions, and subliminally learned norms of behaviour in dealing with the family, community, and members of other cultural groups. However, since socially constructed specific culture traits of different groups still share the biologically determined generalized abilities such as the making of symbols,

specially language, as well as hypothesis formulation and deduction, and perhaps a striving towards perfection, not only do we expect to find some universal traits in every culture, but equally significantly, the possibility of their being inter-fertile. These shared yet differentiated traits of cultures inevitably serve as a gene pool constantly mutating to evolve new symbols, as a group devises new cultural strategies and wields them to confront new emerging conflicts either within the social structure(s), as for example, in the wake of functional complexity and differentiation, or from without by the threats posed by aggressive invasions or dramatic changes in the natural environment. Thus, catalyzed by conflicts, cultural symbols are forever transforming through a more or less harmonious organic development and by the free interplay of their internal elements: the arts, literature, belief systems, resource bases, technology, and institutional structures, each at their own characteristic pace, some even retrograde. And thus, new symbols evolve, of thought, lifestyles and behaviour, and the old yield place to more evocative ones. In a liberal social milieu that supports alternative spaces for their free play, these developments may lead to a new cultural harmony which may be adjudged to be of a higher order, or retrogress in a less supportive society.

We thus recognize that the structure of a culture, whilst itself distinctive, has no claim to its being normative and that its dynamics is mediated by mutations of cultural symbols and the autonomous development of its constituent elements, with no clear possibility of being steered towards a desired goal through deliberate action.

Does the aforesaid unavailability of a reliable frame of reference with which we may compare and evaluate different cultures or the different stages of the same culture, imply that a concern for the improvement of culture is fundamentally ill defined and any prescription for realizing this goal is, at best, arbitrary? Or, are there some enduring constituents that exist at the core of every culture, which could then be distilled to yield some intrinsically human attributes which, whilst supporting the integrity of that culture, can also be expected to prove congenial to other cultures and even contribute some of its nobler aspects to them? We therefore ask whether there exist any deeper Value systems that are central to the totality of a culture, that is, its preferred avowal concerning the issues of truth, justice, equity, co-existence with different worldviews and belief systems, and commitment to supporting alternative spaces for the exploration of new literary, artistic and conceptual forms and symbols that may enrich the ever expanding expressive world of emerging ideas, emotions, hopes, aspirations, and creative responses required to meet strange unforeseen challenges.

In addressing this question, we first note some particulars of the human culture. Firstly, that these cultures are dynamic and grow organically, in many respects, much like an organism, both in the fashioning of an identity through a harmonious synergy of its functionally differentiated elements, and in its

hereditary transmission , not of course by heredity but by learning (enculturation), from generation to generation. And, organic development is a historical process with a consciousness of the past and its potential for the future.

Secondly, whilst culture represents the collective identity of a people and an embodiment of their symbols and conventions, its attributes can only be abstracted from the personal behaviours of individuals and groups. This underlines the conflicting roles of individuals in fostering and advancing group culture through unusual motivations and creative approaches to perfection on the one hand, and remaining a representative of the group on the other. Further, it is well to appreciate that tensions within a society that arise from the struggles between its differentiated elements, by becoming tensions in the minds of its more conscious members, enhance the creative potential of the society for evolutionary embellishments. A certain balance between uniformity and diversity would thus appear to be a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the advancement of culture.

Thirdly, we note that almost all human cultures have evolved in association with certain world views subscribed by the people, as crystallized religions or way of life, and ask as to what implications may it have to the future development of a culture with the ever present conflict potential residing in the growing inconsistencies between the articles of faith and the products of more consensual knowledge gained from scientific investigations.

From the foregoing, it is possible to identify a few generic conditions which, if present, would furnish the necessary ingredients for the advancement (improvement/ascent) of culture, even though they do not provide a guarantee that it will happen.

The first condition I abstract from the organic character of cultural development is the consciousness of the inherited past and its potential for the forming future. This, in turn, requires the existence of uncompromisingly supportive, dogma-free social instruments and processes needed to strengthen fidelity of investigation and an honest interpretation of past historical events.

The second condition is the dominance in society of a liberal social philosophy that supports and sustains alternative cultural spaces for the experimental development of new cultural symbols and modes of thought and behaviour even if they appear to be heretical to currently held conventions. A related corollary is the maintenance of a healthy balance between the need to forge unity and the desirability to preserve diversity which has the potential to spark fruitful directivity to the future. My last condition is the existence, within a society, of a cultivated tradition for skepticism and the progressive minimisation of the inconsistencies between the authoritarian world view of belief systems and our epistemic knowledge of the physical world. At this stage it would be instructive to examine whether in the vast body of Indian cultural accretions there are examples that bear witness to the existence of these conditions.

Indian culture is strongly conditioned by the cyclic view of the world and the prominent role played by the process of creative destruction in moving the evolutionary wheel forward, incorporating the past, without lamenting its passing away, into the present and the already arriving future. Indeed, there are rituals practised by many of its subcultures, that annually observe the significance in their lives of their origins, traced not only to the immediately preceding generations but to *old stones that cannot be deciphered*². And, if the value of a culture is to be measured by the contributions that it has made to other cultures, history has much to credit it.

Indian society has also harboured a liberal culture over long periods of its varied historical traditions, allowing novel ideas to develop in astronomy and mathematics, and in poetry, sculpture and architecture without any threat of persecution or at least, in spite of it, by believers and the prurient. These dogma-free traits are eloquently expressed in the epic Ramayana, as in Javali's admonitions to Rama as to how he should behave: "follow what is within your experience and do not trouble yourself with what lies beyond the province of human experience". The philosophy of skepticism, as against the *cocksure*, too has a long tradition in Indian culture dating back to the Rigveda: "whence this creation has arisen..., perhaps it formed itself,....perhaps..", flourished as Lokayat system of thought from the first millennium BC, along with the more aggressively atheistic system of Carvaka and of other beliefs. Indeed, the simultaneous presence of materialistic, atheistic and a variety of theistic belief systems including Islam, continued to be accepted right through the 16th century and given royal patronage by emperor Akbar who regularly held multi-religious discourses. These realized conditions in Indian cultural progression through the ages, I believe, still live subliminally within the psyche of an average Indian, continually experienced by moving responses and behaviours in everyday encounters with fellow countrymen of varied groups and persuasions.

There is, however, a deep concern today arising from the aggressive postures, adopted by some increasingly successful groups in the country, that are antithetical to the conditions for cultural ascent identified above that have indeed characterised India's cultural traditions for a major part of its long history. Some of these elements generate an irrational hostility to groups of different subcultures whilst others violently oppose any exploratory approach to analysis or expression of ideas and forms that does not coincide with their own unsupported and raw interpretation of history and religion, and cocksure beliefs. In recent years we have witnessed a growing clamour for banning books, paintings, exhibits, films, even ways of dressing, by certain groups on the basis of narrow perceptions, and more regrettably, the impotence of the civil society in combating these. This violence laced tendency to abridge the public space so necessary for the staging of new experimental creations of the human mind and spirit from which society may select the genes for its future advancement,

are ill portents and have serious implications for the cultural integrity of India.

In a bizarre incident of this nature, the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts at the M.S. University, Baroda, Prof. Shivaji Panikker, was suspended for having upheld the law by supporting the fundamental and artistic rights of his student Chandramohan who was attacked by a mob which had illegally entered the university premises, vandalized artistic works mounted for an internal evaluation exercise, and finally, schemed to get the student arrested by the authorities, in Justice Kaul's words³ "to protect the pervert or to assuage the susceptibilities of the over-sensitive". And the seriousness of the situation grows with the steady victories gained by such groups, corralling a series of individual artists like Bhupen Khakhar, Arpita Singh, Surendran Nair, Chitrovanu Mazumdar, even torching the Husain-Doshi Gufa in Ahmadabad which housed the Chester-Herewitz collection of Husain's works. Indeed, while quashing a bunch of cases against the beleaguered artist M.F. Husain, Justice Kaul in his lucid judgment delivered on May 8, 2008, observed "we could have been pardoned for imagining that a particularly nauseating moment in contemporary Indian history had come to a close, where illiterate, ignorant and inflammatory charges were foisted upon an isolated artist with the deliberate intent of paralyzing him. Caught between daily threats to his life and freedom on the one hand and an impotent State unable to guarantee him protection on the other, Husain has been living abroad, in self-imposed exile, for over two years now. And further, quoting the Supreme Court's observations in the 1970 K.A. Abbas vs. Union of India case: "Our standards must be so framed that we are not reduced to a level where the protection of the least capable and the most depraved amongst us determines what the morally healthy cannot view or read... The requirements of art and literature include within themselves a comprehensive view of social life and not only in its ideal form, and the line is to be drawn where the average moral man begins to feel embarrassed or disgusted at a naked portrayal of life without the redeeming touch of art or genius or social value. If the depraved begins to see in these things more than what an average person would, in much the same way, as it is wrongly said, a Frenchman sees women's legs in everything, it cannot be helped. In our scheme of things ideas having redeeming social or artistic value must also have importance and protection for their growth."

The test of the title statement, I leave to the thoughtful criticisms of the audience and the reader, against the backdrop of the foregoing arguments and snippets of some characteristic developments in our contemporary society, along with the sage words of T S Eliot "we must try to embrace so much in our view, that we may avoid, in putting one thing right, putting something else wrong...for it is as much, or more, because of what we do piecemeal without understanding or foreseeing the consequences, that the culture of one age differs from that of its predecessor".

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FREEDOM OF SPEECH, RELIGION & THE UNITED NATIONS*

Marquez Comelab

On the 24th of November 2008, the UN passed a draft resolution against defaming religion. It was sponsored by the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). They want nations to pass legislation against blasphemy. At this point in time, it is optional for each member nation of the UN to adopt this resolution. In the next few months, however, the OIC will be pushing for its enforcement worldwide.

I write this article because I believe the motive behind the efforts of the OIC is sinister. I want to ensure that readers are aware of this development because if the OIC gets its way one's right to express one's opinion is at risk. It has happened before and it continues to happen in totalitarian regimes all over the world today. Only this time, it has the backing of the UN. Before I continue, let me be clear; I also want to protect human beings from being discriminated against and ensure that they are not subject to physical violence because of their religious beliefs, or lack thereof. This issue, however, is not about protecting people from other people. It is about taking away our right to think for ourselves and to speak our minds.

A blasphemer is someone who speaks of (God or a sacred entity) in an irreverent, impious manner. Irreverent means 'lacking or exhibiting a lack of reverence: disrespectful'. Impious refers to irreligiousness. Many works of art, film and literature blaspheme a particular god or religion. The justification behind the recent push for blasphemy laws is to avoid instances where the feelings of Muslims are hurt because of impious statements about certain things they consider sacred or holy.

I can draw three examples from recent history that have added urgency to the cause of the OIC to push for laws that protect Islam from free inquiry and criticism:

1. The cartoons drawn by Kurt Westergaard
2. The film, Submission, by Theo Van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali
3. The film, Fitna, by Geert Wilders

I will discuss these cases one by one. In the process I shall raise the questions:

1. Who needs protection from whom?
2. Were these works created purely to incite or provoke violence from Muslims or were they created out of curiosity, to ask questions and seek the truth?

Danish Cartoons by Kurt Westergaard

Perhaps the most popular incident that most of us have heard about is that of Danish cartoonist, Kurt Westergaard. Westergaard created the controversial cartoon of the Muslim prophet, Muhammad, wearing a bomb as a turban.

After the publication of his cartoons, Muslims worldwide were enraged. In two days of heavy rioting, five people were killed in two major cities, and a

private property, worth millions, was torched in Pakistan.

Some of the banners and chants in these protests carried messages like:

- 1) Death to Denmark.
- 2) Hang those who drew the insulting cartoons.
- 3) This is the beginning of the end for you disbelievers.
- 4) Denmark, go to Hell. George Bush, go to Hell. USA, to Hell. Nuke, Nuke Denmark.
- 5) We want Danish Blood.
- 6) Europe, you will pay. Your annihilation is on its way.
- 7) UK, you obey, Bin Laden is on his way.
- 8) May they bomb Denmark so we can invade their country and take their wives as war booty.

On February 12, 2008, Danish Security and Intelligence Service, PET, arrested three people, two Tunisians and one Dane of Moroccan origin. They were planning to murder Westergaard. In a statement on Jyllands-Posten's website, Mr Westergaard said: "Of course I fear for my life when the police intelligence service say that some people have concrete plans to kill me...".

Submission by Theo Van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali

The film, *Submission*, is a 10-minute film directed by Theo Van Gogh and written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. It was shown on the Dutch public broadcasting network (VPRO) on August 29, 2004.

The film tells the story of four fictional characters played by a single actress wearing a veil, but clad in a see-through chador, her naked body painted with verses from the Koran. The characters are Muslim women who have been abused in various ways. The film contains monologues of these women and dramatically highlights three verses of the Qur'an, 4:34, 2:222 and 24:2 that authorise mistreatment of women, by showing them painted on women's bodies.

Hirsi Ali, now a Muslim atheist, was motivated to make the film because of the injustice she saw. She said, "It is written in the Koran a woman may be slapped if she is disobedient. This is one of the evils I wish to point out in the film. If you are a Muslim woman and you read the Koran, and you read in there that you should be raped if you say 'no' to your husband, that is offensive. And that is insulting."

In her book, *Infidel*, Hirsi Ali tells us what happened two months after the film was released. "Theo van Gogh got up to go to work at his film production company in Amsterdam. He took out his old black bicycle and headed down a main road. Waiting in a doorway was a Moroccan man with a handgun and two butcher knives.

"As Theo cycled down the Linneausstraat, Muhammad Bouyeri approached. He pulled out his gun and shot Theo several times. Theo fell off his bike and lurched across the road, then collapsed. Bouyeri followed. Theo begged, "Can't we talk about this?" but Bouyeri shot him four more times. Then he took out one

of his butcher knives and sawed into Theo's throat. With the other knife, he stabbed a five-page letter onto Theo's chest. The letter was addressed to me." After Theo's murder, Hirsi Ali went into hiding.

Fitna by Geert Wilders

Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician and member of the Dutch Parliament since 1998, is another fighter for freedom of speech. In 2008, he released a short film titled Fitna. Fitna means 'disagreement and division among people' in Arabic. Wilders said the 15-minute film showed how verses from the Koran are being used today to incite modern Muslims to behave violently and antidemocratically based on those verses. When you take a look at his film, it is the Koranic quotes and the zealous personalities captured in the film that incite violence, not Geert Wilders.

Fitna was released on the Internet on the video sharing website Liveleak, after which it was immediately removed because of serious threats being made to staff. After security upgrades to ensure the safety of the staff at Liveleak, Fitna was re-released.

Prior to the release of the film, Geert Wilders did an interview with Fox News where he made statements relevant to this discussion.

When asked why he would release a film with all these threats of riots on the streets, he responded, "That [threats are being made] just proves my point even more, that it is needed, a lot, to make such a movie. Indeed, only the proposition that I was going to make a movie [got] the Dutch government panicking, talking to imams all over the country, Muslim groups threatening to go to courts to prevent the movie being published, [it is as if] we have no freedom of speech here in the Netherlands. All the reactions, even before the movie is finished, let alone broadcasted on television, prove my point that it is very needed to make [such] a movie. People should bear some criticism also in the Muslim community."

When interviewed, Geert Wilders had already been living for three years of his life under high security. He was asked by the interviewer whether it was more prudent for him to 'temper' what he was saying, just a little bit. Wilders response was, "If I do that, if I would moderate my voice or maybe stop talking like that, then the people who are not using democratic means, but undemocratic means – like the death threats that I am getting everyday – then, those people, would win. In a democracy, if you are against somebody, you use your freedom of speech. Go and debate, write an article or vote for a party that thinks differently... This is civil society. This is everything that should be done in a democracy. More than half a million people voted for my party and me personally, so I have an obligation to the voters who expect me not to stop saying what I really think. If I stop, then I would not only be playing a nasty game with my voters, I would also give a signal to everybody who says, 'If you say what we don't like, we will kill you, behead you or do terrible things to you', that they are winning."

The publishing and drawing of the cartoons was offensive to many Muslims and they are all within their rights to protest. What is a separate issue, however, is the way most of the protests have been conducted. The slogans and the chants, themselves, were criminal. They incited and spread hate, murder and violence. Many other religions have been offended by other forms of expression, in film and in various forms of art, but none have allowed themselves to react and behave in such an outrageous manner.

What is most unacceptable for a society that values freedom of expression is that three men plotted to murder the cartoonist. Westergaard was lucky to have been protected by the Danish police. Unfortunately for Theo Van Gogh, the Dutch police was not there to save him.

The push for anti-blasphemy laws is not about protecting people from other people. It is about immunising religious ideas from intellectual probing and enquiry. We cannot protect ideas from other ideas. The ability to explore a full range of ideas is important because truth cannot be arrived upon unless all points are considered first.

John Milton (1608-1678) said, "If facts are laid bare, truth will defeat falsehood in open competition." But this cannot be left for any individuals, or a government, to determine. It is up to each individual to uncover their own truth and no one is wise enough to act as a censor for all individuals, not even the UN.

To those who voted for the resolution on defamation of religion, I say, believing in freedom of speech means believing in freedom of speech of views you do not like. By passing anti-blasphemy resolutions, such as these, the UN seems to expect us all to accept everything we are told to believe, because if we show dissent or express our opinions against these beliefs, we will get prosecuted as blasphemers.

To conclude, I echo what H.L. Mencken said eighty- two years ago: "Individuals have the right to harbor and indulge their imbecilities as long as they please, provided only that they do not try to inflict them upon others by force. They have a right to argue for them as eloquently as they can, in season and out of season. They have a right to teach their religion to their children. But certainly they have no right to be protected against the free criticism of those who do not hold them. They have no right to demand that they be treated as sacred. They have no right to preach them without challenge."

**Source: International Humanist News, May, 2009*

Marquez Comelab is the author of The Tyranny Of God. In his book, he argues that if we believe that God truly exists, and his nature is as asserted by the Bible or the Koran, then it is only logical to assume that all laws must reflect God's will. By its very nature, therefore, the rule of God is totalitarian: the exact opposite of democracy.

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RUSH HOUR OF THE GODS*

Meera Nanda

“The world today is as furiously religious as it ever was....Experiments with secularized religions have generally failed; religious movements with beliefs and practices dripping with reactionary supernaturalism have widely succeeded”

Peter Berger, Desecularization of the World

Those looking for evidence to back Peter Berger’s conclusion can do no better than take a closer look at the religious landscape of India, the “crouching tiger” of 21st-century global capitalism.

India today is teeming with millions of educated, relatively well-to-do men and women who enthusiastically participate in global networks of science and technology. The Indian economy is betting its fortunes on advanced research in biotechnology and the drug industry, whose very existence is a testament to the naturalistic and disenchanting understanding of the natural world. And yet a vast majority of these middle-class beneficiaries of modern science and technology continue to believe in supernatural powers supposedly embodied in idols, “god-men” or “god-women,” stars and planets, rivers, trees and sacred animals. By all indications, they treat supernatural beings and powers with utmost earnestness and reverence and go to great lengths to please them in the hopes of achieving their desires.

According to the 2007 State of the Nation survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies among Indians, the level of religiosity has gone up considerably in the past five years. A mere five per cent of respondents said that their religious belief had declined, while 30 per cent said they had become more religious. The same poll found that education and exposure to modern urban life seem to make Indians more, not less, religious: “Urban educated Indians are more religious than their rural and illiterate counterparts ... religiosity has increased more in small towns and cities than in villages.”

Another measurable indicator of rising religiosity is the tremendous rise in pilgrimages or religious tourism. According to a recent study by the National Council for Applied Economic Research, “religious trips account for more than 50 per cent of all package tours, much higher than leisure tour packages at 28 per cent.” The most recent figures show that in 2004, more than 23 million people visited the Lord Balaji temple at Tirpuati, while 17.25 million trekked to the mountain shrine of Vaishno Devi. Here I will focus on Hindus, who make up nearly 85 per cent of India’s population. But they are not the only ones who are becoming more religious: indicators of popular religiosity are rising among Indian Muslims, Christians and Sikhs as well.

Humanist Outlook - Summer, 2009

113

Today's generation of Indian upper and middle classes are not content with the de-ritualised, slimmed-down, philosophised or secular-humanist version of Hinduism that appealed to the earlier generation of elites. They are instead looking for "jagrit" or awake gods who respond to their prayers and who fulfill their wishes— the kind of gods that sociologists Rodney Starke and Roger Finke, authors of *Acts of Faith*, describe as "personal, caring, loving, merciful, close, accessible...all of which can be summed up in a belief that 'there is someone up there who cares'". The textual or philosophical aspects of Sanskritic Hinduism have by no means diminished in cultural prestige: they continue to serve as the backdrop of "Vedic sciences" (as Hindu metaphysics is sold these days), and continue to attract a loyal following of spiritual seekers from India and abroad. But what is changing is simply that it is becoming fashionable to be religious and to be seen as being religious. The new elites are shedding their earlier reticence about openly participating in religious rituals in temples and in public ceremonies like kathas and yagnas. If anything, the ritual dimension is becoming more public and more ostentatious.

Not only are rituals getting more elaborate but many village and working-class gods and goddesses are being adopted by the middle classes, business elites and non-resident Indians – a process of Sanskritisation that has been called a "gentrification of gods". Worship of local gods and goddesses that until recently were associated with the poor, illiterate and lower castes is finding a new home in swank new suburbs with malls and multiplexes. The enormous growth in the popularity of the goddess called Mariamman or Amma in the south and Devi or Mata in the rest of the country is a case in point.

The natural question is why? What is fuelling this middle-class devotion to "lesser" gods, traditionally associated with the unlettered? Devotees themselves provide a fairly cogent explanation: they see these local gods as being far more intimately familiar with, and responsive to, the needs of ordinary people than the "great gods" who live up there in the celestial sphere.

Rather than retiring their gods, as secularisation theory expected, the emerging middle classes in India are remaking them. The local deities who were once considered guardians of the village, and protected against scourges like smallpox, are now being beseeched for blessings for success in an increasingly competitive urban environment.

How to explain this phenomenon? What motivates educated, well-to-do urban sophisticates to continue to believe in miracles and supernatural beings? Social theory has only two standard answers, neither of which fits the Indian data very well.

The first answer has to do with economic well-being. As has been recently shown with great sophistication and care by Pippa Norris and care by

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in their book *Sacred and Secular*, the level of belief in modern, post-industrial societies bears a strong correlation with the level of “existential insecurity”. On mapping religiosity against income data from societies in North America, Europe and Japan, Norris and Inglehart found that the higher the income level, the lower the religiosity as measured by frequency of prayer: in aggregate terms, the poor turn out to be twice as religious as the rich. The data from the United States, for example, shows that two-thirds of the least well-off prayed, compared with 47 per cent of the highest income group. According to this view, religiosity does fall off and people do become more secular in modern industrial economies, except when they are caught on the lower rungs of the economy in those societies that do not provide public welfare.

This explanation does not adequately explain the Indian data. Here we have the case of rising religiosity among the already wealthy and the upwardly mobile, whose level of material well-being is fairly decent even by Western standards.

The second explanation is that the growing religiosity is a defensive reaction to modernisation and Westernisation. Pavan Varma, the author of the much-cited *The Great Indian Middle Class*, treats religion as a refuge for the alienated and lonely urbanites, uprooted from the old, warm little communities they left behind in villages. Varma simply assumes that the transition to modern life in the cities must be traumatic and drive the new middle classes to seek out the consolation of God in the company of fellow believers.

But insecurity and anomie do not appear to be the most salient aspects of what is going on. There is anxiety and insecurity among the newly well-to-do as they face an increasingly competitive economy with declining job security. But there is also a sense of expanding horizons and multiplying opportunities. The upwardly mobile in urban India have, in the words of researcher Maya Warrier, “done well for themselves by seizing the educational and career opportunities that came their way. Their experience of the unprecedented pace and scale of change had resulted not so much in a sense of despair and alienation as in a sense of optimism about multiple opportunities in most spheres of life.”

It is not despair or alienation, but rather ambivalence over their new-found wealth that seems a more plausible explanation of the growing religiosity.

Modern gurus seem to ease this ambivalence by giving new wealth a divine stamp of approval. “To be rich is divine” is the message coming from modern gurus who minister to the upper crust. Swami Dayananda, the guru of successful businessmen and women in Chennai, for example, teaches a business-friendly version of Gita which he sells as “a program for living” or a “plan for life”. Rather than renounce all desire, as Lord Krishna teaches in the

Bhagavad Gita, Dayananda's version of the Gita teaches that "desires are a manifestation of divinity that actuate people to do things." "Practical moksha" does not mean renunciation of these divine gifts but only that they be brought under control of the will. Thus, while claiming to teach the "eternal" message of moksha which aimed at identification with the Godhead, modern gurus dish out advice on how to succeed in business.

Blessing the hyper-consumption of their middle-class followers is only half the story. Modern gurus also seem to help to take the edge off guilt by teaching how to "balance" all that consumerism with spiritual pursuits. Gurus like Mata Amritanandamayi teach that "Western" consumerism creates bad "karmic burden" which can be negated, or at least "balanced", by performing some of the rituals and pujas she prescribes. To put it a bit flippantly, the cure for shopping is more shopping – this time for spiritual products and the services of gurus and priests. Surely a win-win situation for all involved!

There is, however, another factor that is making public expressions of religiosity fashionable, namely the rising levels of triumphalism and nationalism among the upwardly mobile. Polling data from a Pew Global Attitude Survey revealed that as many as 93 per cent of Indian respondents – the highest in the world – agreed with the statement "our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others". In comparison, Chinese, Japanese and even American public opinion was far more self-critical and ambiguous over the superiority of their cultures.

For educated Indians brought up on a steady diet of religious, media and other cultural discourses that constantly package Hindu signs and symbols as the essence of Indian culture, it has become almost second nature to conflate the two. Now that India is becoming an important player in the global market many are beginning to ascribe the country's success to the superiority of "Hindu values". This sentiment is being aggressively promoted by gurus and tele-yogis like Swami Ramdev, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Sai Baba and a host of others. Indeed, the public sphere is replete with these messages of becoming more Hindu in order to become more successful in the global race for money and power.

On the face of it, contemporary popular Hinduism appears to be the very epitome of a dynamic and inventive religious tradition which is changing to keep pace with the changing time. Clearly, all the new gods, god-men/god-women, new temples and rituals add up to an impressive inventory of creative innovations that are allowing men and women to take their gods with them as they step into the heady, though unsettling, world dominated by global corporate capitalism. But there is an underside: the same innovations in religious ritual and dogmas that are enabling the "Great Indian Middle Class" to adjust to global capitalism are also deepening a sense of Hindu chauvinism, and widening the chasm between Hindus and non-Hindu minorities. The banal, everyday

Hindu religiosity is simultaneously breeding a banal, everyday kind of Hindu ultra-nationalism. This kind of nationalism is not openly proclaimed in fatwas, nor does it appear on the election manifestos of political parties. Its power lies in structuring the common sense of ordinary people.

The net result is a new kind of political and nationalistic Hinduism which is invented out of old customs and traditions that people are fond of and familiar with. Because it builds upon deeply felt religiosity, it sucks in even those who are not particularly anti-Muslim or anti-Christian. Religious festivals, temple rituals and religious discourses become so many ways of “flagging” India as a Hindu nation, and India’s cultural superiority as due to its Hindu spirituality.

The best way to describe the banality of Hindu nationalism and the role of religion in it is to show how it works. The example comes from the recent inauguration of Shri Hari Mandir, a new temple that opened in Porbandar in Gujarat in February 2006. The grand sandstone temple and the priest-training school called Sandipani Vidyaniketan attached to it are a joint venture of the Gujarat government, the business house of the Ambanis and the charismatic guru Rameshbhai Oza. The inauguration ceremony of this temple-gurukul complex provides a good example of how Hindu gods end up serving as props for Hindu nationalism and Hindu supremacy. According to the description provided by the organisers themselves, the temple was inaugurated by Bharion Singh Shekhawat, the vice-president of the country, with the infamous chief minister Narendra Modi in attendance. Also in attendance were the widow of Dhirubhai Ambani and the rest of the Ambani clan whose generous financial donations had built the temple. Some 50,000 well-heeled devotees of Oza from India and abroad crowded into the temple precincts to watch the event.

The elected representatives of “secular” India, in their official capacity, prayed before the temple idols – something so routine that it hardly evokes a response from anyone any more. The prayer was followed by the national anthem sung before the gods, followed by recital of the Vedas by the student-priests, followed by a Gujarati folk dance. This was followed by speeches that liberally mixed up the gods and the nation, with quite a bit of rhetoric about the greatness of Hindu “science” thrown in for good measure. Modi, the chief instigator of the 2002 Godhara riots between Hindus and Muslims, spoke glowingly of the “tolerance” and “secularism” of Hinduism. He went on to recommend that yagnas and religious recitals be held all over the country before undertaking any new construction because Hinduism is “inherently ecological”. Next came Mrs Ambani, who urged mixing spirituality with industry. The vice-president, in his turn, spoke of how modern and scientific Hindu traditions were, comparing the gods’ weapons with modern missiles and their vehicles with modern-day helicopters.

The theme of the superiority of ancient Hindu science was taken up a week later when the president of India, Abdus Kalam, came down to the temple-ashram complex to inaugurate its “science museum”, which highlights ancient Hindu discoveries in astronomy/astrology, medicine (ayurveda), architecture (vastu) and such. Without ever questioning what validity the Earth-at-the-centre astronomy/astrology of Aryabhata has in the modern world, the nuclear physicist president went on to claim not only the greatness of antiquity but also the continued relevance of the ancients for “enriching” modern astronomy. The ancients were smoothly turned into the guiding lights of modern science – regardless of the fact that their cosmology has been falsified by it.

This is representative of how India’s state-temple-industrial complex works: the gods become the backdrop, and the traditional puja the medium, for asserting the Hindu-ness of India and the greatness of both. Worship of the gods becomes indistinguishable from the worship of Hindu culture and the Indian nation. Devotees come to listen to hymns sung to gods, but end up worshipping a political ideology – and cannot tell the difference. The cult of nation, furthermore, is simultaneously turned into a cult of “reason” and “science”, without the critical and empirical spirit of science.

Once the beloved and popular gods become identified with the land and its culture, Hindu nationalism becomes an everyday affair. No one has to pass fatwas and there is no need to launch a militant battle against the West. Hindu nationalists have no use for such crude tools. They would rather turn the worship of gods into the worship of the nation and they would rather beat the West by appropriating the West’s strengths in empirical sciences for their own gods. The tragedy is that the religiosity of ordinary believers provides the building blocks for this banal, but far from benign, Hindu nationalism.

Economic globalisation and neo-liberal reforms have created the material and ideological conditions in which a popular and ritualistic Hindu religiosity is growing. Popular religiosity, in turn, is being directed into a mass ideology of Hindu supremacy and Hindu nationalism.

This trend is a symptom of a deeper, more fundamental malaise, namely the failure of secularism. For all its professions of secularism, the Indian state has not developed a stance of either equal indifference to or equal respect for all the many religions of India. It has instead treated the religion of the majority as the civic religion of the Indian nation itself. The result is a deep and widespread Hinduisation of the public sphere, which is only growing under the conditions of globalisation.

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**Source: New Humanist, March/April 2008. Reproduced by permission.*

A TIME TO DARE*

Deep Joshi

*We need to be daring rather than defensive in addressing issues
of widespread poverty and crass inequalities*

Individuals and organisations in the so-called voluntary sector follow a variety of strategies ranging from the ameliorative to the transformational. Underlying these, however, is a shared concern of influencing the future of Indian society and to make it more just and humane so that more and more of our citizens live a life of dignity and purpose in freedom. I believe this underlying vision needs a clearer articulation by all of us in the sector. Where do we think we are headed as a nation, as a society? What kind of future do we envision? What are the objective conditions? What are we working towards? What is a reasonable prognosis for, say, two to five decades hence? What could we do now to secure the future we want?

I believe we are at a stage in our evolution when it is imperative to ask such questions and seek concrete answers instead of assuming those under broad labels such as development for all, prosperity for all, an egalitarian society, etc. It is not just adequate to rue about the state of things and then proceed with actions as if all is well and 'under control'.

It is well beyond the scope of this paper to draw a comprehensive picture of the likely future. I only highlight here the key issues that must inform our actions as individuals and institutions that value freedom, dignity and purpose and want to enhance those with our actions. In doing so, I draw on ideas developed by Robert Chambers and Gordon R Conway in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century, Discussion Paper 296, Institute of Development Studies, February 1992.

The trebling of India's population over the past 50 years and the prognosis for continued growth through much of this century calls for a basic reassessment and explicit statement of what material prosperity is likely. That alone will inform the choice of institutions and human processes to ensure a climate in which freedom, dignity and purpose remain achievable objectives for all.

Moderate Well-being

Given the overall prognosis for material progress and population growth, it is clear that a large segment of the population in India will have to do with very modest levels of material well-being in the foreseeable future. I believe we tend to shy away from speculating about the limits of the modernisation and growth paradigm. It somehow seems only fair and, therefore, the contrary, unfair and even shameful thought to assume that everyone will sooner or later catch up and enjoy the kind of material well-being associated with the modern, urban middle class. Yet a little reasoned thought and analysis will show that widespread material prosperity is least likely. It is not merely a question of time. It is not only a question of what the economically feasible rates of growth are and, therefore,

how much time it will take to 'pull everyone up', but also a sociological, political and ecological question of sustainable growth.

In a society endowed with grossly unequal distribution of resources and capability, there will be many who will enjoy unprecedented prosperity as our economy grows, spurred by the unrelenting human search for material well-being. This is all too apparent already. In this scenario, unless there is a widely shared sense of equity and fairness, it will be increasingly difficult to keep the social fabric together. Therefore, our actions must be informed by a concern to enhance the notion of fairness and certainly not diminish it.

Touchstone of Equity

The idea of equity and fairness has both material and psychological dimensions. That one is able to create choices and influence phenomena that affect one's well-being is as, if not more, important as material well-being. That everyone has reasonable opportunities to affect one's future regardless of one's roots is basic to the idea of equity. This I believe is an issue that the sector must use as a touchstone in developing strategies and actions. Only if we do so will we come up with alternatives to current normative frameworks.

Capability has always affected human well-being. Spurred by the growth in technology, heightened interconnectedness and the pressure on resources, it has now become a critical determinant of human well-being. This will become more acute every passing day. There has been unprecedented growth in human capability in India, as indeed globally.

We know more about the natural phenomena that affect our lives and that we seek to harness to enhance well-being and limit misery. We have developed new ways of doing things and organising our actions. More people than ever before have access to such knowledge. Capability goes beyond such knowledge. It includes one's perception of place in society, one's ability to influence the world one is affected by, the ability to make choices, to adapt, experiment, innovate, to build networks and to contribute to others' well-being.

The growth in capability in our society has only been matched by unprecedented inequality in its distribution. While more Indians than ever before now have the capability to make a place for themselves anywhere in the world, large populations are poorly endowed with the capability to affect even their immediate environments. Many such as the tribal people and those earlier dependent on traditional institutions have, in fact, suffered erosion in their capabilities.

Our choices of strategies and actions, therefore, must be informed by an abiding concern to enhance the capabilities of the people. This implies that our work must focus on building people's capabilities rather than merely ameliorating their present situation. More importantly, it implies that we seek developmental frameworks that build on people's capabilities, potential or actual, rather than the other way around.

The development process in India during the past half-century bears a deep imprint of the concern to modernise a 'backward society'. Often explicitly, and always implicitly, it has meant catching up with the so-called developed nations. Catching up means, first and foremost, materially, followed by a fair deal for all as implicit in the democratic and socialist pattern of society we have sought to create.

Inevitably, catching up also means clearing up the backlog. It means quickly educating the armies of illiterates, never mind the purpose and efficacy of the education our schools peddle; producing enough food quickly to stave off starvation, never mind the inability of poor people to buy that food; providing health care services to prevent epidemics, diseases and ill health quickly, never mind the motivation of the service providers and the professional and sociological walls that separate them from the poor, and so on. The sheer size of the slate that needs to be cleaned means the state feels impelled to become the cleaner itself.

Cleaning Messy Slates

The state as the provider of services—the cleaner of messy slates—and as the harbinger of development has thus seen unprecedented growth. This unprecedented turn in human—especially Indian—history has had several undesired implications besides unimaginable erosion in quality, capability and legitimacy of the institution of the state itself. In the arena of institutions, the state has been like the proverbial banyan tree. As the state took upon itself the responsibility of delivering development, other institutions have remained stunted or have even withered away.

Thus it is the state that installs a hand pump for drinking water and the citizens who drink from it do nothing for its upkeep. The state employs over three million teachers but cannot get them to teach, leave alone educate. Citizens readily empty their pockets to bribe government functionaries but cannot collect small sums to repair a school building, a village road or a leaky pond. In short, much of the development fostered by the state-led 'catching up' paradigm is institutionally unsustainable and many actions of the state have eroded other institutions.

I believe much social and political energy in the near future will be wasted in folding back the institutionally unsustainable carpet of development unfolded by the state. The process is already underway. The emerging institutional vacuum also implies that it is not enough to come up with bright new ideas or technologies to solve society's problems. Institutional mechanisms must be created to ensure that the ideas are translated into sustainable action on a large scale.

In this scenario of a state unable to cope and on the retreat, stunted institutions and powerless and emaciated citizenry, voluntary organisations must work to promote institutionally sustainable processes of development. In

concrete terms, it implies that people must play a central role and take charge of the development process themselves. How do we address these challenges? There are no easy answers and I certainly have none. I can, however, offer a few pointers that may aid our continuing search for answers.

Changing Mindsets

Foremost in my view is the need for us to radically change our self-perception. The roles and identities of key institutions, especially the state and the market, are undergoing radical changes. So must ours. It is imperative that we get out of the 'interstices' and 'on the margins' mindset. I did not believe such a mindset was appropriate even when the state was the pre-eminent 'development agency'. It certainly is not appropriate now because the state itself is throwing up its hands.

Isolated action on the margins can hardly affect such monumental issues as equity, capability and institutional sustainability. How can we achieve salience if we continue to operate in our little enclaves on the margins? I believe we need to take a longer-term view of our work and develop broader perspectives. The issues I have highlighted are transformational and call for the involvement of an ever-widening circle of citizens. Should the sector not see itself as a vehicle for enabling more and more citizens to apply themselves to the issues of widespread poverty and crass inequity? I believe it is a time to be daring rather than defensive. If lawful action to create a fairer society is not 'mainstream' in a democracy, what is?

To be in the mainstream, we must first set very high standards for ourselves. I believe there is much scope to improve the quality of internal governance and to inculcate a culture of transparency. We require much higher standards of performance and effectiveness. We need to be far more reflective and critical of the 'what and how' of our work. Our actions must demonstrate our motives, rather than the other way around.

Widening our circle, involving more and more citizens, proactively and methodically, is another strategy we need to follow. Little is known about the sector and much that is known is biased and not very flattering. We do little to change these perceptions, expecting that our 'good work' will eventually stand out. For example, we do little to use the media or inform the vast numbers of young people in schools and colleges about our work. We need to work to change that and not remain confined to our own organisational preoccupations.

Alternative Paradigms

Another area where there is need to be daring is that of the perspectives and paradigms of development itself. We need to develop and carry through alternative paradigms of development. Much creative work has been done in the sector that has the promise to redefine basic propositions about education,

continued on page 125

Book Review

Ethics in Governance — Innovations, Issues and Instrumentalities*

AP Saxena

This is a timely volume of selected essays by Prof. Arora, by 'now a widely known scholar of public administration. In his illuminating introduction, the editor has raised a seminal question about "creating a new moral order" to secure probity in public affair. Yet as he rightly stresses the burden shall be on the actors since systems cannot change unless the men who manage public affairs are keen to change them.

The opening piece in the volume — Sardar Patel's memorable address—delivered some four months before the country's independence, sounds as important today as when it was delivered. The core emphasis of administration as the late leader explained was: 'The duty to treat the common man as your own — to feel yourself to be one of them — to learn not to despise or to disregard them.' Obviously it demanded 'discipline, impartially and incorruptibility of administration'. He was emphatic in his remarks that 'a civil servant cannot afford to, and must not take part in politics.' Indeed golden words of wisdom which subsume the larger canvas of ethics.

Today morality and integrity are more than dominating the entire society which demands that public office should be treated as trust. One cannot mandate honesty. The rule of law can alone defeat the perverse mind. As the editor recalls the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 'The line separating good and evil passes not between states and classes but through the middle of every heart.' Today the focus has to be on the common people, especially the weaker sections. Everyone needs to be reminded that 'about one-half of the population is less than thirty years.' The reviewer is tempted to add that in this demographic profile, the youth comprising the majority will be more demanding, restive, even impatient in demanding efficient, ethical, honest governance.

Ethics in the context of governance emerges a set of standards that help guide conduct. It is a system based on morals enveloping all concerned. Since early 17 century, ethics has been accepted as the 'Science of Morals, rules of conduct, the science of human duty.' Thus, ethics is treated as moral principles. Or, if ethics is a bundle of morals concerns, it will emphasize a desirable, expected response.' Thus extending it to the unexceptional concerns of humanism, individuals serving in the process of governance should unquestionably be sensitive and compassionate. Their compassion 'should invoke sensibilities to understand, even feel the pain of others'.

All in all, it is a scholarly contribution seeking to demystify the concept and implied content of ethics in the wide arena of humanism where governance happens. In specific terms, it may not be a speculative quest since ethics

**Ethics in Governance: Innovations, Issues and Instrumentalities. Ramesh K Arora, Aalekh Publications, Jaipur, 2008. pp 243.*

is not only a set of values loaded with morals.

A worth reading, well produced volume, dealing with contemporary issues of governance, often discussed without due concern for values, morals and humanism. The discipline of public administration shall stand enriched by the efforts of the distinguished editor who has succeeded in enlarging the conceptual domain of ethics with concern for human issues.

AP Saxena is a noted administrator and scholar

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Continued from page 123

health, governance, livelihoods and the management of the commons and basic services. Rarely do these 'interesting experiments' create new social constructs. and work towards forest management without forest departments? For example, can we not develop an alternative system of education so that people themselves will take charge rather than remain dependant on the state and tied to the 'catching up' paradigm? Can we develop and carry through a construct of local governance outside the 'three-tier' framework? Can we imagine and work towards forest management without forest departments?

Perspectives about development are unlikely to change unless our views about people's potential and capability change. We need to build on people's capability and have faith in their capability. After all, little progress can be made unless people themselves take charge of their own development. There are plenty of examples to demonstrate that poor people can manage complex human and technological processes. Yet many among us shy away from handing over. For example, we know poor people spend significant sums of money to get poor quality health services and education. Yet we would balk at the idea of designing services that require poor people to pay, at least to their capability. As a result, our approaches often are no different from those of the state agencies whom we rightly criticise.

Finally, I think we need to be much more outward looking than we are. Very few among us build bridges with agencies of the state, the market and even with each other. For example, many among us harbour very negative views about panchayati raj institutions, leave alone collaborating with them. The refrain is that panchayats are dominated by vested interests. It is perhaps true. But how would they change if we do not work with them and create mechanisms to enable poor people get a toehold? After all, the idea of development itself demands that poor people be able to effectively deal with the institutions of society. How would that happen if the agents of change themselves work inside little cocoons?

Source: NewsReach Dec 2008

Deep Joshi is a pioneer in the field of rural development, and a Founder of Pradan. He has recently received the Magsasay award for his outstanding contribution to poverty alleviation.

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HAVING DREAMS AND REALISING THEM*

Deepmala

In my childhood, I heard about the discrimination that my mother had to go through because of being born in a family whose traditional occupation in Hindu caste society was scavenging human waste. She was married off in her childhood. She did not want to work but was forced by her parents-in-law to follow the traditional occupation of cleaning night soil and carrying it to a deserted place. My father never wanted my mother to do this work. This happened when he was travelling to look for a job. When he returned home after a month, to his utter disappointment, he found my mother doing the 'work'. My father objected to this but his parents were adamant that they could not feed an unemployed daughter-in-law. Angry at their response, my father revolted and started living at my mother's parents' house. Instead of cleaning toilets and carrying night soil, my father got her a job of domestic work at the home of several families in Mohammadabad. My father is working with a hospital but my mother still works as a domestic help. However, she is happy with it, as she has escaped from a disgraceful profession.

We are five sisters and three brothers. Being the eldest, I have to take care of all my siblings, and do all the domestic chores as well as go to school. As a result I practically dropped out of school. But before I ended up becoming completely illiterate, I came in touch with the Social Development Foundation (SDF) (an IHEU-supported Humanist organisation working in North India – Ed.), which helped me to restart my education. SDF was working in Mohammedabad for the liberation of the community from the profession of scavenging and raising the issue of their rights. I felt that given an opportunity to study, I would be able to do justice to my self and therefore I accepted their offer. Since then I have never looked back.

Because of my association with the SDF, I've received unprecedented opportunities including attending leadership development programmes and meetings with activists across the country. These visits have exposed me to various new realities of life. Today, I am strong in my convictions and ideas and want to fly high.

But then success has a price. As long as I was a docile, domesticated child, my parents were very happy for me. But today, thanks to the SDF and its founder, Mr. Rawat, I am developing and growing stronger. And this makes my family insecure, since I'm challenging established myths and ways of doing things. We are chained by our rituals and cultural practices. I've discovered that girls like me get our family's and community's support only when there is

an 'outside' threat, that is, a danger from a source outside our community. But there is unanimous suppression when the challenge is from within. My parents would feel happy if I followed the social norms, got married according to their choice and played the role of a mother and obedient wife. Though my parents claim that they treat me like my brothers, the fact is that no boy will cook at home, take care of the siblings and follow the dictates of the family like a girl. And his not doing all these things isn't considered 'abnormal', but if a girl doesn't follow these customs, she is likely to be viewed as a 'bad' character, and uncultured.

I know there are a lot of challenges for a Dalit girl. As she decides the course of her future action, there will be caste people targeting her, there will be her own community's cultural moral police, who will question her dignity and integrity, but those who have decided to dedicate themselves to social justice must break these chains. They cannot remain bound to old ideas. I believe if the family is hindering one's growth then there's no point in clinging to it. Why should girls like me be enslaved inside the house and pretend to feel happy whenever there's a visitor? I have a right to be angry and unhappy. In this age, when we should be using science for our modernisation, I feel pity for those parents who remain mired in superstition and traditional beliefs. They kill their daughter's freedom and feel ashamed when she goes out, and they create obstacles to her emancipation. They believe that girls like me are meant only to marry and rear children. But we must challenge this notion. I'm ready to go ahead if given a chance. I want to study and become a role model for my own community so that I can work for social change. I can only say that everyone can achieve something worthwhile, given an opportunity. We must dream and work for a world where there is no discrimination based on gender, caste, religion or region. Let us aim high to develop a Humanist world, full of life and liberty. Let there be equal opportunities for all so that there are no racial prejudices and hatred in our minds.

Source: International Humanist News, November, 2008

Ms Deepmala is a student of Class XII and working closely with the Social Development Foundation, Delhi

(This article has been translated by Vidya Bhushan Rawat – Ed.)

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THE KANYAKUMARI DECLARATION

*Statement of
The National Convention on
“The Politics of Nuclear Energy and Resistance,”
June 4-6, 2009, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India*

We, the undersigned organizations, peoples' movements and concerned citizens committed to building a world free from nuclear exploitation, nuclear business, nuclear power and nuclear weapons, do hereby declare the following:

1. In the context of the unprecedented threats facing the world due to global warming and the rapid depletion of conventional energy sources, the nuclear establishment is most opportunistically pushing nuclear energy as a climate-friendly energy source. However, all the activities associated with nuclear power generation - the mining and processing of uranium, the building of nuclear power stations involving huge amounts of cement and steel, the long construction process, the decommissioning of plants and the handling of radioactive waste - are highly unsafe and expensive, and cause enormous climate-changing pollution. Nuclear energy is not cheap, safe, clean or sustainable. It also does not offer a solution to our energy problems.
2. The government of India is aggressively expanding nuclear power generation and enhancing nuclear business with countries such as the United States, Russia, France, Kazakhstan and others without any regard for norms of democratic decision making. We express outrage over the fact that the newly-elected UPA government is conveniently choosing to interpret the verdict of the recent elections as a mandate for nuclearization.
3. A highly populated country like India does have an increasing need for energy. But for that very reason the energy options we choose must be economical, sustainable, safe and environmentally-friendly. Moreover energy distribution must be made more equitable, just and efficient.
4. In India, huge resources have already been wasted on nuclear power projects that are expensive, inefficient, hazardous and also potentially catastrophic. The Indian nuclear establishment has expressed interest in amending the Indian Atomic Energy Act, 1962 to facilitate privatization. While private companies will make money, Indian taxpayers and ordinary citizens will bear the cost of dealing with all the liabilities such as nuclear waste, decommissioning, possible accidents, public health issues and other dangerous consequences.

5. The workings of the nuclear establishment in the country are shrouded in mystery and protected by draconian laws of official secrecy in complete contradiction to our constitutional right to information. Legislation as secretive and repressive as the Indian Atomic Energy Act, 1962 should have no place in a democracy.
6. Nuclear energy establishments such as the Indian Rare Earths (IRE) in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, Kalpakkam, Rawatbhatta and Jadugoda have already created major health problems for local citizens.
7. India's nuclear program has been and continues to be vigorously resisted by the people of this country whose struggles in the past have stopped two nuclear power stations – Peringome and Kothamangalam – from coming up. This convention declares total support and solidarity to the struggles of people resisting the Koodankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu. It also declares support and solidarity to people in all other parts of the country such as Jadugoda, Meghalaya, Haripur and Jaitapur who are struggling against uranium mining and nuclear power plants.

In view of the above, we, the gathered participants of the National Convention on “The Politics of Nuclear Energy and Resistance” demand that:

1. **Immediate compensation and health facilities be provided to people suffering from radiation illnesses such as cancer, genetic disorders, skin diseases, reproductive health problems and other major health effects caused by nuclear establishments, nuclear mining and fuel sites and other allied nuclear industries and activities.**
2. **All persons living in the vicinity of nuclear establishments and nuclear fuel sites be declared potentially radiation-affected and that clear-cut mechanisms be evolved for appropriate compensation.**
3. **All activities related to the Koodankulam Nuclear Power Plant be immediately stopped.**
4. **The proposed nuclear power plants at Haripur (West Bengal), Mithi Viridi (Gujarat), Madban (Maharashtra), Pitti Sonapur (Orissa) and Kovada (Andhra Pradesh) be immediately scrapped.**
5. **The draconian Indian Atomic Energy Act, 1962 be revoked forthwith.**
6. **The Right to Information (RTI) Act be amended to apply to all aspects of the nuclear establishment.**

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NEWS AND NOTES

Iranians 'execute Sunni rebels'

Iran has executed some of the 14 convicted members of a Sunni rebel group, state media says.

The semi-official Fars news agency has reported that the convicts were hanged in prison.

Tehran says the men are members of the Jundollah (God's Soldiers) Sunni group, which is blamed for a series of attacks across the predominantly Shia country. Iran's news agencies had said that the provincial judiciary had invited residents and families of Jundollah's victims to watch the executions.

Jundollah has claimed repeated attacks in the province, including a bombing in May in a Shia mosque in Zahedan that killed 25 people, Iranian media say.

Human rights groups accuse Iran of making excessive use of the death penalty but Tehran insists it is an effective deterrent that is used only after a lengthy judicial process.

Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8149014.stm

Sikhs pay Rs 2 crore as 'tax' to Taliban in Pak

Islamabad: Members of Pakistan's minority Sikh community living in the restive Aurakzai tribal region have paid Rs 2 crore as 'tax' to the Taliban after militants forcibly occupied some of their homes and kidnapped a Sikh leader.

The Taliban had demanded Rs 5 crore as jizya, a tax levied on non-Muslims living under Islamic rule, but the militants finally settled for Rs 2 crore. After the amount was paid on Thursday, the militants vacated the homes they had taken over and released Sikh leader Saiwang Singh, officials in the tribal region near the northwestern city of Peshawar were quoted as saying by the Daily Times newspaper.

The officials said the Taliban had announced that the Sikhs were now free to live anywhere in Aurzakzai Agency. The militants also announced they would protect the community, saying that no one would harm them after they had paid jizya. Sikhs who had left the area would now return to their homes and resume their business, the officials said. The militants had occupied at least 10 homes of Sikhs in Qasimkhel village on Tuesday. About 35 Sikh families have been living in Qasimkhel for many years.

The Taliban demand for jizya was resolved at a jirga or council held yesterday through the efforts of local tribal elders. The militants had said the Sikhs should pay jizya in accordance with Shariah or Islamic law.

Source: <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/sikhs-pay-rs-2-crore-as-tax-to-taliban-in-pak/90471-2.html>

Plight of Christians in Orissa (India)

INDIA'S north-eastern state Orissa continues to be in grip of gory anti-Christian riots. Scores of Christians, including some nuns have been burnt alive. Countless churches, houses and shops have been gutted. Even Christian orphanages have not been spared. To justify massacre of hapless Christians, Hindus spread the canard that eminent Hindu leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, had been killed by Christians on Saturday night. Kandhamal district was the epicentre of the communal riots. Most of the Christians were killed there. In the village Barakhama Hindus attacked Christian dwellings with guns and bombs.

Source: www.persecution.in/orissa_persecution_india

Mantras to aid Agriculture

In response to an unstarred question by the BJP's Shreegopal Vyas in the Rajya Sabha, Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar also said that the research has shown crop diseases to have been treated by the chanting of *mantras*.

“Yes, we have observed better crops prospects when the *bhasmas* were integrated with the other components of organic farming. At present, these are only observation from our experiments and not a scientific confirmation. But we hope to publish our controlled observation within a year and a scientific paper on it few year later after proper scientific validation,” DR. Y S Paul, Head of the Department of Organic Agriculture at the University, told the *Indian Express* over the phone.

Source: Indian Express, 27 July, 2009

Untouchability alive in rural areas

Untouchability is alive in the countryside through fear of law and rising Dalit assertion seem to have curbed its crude manifestations. These are the findings of a survey by National Law School, Bangalore, to study the impact of Protections of Civil Rights Act on untouchability. The study was commissioned by the Union social justice minister.

Villages are far from being zero-untouchability zones as found in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, MP, UP, Rajasthan and West Bengal.

As many as 516 of the 648 Dalits questioned said they were not allowed to enter temples while 151 were said they were not allowed to take procession of their deities.

Around 16% of non-Dalit questioned conceded SC's were barred from temples activities. Another 13% refused to comment, showing the bias continues to be strong.

Source: Subodh Ghildiyal, Times Of India, 27 July, 2009

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