

# Responsible Citizens of a Peace Super Power

## *An Agenda for Youth in India through Social Harmony*

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### Introduction

Civilisations, Nations and Societies at different times in the evolution of human history have played different roles to influence the rest of the world and the march of global destiny. The long standing Indian civilisation has many times contributed and shaped human history. Today we find that we are yet again gaining in stature and significance to play an important role in the changing international scene.

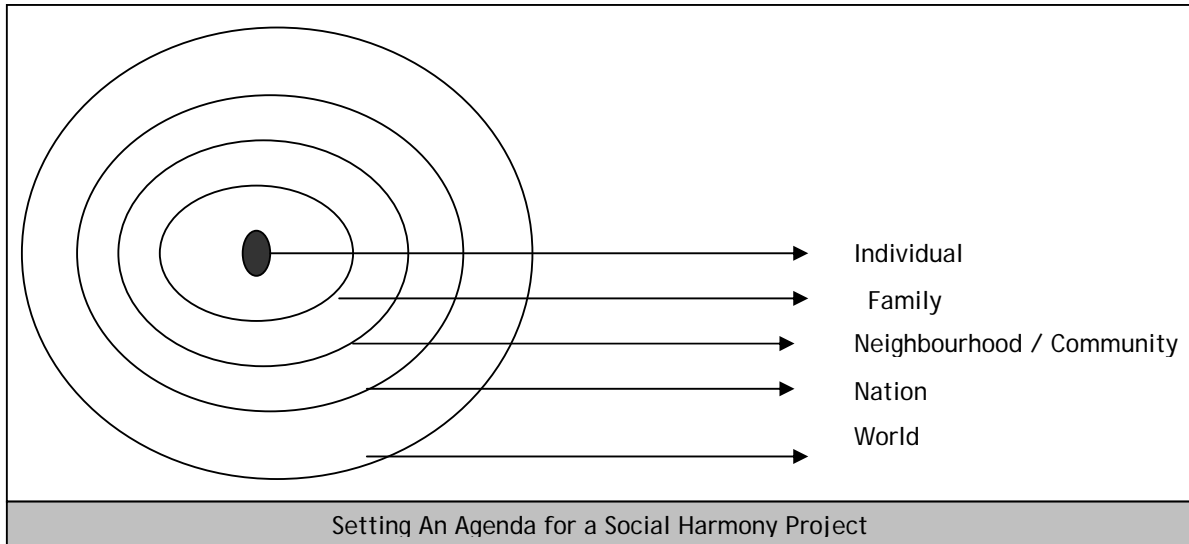
The recognition for India as an emerging economic power and a centre of vast skill based manpower capable of competing and out performing people from other parts of the globe has come through consistent efforts and excellence in performance by generations of people amidst difficult circumstances.

For the coming generations this provides extra ordinary opportunities both in terms of choice of areas and locations of work and in terms of the amount of resources that they can access and avail of for achieving their aspirations. However, this also places in their hands the important and significant responsibility of contributing to the national and international well being in terms of its safety, security, health, commerce, societal norms, values and knowledge.

Such a responsibility to be effectively disposed requires a clear understanding of our strengths and limitations as a society and harmonising of the strengths while overcoming the limitations. Our Youth today, need to set before them an agenda to harmonise their individual and collective energies, a project in which they are a player as much as a beneficiary. In this article, we look at a method of developing such an individual agenda. This article is addressing the Youth and those who are working with Youth programmes, particularly in our educational institutions - schools and colleges.

## A Harmony Project

It is important that we start with an approach and follow a common base and understanding of ourselves and our society if we were to set ourselves an agenda of harmonising such forces. Our understanding of our society has to start with ourselves, our family, neighbourhood, community and nation. Starting a harmonising project from within oneself is a process of strengthening from within. Hence we will start from ourselves and work outwards, at each level we will try to understand the unique strengths and advantages our society, nation and knowledge systems provide us both through the traditional ways and through the modern developments and what we can contribute to the benefit of our nation and the world through them.



### Harmony at the Individual Level

As individuals living in complex time periods, our understanding of ourselves is very complex, varied and often crowded. Some of us tend to perceive and treat ourselves and others as a complex system that is ordered on scientific lines, where multiple systems function as independent units adding to the whole system. Others tend to treat the body and mind as a complex machine that performs a whole lot of functions. Such people tend to interpret our body and mind and their problems on technical lines as something that can be 'fixed' not unlike a motor or a computer. Others try to interpret human body and mind in terms of its beauty, the functions that it performs as per its aesthetic value and the shape of the body and the formation of a thought process as an artistic expression. Whatever may be our understanding of the human body and mind, the important part is its upkeep.

"You will understand the Bhagavat Gita better with your biceps, your muscles a little stronger" says Swami Vivekananda<sup>1</sup>, the great Indian sage. The stress in physical well being and upkeep of ones' physical health has been very high in India since long. India has the advantage of being on the forefront of understanding the upkeep of the human body through yoga and its related health systems of ayurveda, siddha, etc. The benefits of yoga and ayurvedic system of health care are today well recognised and need no special emphasis. **For any Indian, the beginning of the process of harmonising forces should**

<sup>1</sup> Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol3. pg. 242

start at a personal level with a preliminary understanding and practice of yoga in day to day life.

This includes ingestion of healthy and nutritive food of which we have in abundance. Currently, there is a wide awareness amongst youth on the ill effects of certain types of food, which are less nutritive and not healthy for the body, appropriately called the "junk food". Such food is ingested by people who treat their bodies as dustbins instead of temples that the ancient Indian wisdom envisaged it to be.

A healthy body in a healthy mind is an old saying. It is not enough to have a healthy body if one were to not utilise it in a purposeful manner. The development of the mind is equally important, it is in the mental development that we gain focus and develop our thought processes.

Mind development has various facets; our education only contributes towards the development of references through which we interpret the world and what happens in the world. This it provides through arts and sciences and apart from explaining the world also equips us with the tools for us to interact with it. However this is not enough if we were to become a global power, we need to equip ourselves with other skills. Concentration, observation, awareness, empathy, all these are not part of our curriculum, but, essential qualities for future global leaders.

Mind development is done through adopting early discipline and through ingestion of healthy 'food' for the mind. Just as the food we consume shape our body and bodily functions, the information we ingest into our mind shapes our mind and ensures its healthy function. Information for the mind is often what we read, what we see, what we listen to. This again is dependent on our environment - the company we keep and the environment we seek play a part in ensuring that we have the right inputs for our minds.

We live in an age of information deluge. Selective ingestion of information has become all the more necessary to ensure that our minds are kept focussed and sharp. Today with the spread of technology and availability of Internet, it is possible to form virtual networks and be part of groups that discuss and interact on various levels even from remote locations. Such technologies can be used to ensure that one is only ingesting the kind of information that one seeks and weed out unnecessary and often 'junk' information that is spread through mass media, particularly the visual media. **It is important that the future global leaders consider their mind time very valuable and only intake healthy information and company.**

### **Harmony with the Family**

The family with whom we live, into which we are born is our immediate environment, it often determines the nature of our habits. It is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our own families, benefit from its strength and try to eliminate its weaknesses.

*'Mata Pita Guru Devo'* is an old Indian adage; we in India place much significance on the family system and the family values and culture. Traditionally, joint families that consist of 4 generations living under one roof are not uncommon even till recent times in India. However, the growth of urban centres has ensured that the size of houses has grown small and with that the number of people living in them also has decreased, so nuclear families consisting only of 3-4 people have become the norm. Even in rural village centres, this has become a norm according to some recent studies.

Under such circumstances, young people are placed in a position where they need to take responsibility for their own studies and knowledge development at a very young age. Reposed with such responsibilities, the youth should realise the advantages of traditional family systems and try to compensate for its loss. Traditional families that had people from many generations had a natural way of imparting knowledge, which at times ensure that people adopt similar professional interest. Traditionally, children learnt the skills of their family occupation from their elders, got involved with the family occupation even while they are young through observing and helping their parents. Even today, this is most visible in agriculture, in weaving, carpentry, and other similar productive and labour intensive work that have been practiced for long. In such occupations, the involvement of the children is, it is often considered the best form of apprenticeship that the children could learn from. **It is important that young people realise the value of such apprenticeship and try to learn any occupational labour as an apprentice during their holidays.**

The other form of learning in the traditional family systems is through direct transfer of knowledge by listening, observing and understanding the world through the eyes of elders as they interpret the world and the way they have understood it. Grandma's story telling sessions are some of the fondest memories that many who grew up such family sessions carry with them. Grandma's recipes, grandma's home remedies, etc. are all ways of remembering much knowledge on health systems and living styles that were part of a particular family tradition and that have handed down to the next generations for further enhancement, upkeep and transmission further on. Today often such family knowledge sources are not available and instead compensated through mass media, particularly the visual media. However mass media have their own limitations and can never compensate for the bonding that is created with people and places in the process of learning. **We need to interact with elders, particularly some of the elders in their own families and understand from them the folk stories, local knowledge, puranas, skills and traditional recipes.**

Many traditional knowledge systems in India have been transmitted and practiced through the families. Hence families often tend to be a great contributor to society and welfare of the community around it and provide valuable service to humanity. It is such families that have in any places held together societies from crumbling by being the Trustees of all local wealth and being the guardians and patrons of many of the locals. The third priority of the youth in developing a harmony project with the family is to ensure that there be a method of understanding the family and its role in the society, the institutions that have been created by the family and ensuring it functions for the benefit of the larger society. This the youth has to do through not merely understanding the strengths, but, **also being an active member of the family, in contribution towards the maintenance and furthering of such family strengths.**

## Harmony with the local community

The definition of community in India is wide and varied and much debated. For the purpose of this article, we assume a community to be a group of families / individuals sharing a common identity, either geographically or through a shared cultural identity.

Often the immediate neighbourhood is the best community that one can relate to, this is the same set of people one grows up with and understands as the world in ones' early years. They have an impact on the life of individuals and the way we perceive the world. In India, village communities are much more clearly defined than the urban communities.

It is not just the people alone constitute the immediate community, this could often include the local plants, animals and birds, festivals, customs, forest areas, temples of different religions, local water bodies - rivers, streams and ponds, major local occupation and activity around which life revolves, all these and more constitute the immediate neighbourhood and community.

Diversity is most pronounced at the level of the communities. Families could be at times similar in terms of their aspirations, their understanding, etc. But communities in India for long have created and held forth their own identities, sometimes to the benefit of all and sometimes to the overall weakness of the society. But the fact cannot be denied that strong community identities have been forever created and held very sacred by many parts of India. Today, amidst the modernisation and technical advancements, many such community identities that go back for centuries are still maintained, many have undergone significant changes through the ages due to political, social and cultural changes, some old identities have been exchanged for new ones, there are other new identities created under completely new set of circumstances, there are old communities, hesitantly shedding their identities for new ones. **For us to understand and harmonise the identity of India, it is essential to understand the diverse community identities and the underlying values that unite them.**

The strengths of the community are the knowledge that they retain and sustain, the institutions that they have built which often constitute the security for the entire community, the safety they provide to all its constituent members, including plants and animals, the sense of belonging that it provides to its members and the access to resources that it makes available for anyone within the community. In modern economical terms, these community strengths have been called as social capital, community knowledge base, social security net, consumer protection, social justice, etc.

Across the world many such communities have suffered in the recent decades with the rapid commercialisation of all knowledge systems and all forms of flora and fauna for commercial exploitation purposes. With the disturbance of the community systems, its knowledge and culture begins the destruction of the local flora and fauna as its conservation and protection provided by the local community is no longer available.

In tribal areas in the Eastern Ghats, certain animals are held sacred totems by specific communities and they would not hunt these animals at any cost. This ensured that the community took ownership and was responsible for the forest and all forms of forest life around them, but, with the price on commercial terms being placed on the life of such animals, such sacredness has slowly been eroded from amidst communities. This has resulted in many of them not merely questioning the value of these sacred totems, but, also participating in its eventual destruction.

An American sociologist visiting India enquired with the local scholar, "what do you do with people who are mentally disturbed or ill, you don't seem to have enough homes in which they could be kept and treated?" The Indian counterpart replied that such people are not relegated to asylums or homes and in traditional Indian societies they are absorbed in some level at the larger community. They may find a place in extended family set-up and eventually find a way of making a life. The American was astonished about this, "if not for any other reasons, this alone is enough for you to retain and sustain such community bondings", he said, "we in America spend much just in maintaining such people in government run homes at a phenomenal cost to the government"<sup>2</sup>.

When community knowledge and understanding of nature and traditional skills are nurtured and canalised instead of being abused and exploited, they not only promote an over all development of the community but also contribute towards furthering community bonding, many civil society organisations and government agencies are working towards getting such initiatives organised across the country. The *valayar* community of herb gatherers is such a case in the Natham region of Tamilnadu. This community consists of people who traditionally used to hunt for snakes in forests and had a good knowledge of the forest land. They also gathered herbs and were aware of the availability of different beneficial herbs in the forest. Currently, they have been organised into a company of herb gatherers, taught on how to gather herbs without damaging the forest land and also sustain the herbs available. Today they benefit from the knowledge and its product<sup>3</sup>.

These examples are just the tip of the ice-berg; each community has its own unique practice and knowledge. In a survey across India that involved more than 4000 communities, it was found that on an average each community has knowledge and practices about 5.3 occupations out of which 3.5 are new and 1.3 are traditional<sup>4</sup>. The vast amount of knowledge that they have accumulated over a millennia in various spheres of life through such practices have in them the potential to fuel a vibrant economy.

Technological advancement from around the world has placed amidst such communities newer devices and they have adopted these too for their own benefit. Today in many parts of India, farmers get better prices for their produce because they have the access to internet and are able to find out the nearest market from which they can get better returns for their produce<sup>5</sup>. Earlier they used to sell the produce to the first trader whom they came by and were subjected to much exploitation. **Youth involved in the social harmony project need to be aware of the latest advancements in the technical spheres and how to harness them to address long standing problems in the society.**

Yes, when communities are disturbed consistently through invasions and they are brought under alien rule, they do tend to become deprived of all personal value and slowly loose on their knowledge systems and traditional practices. The resource base getting eroded systematically as it happened in the British times almost pushed many such knowledge systems and traditional practices to the verge of extinction. Unfortunately, India had to be subjected to such invasion and depravation for over 500 years. This has resulted in a survival mentality; where many communities try to hold on to their knowledge as a source of power and try to ingratiate themselves to the powers of the day at the same time intimidate others. This results in a stratified society, in such the practice of inequality

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<sup>2</sup> Personal experience narrated by Sri. A.V. Balasubramaniam, Director, Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems ([www.ciks.org](http://www.ciks.org))

<sup>3</sup> More information on this initiative can be had from the Covenant Centre for Development (CCD), Madurai, ([www.ccd.org.in](http://www.ccd.org.in))

<sup>4</sup> Vol. I, "People of India" Project by the Anthropological Survey of India

<sup>5</sup> More information on the benefits of information and communication technology for the common people can be had from [www.bytes4all.net](http://www.bytes4all.net) and [www.tenet.res.in](http://www.tenet.res.in)

gets ingrained into the social order. Such occurrences happen in every society and civilisation when they go through oppressive times of alien invasion and rule. Every nation that goes through such a practice makes efforts to come out of such a state through a joint effort involving the entire population, fuelled by their collective strengths and moving forward to establish a society that is dictated by its core values and political order. India declared herself a democratic secular state when she became a republic thereby asserting her core values of mutual respect and equality to all.

When a reporter queried Mahatma Gandhi on whether India will now achieve Swaraj a few days before the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 1947, he replied that having been under British rule for over 150 years, it would take us about 75 years to rid our body politics of the poison of slavery and achieve true Swaraj.

**Harmonising community / neighbourhood forces involves a combination of historical understanding of the community, its role in the current political and social milieu, its strengths and weaknesses.** Once we know these through a thorough study, we are in a position to harness the same through our social harmony project.

### Harmony at the National level

India is a new nation formed through an old identity. 'Unity in diversity' as the hall mark of Indian civilisation has been an often quoted phrase. India as a nation is a rare unity of an extremely diverse people coming together under an emotional and civilisational integration and united as a nation state and governed through a modern parliamentary system of democracy.

National integration was a physical coming together and motivation focussed during the freedom struggle towards achieving freedom from the British. Currently, this extends to eliminating the inertia that has accumulated in the collective consciousness of our people and to strengthen our role as a responsible and productive nation in the international political sphere. Today for us, national integration means being integrated through development values, economic preferences, shared knowledge, sense of volunteerism and a vision.

*'Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanthi'* (truth is one but, explained variously by the wise) and *'Isha vasyam Idam sarvam'* (all that exists is a manifestation of divinity) are core values of India as articulated by Seers of this land from time immemorial. In Indian social harmony is an intrinsic phenomenon. Respectful co-existence and creative confluence amongst diverse cultures, languages, traditions and practices existed amongst people in this land for a long time. Through their understanding of each other and creative interaction, people in this land created amazing arts and architecture, new forms of knowledge, languages, sciences and technologies. In harmonious times in India (of which there were many), people have produced in plenty, shared their produce with their neighbours, traded in the high seas, travelled far and wide through land and sea, built magnificent structures, created complicated designs and had a successful life.

It is the ancient India that is much revered and admired by people near and far. Whether it is the intellectually exciting works of Vedas and Upanishads, architectural fascination remains of the Indus valley civilisation or scientifically path breaking astronomy, astronomical calculation and observatories, the mathematics or the practice of inoculation and plastic surgery since the times of Susrutha.

It is estimated that in 1800 India and China region together contributed almost 60% of the global produce. The travel records of Chinese travellers in India prove that there was a

vibrant trade and commerce relationships between India and the countries in the Indian Ocean region, particularly China. The relationships have moved away long since from the mere commerce and trading to include other spectrum of life that includes arts, architecture, language, dance forms, textile making, epics and much more. In Thailand, even today during the coronation of the King there is chanting from Indian scriptures, the King is known by the title of Rama. Similarly Malaysian and Indonesian languages resemble Sanskrit and Tamil (two of the oldest languages for both of whom India is the motherland).

Many Chinese and Japanese feel that they are blessed if they can be born in their next birth in India. When the famous organic farmer, Masanabu Fukuoka visited India in the 1980s, he was asked whether there was any place in particular that he wanted to visit in India, he replied that he would like to go to the Ganges and the Himalayas - both of which are considered reverent not just by the Indians, but, whole lot of people across Asia.

This is the country that encouraged and embraced all visitors and tourists, declaring with all confidence that '*athithi devo bhava*' (guest is verily a manifestation of God). Communities from different lands belonging to various faiths have made India their home for long. The early Syrian Catholics, Iranians, the Portuguese, the Ahmediyas, the Parsis have all co-joined their identities into the mainstream Indian identity and have enjoyed through the rich interaction with the local faiths and traditions. In fact, the nature of the Indian society is in itself secular and the declaration of itself as a secular state is one of the clear proclamations of India as perhaps the largest secular nation in the world. The Indian secular identity though differs much from its western interpretation. As against the western interpretation of indifference to all religions, here secularity implies equal respect and mutual understanding and accommodation of various religious faiths to co-exist and practice their religion in complete freedom.

Since Independence, the Indian state has tried to variously implement its democratic and secular ideals in the society, to harmonise the human energies in the society for the welfare of all and to create a more self-sufficient India and assert its values in the global scene. It has been successful in some and not so successful in other areas.

Successes are largely in the area of self-sustenance in the areas of food production, development of a method and conduct of election that is considered one of the best and fairest in the world, scientific and technological knowledge houses, both educational and research that have repeatedly produced remarkable talent amidst much resource constraints, institutions of higher learning that today attract candidates not just from India, but also from countries far off. The current global demand for Indian talent in software industry is fuelled by an environment that encourages and aids technical education and commercial activity.

However, these few successes have been at times at enormous cost. The cost has been that of endangering the flora and fauna in our forest areas to create infrastructure, displacement of our people in many parts of the country in the name of development projects. Inequality amongst the states that results in often biased opinion and inequality in treatment of fellow citizens, lack of rigorous mechanisms to ensure justice for all and that the planned resources reaches the last man. There is growth of fanaticism of various kinds, sectarian conflicts that has resulted from many individuals and groups wrongly identifying their betterment with that of mis-guided path of terrorism and acts of violence.

Corruption is often held as one of the major sources of irritants and blocks for development, however recent examples of corporate successes which include InfoSys, Wipro, Excel Industries, Alacrity and many other companies who have prescribed and held

firmly to clean practices have only proved this point wrong. These corporate entities have proved that it is possible to be successful at a larger level without having to be corrupt.

'*Satyam eva jayathe*' a sentence from ancient Indian scripture has been adopted as the national motto of India. "Truth alone triumphs" is an ancient scriptural saying that not merely represents a deep seated Indian conviction, it also is an ideal for human society everywhere.

In the current times, like many times in the past, there are threats for the Indian society both forces within and without. **Building resistance and resilience within the society to withstand weed out such forces from within and encounter such threats and overcome them from without, also constitutes practicing national responsibility and social stability in our times.**

The role of youth in maintaining national integration and social harmony has been much debated and planned since the achieving of Independence in 1947. The formation of National Service Scheme (NSS) was done with a view to bring about youth in the development of nation through various activities planned to involve them directly. Since then and before that many other youth organisations and groups have been formed which have all provided the youth in the country with opportunity to understand and participate in the social change process.

Today, youth have before them vast opportunities. However they have many issues facing them also. If the youth immediately after the independence only had national priorities, the future global Indians should also assume the role of global leaders. Starting on a project of harmonising their forces, from their individual level to that of the family, community and nation is the first step towards such a global leadership. The unique combination of traditional wisdom and knowledge systems and modern technological skills and successes provide a good take-off point for such aspirations and intentions.

## Conclusion

Often it is said that history is filled only with bloodshed and violence. Such partial reading and understanding of history has created amongst the existing world order an increasing dependence on violence and tools of violence and the control over it as the means of power and domination and indeed, survival. The resources, human time and energy spent in the creation of a world order where violence reigns has made the most violent person in the street / village the most powerful and perhaps the most hated also. This creates an overall air of mistrust, hatred and resentment in everyone.

History is also filled with people sharing their all and living together as communities, societies sharing what they possess as wealth and knowledge with their neighbouring societies, and nations in mutual trust and understanding exchanging what they have with other nations. Such voluntary giving and sharing creates an air of confidence, trust, peace and ultimately happiness. Some societies have done this to a lesser extent and others to a much greater extent; this depends on the age and maturity of their civilisations. India as one of the oldest and advanced civilisations has played a significant role in establishing a peaceful order in its part of the world time and again.

Every civilisation, nation and society finds that its core values and convictions are at times and in certain situations relevant not just to itself, but, also to a larger society, its neighbours and other countries and civilisations. Today, we in India find that the peaceful co-existence that we have as one of our core civilisation value has a relevance at a much

larger world order. There is a global need for an active and intense peace super power and India is well placed to play that role. However, this is not possible in practicing *ahimsa* as a static, passive, non-violence alone.

This is possible when the peace champions of India become world leaders in various spheres of life, in engineering, technology, medicine, science, media, politics, entertainment and many more. When they perform their jobs in these respective areas, excel in it, yet, not forget to practice peace, to “speak every word with a blessing behind it and peace before it” as Swami Vivekananda<sup>6</sup> has said, to counter the violence of accumulation through the peaceful practice of distribution, to counter the violence of competition with the peaceful practice of excellence, to counter the violence practice of intimidation of the lesser with a peaceful practice of sharing and confidence building, to counter the violence of wealth aggrandisement with the peace practice of trusteeship, to counter the violence practice of centralised political control through the practice of peaceful local panchayats and the oceanic circle spreading the message of peace, then India would be a nation of a billion peace practitioners, a Peace Super Power. The youth of this country can make it possible through a personal harmony project, to achieve the harmony as *samanvaya* that the ancient Indian scriptures proclaimed as the vision of India.

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<sup>6</sup> Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol3, pg. 106