



BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY

In Search of the Human Face of Social Integration

Statement to the

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“When our true hearts are presented in front of God, He will definitely work through us and all will be accomplished.”

B. K. Janki

The task of achieving social integration is huge as the disparities are wide and the contradictory trends powerful. Yet the vision remains - a vision of world society at peace and in harmony with itself, where justice pervades all aspects of life; where relationships between all people are an expression of the personal sovereignty, love, joy and consideration for others that is the essence of every human heart; where we know that we are all brothers and sisters of the one family that is humankind; where, with the understanding that we have this common bond, we appreciate, accommodate and respect the differences that bring richness and diversity to life, be they of culture, nationality, religion, age, gender or belief; where our first thought is to give and share with others from the heart, to let our lives be a dance of the soul as we journey through time together.

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The vision remains but do we really believe that it is achievable? And if so, when? Or is it just an unattainable dream - an appealing illusion to help numb the pain of harsh reality? For many, the vision seems to represent an ideal that they believe never existed and never will. If we remain in the shallows of a materialistic paradigm that restricts our vision and understanding, this perspective is likely to take hold. A deficit-based outlook then only exacerbates the mismatch between thought and action or ideal and reality. But if we open our minds and unlock our hearts to oft-forgotten but eternal spiritual truths the prospects are very different. They not only support the vision and indicate that it can be realised but explain its origin. Foremost among these truths is that each individual is a unique spiritual being of inherent goodness and worth; that our deepest level of identity and origin is spiritual, not physical, and our innermost nature, the core of our being from which we have gone astray, is of self-respect, love, purity and peace. It is this understanding that is the basis of our faith in the dignity and worth of the human person and our faith that we can

attain the better world we are striving for - a faith that must urgently be reaffirmed so as to imbue all other measures aimed at boosting the quality of life.

The only hope is in daring to re-dream one's place in the world.

Ben Okri

The ways in which technological advances continue to bring the world and its people closer together in time and space are a familiar theme, particularly to those fortunate enough to have the education and financial resources to be able to take advantage of them. The benefits that advances in information and communication technologies have brought to many people and, more importantly, the potential that they offer for many more to do so, are to be welcomed. They offer solutions and possibilities that are being grasped and realised to bring new openings and choices to many; liberalized trade has tapped new veins of prosperity, helped to free some people from poverty, insecurity and indignity and promises to offer these fruits to others too. But the path of human progress is not so simply walked and the actual experience to date of the impact of globalization varies tremendously. New opportunities and benefits are not evenly distributed and many people are being passed by while others find themselves marginalized, excluded or worse off than before. In many cases, it has only been the rich who have got richer while the poor have got poorer and globalization has only increased the divide, bringing greater polarization. Even the rich are coming to see that the economic growth that recent years have brought is not well correlated with happiness or human progress in a larger sense. Yet directing the forces of globalization, or shielding citizens from its negative implications, is beyond the capacity of individual countries while the global business and financial actors that are the new power-brokers on the world stage tend to be more driven by short-term profit motives than concerned about broader human and social welfare. Globalization, whether of markets, communication, culture, ideology, politics or otherwise, may thus be universal in character but it is far from so in the support it attracts or authority it can call on.

*There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.*

...we must take the current when it serves

Or lose our ventures.

Shakespeare

The result of all this is a world that to many seems heartless, uncaring and unforgiving, where greed, selfishness and the desire to take have soured the milk of human kindness. The day of the interlinked global village that techno-optimists have long proclaimed may in reality have dawned but we are still far from being an integrated global family. Poverty, unemployment, lack of education, inadequate healthcare and inequitable availability of opportunities only increase the compartmentalization of society. If the ship of human destiny is not to break open at the seams and spill us all into a whirlpool of self-destructive fragmentation, ego-centrism and civil disorder, it is the task of each individual in world society to reach out to others and let them regain their rightful place within the fold of a society in which the benefits of development are for all. Ultimately, in any event, our future is a common one. In our globally interdependent world, we sink or swim together; integration of society - and an integration in which relationships are an expression of a culture of peace, caring and sharing rather than dominance and violence - is an imperative, not an option. The injustice, intolerance and discrimination that blight society's chart of progress must give way to higher values. The responsibility to help make this shift is everyone's for we are all members of society and the chain of social integration can only be as strong as its weakest individual link. The task may be large but, if we take the right path,

it will surely lead us to our destination. This process of upgrading our moral software requires a renaissance of values across the breadth and at all levels of society with a particular focus on four areas: education, family, communication and governance.

Education

If you are thinking a year ahead, sow a seed.

If you are thinking ten years ahead, plant a tree.

If you are thinking a hundred years ahead, educate the people.

Kuan Tzu

Achieving social development and integration will require a confluence of forces for the good but, most importantly, profound changes in thinking, attitudes and behaviour. We need to learn who we truly are and how to be, how to live with each other, to dismantle the barriers we have erected in our minds and thaw our chilled hearts; and we need to unlearn the disruptive and divisive tendencies we have acquired. This in turn requires a new, spiritual, understanding and perspective of ourselves and those around us. Such understanding opens the door to development of the inner self, without which any outer development will be short-lived as the external, or physical, is a reflection and expression of the internal, or spiritual, and so the state of the world depends on humanity's inner state of being. Likewise, integration of society is only possible when individuals are integrated and whole and a harmonious and moderate society requires harmonious and moderate individuals. We must thus place a high priority on learning and education that is not only functional and practical in content but which also has spiritual, ethical and moral principles and values at its heart and the overall development of the whole person as its aim.

Family

All human beings should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 1, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

How can we bring about the integration on which a society of peace, security, harmony, justice and prosperity for all depends? The family has always been the primary unit and building block of society and social disintegration owes much to a breakdown in family structures. Today, many members of the world family feel alienated, hurt and lacking any sense of community or constructive role within it. But if globalization is eroding individual identity, and stalks the planet in a straitjacket of unwanted uniformity or a one-size-fits-all culture, excessive individualism is gnawing away at our global identity to the extent that as a world family we run the risk of being diagnosed as dysfunctional. Behind both these trends lurks the spectre of materialism, an over-emphasis on the physical, that is robbing us of our spirituality and our sense of meaning, belonging and purpose in life. It is only at the spiritual level that we can truly transcend our external differences and see the common identity, aspirations and inner feelings that we share as human beings. Then a meaningful meeting of the minds, on which unity and integration are founded, is possible. Just as there is a unity of the human body despite the tremendous diversity of cells, organs and limbs, so too our diverse cultures and peoples together make up one human family. A spiritual perspective will enable us to see the underlying truth of this concept as well as the subtle strategic connections that exist between humanity and that link us to the Supreme. The resulting awareness of the inner being provides a sound basis for the self-respect on which respect for others depends; it also supports a belief in ourselves and each other so that we may include all those around us and include them not out of self-interest or as objects of charity but on the basis of their rights as fellow human beings. Thus a renaissance of our own spirituality will bring alive the concept of world family while also reinvigorating the force for cohesion and integration that the immediate family has always been.

Communication

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

T. S. Eliot

Communication is the foundation of society and culture; our very world is shaped by the words we express and images we create. Technology has given a formidable capacity to generate and distribute these and yet what is the message that the mass media of communication are giving us and our children about how to live our lives? In reaching out, and indulging in quantity, quality has been left behind. The media are a great source of entertainment for many but too often the content generated blurs the distinction between social groups and their individual members, leading to distorted stereotyping that does not foster a positive attitude towards others. Further, with worldwide broadcasting now commonplace, traditional ways, concerns and standards that have been handed down over generations are being deluged with extraneous influences by media powerhouses that are often insensitive to the impact of these influences. We must shift from broadcasting images and voices that promote division, exclusion and breakdown to an inclusive, integrating, peace-building message that honours individuals and respects differences. We have learned to see others and that they are different but not yet to appreciate or respect such differences. The diversity within society cannot and should not be denied but with an attitude of openness to and the practice of learning from each other, the threatened clash of civilizations and cultures can be transformed into a mutually enriching dialogue between them. Integration does require mutual understanding and it is through a process of dialogue, which must be across generations as well as among civilizations, that common conclusions and shared perspectives can be reached. In particular, the voices of youth, women and the girl-child must be listened to. Information technology and greater speed, ease and quantity of communication only highlight the need for quality in all aspects.

Likewise, as individuals we need to reflect on the extent to which our language is disconnected from nature and the self and to be aware of the generative capacity of our own thoughts. Too often we engage in false language or polluted thinking that alienates and leads to violence. Our language has become one of doing and acquiring instead of being and giving. To understand our present and create the future we desire, we need a spiritual language; we must think and speak from the heart and in the language of the soul - a language of trust, faith and higher values, of inner growth, love and listening. In the thoughts we create and attitudes we form, the language we choose and the images and stories we convey, we must all help support a shift of humanity's collective consciousness away from the over-materialistic to the spiritual.

Governance

*All humans form a single being; he who touches one of its limbs, touches me -
and if he wounds it, he wounds me.*

Sa'di of Shiraz

An integrated society is one in which all its members benefit from development and all have equal opportunities to participate in building their future. Each individual has the ability, and right, to make a difference in society. The strengthening of civil society over recent years is thus to be welcomed and the urgent challenge now is to ensure that the voice of the people is heard, not only within all levels of government in crafting a consensus-based social milieu, but also as a participant in the economic arena. The growth orientation of free-market ideology is to be welcomed but its other effects - the unleashing

of impersonal market forces that neglect, by-pass or exclude - need to be tempered. Society must lead the economy rather than letting what to many is a casino economy, that tolerates great disparities and breeds unrest, lead society. We must all realise that the collective interest is the individual interest and that the new social contract of an integrated society is based on a shared and inclusive purpose, respect for others, appreciation of their role and contribution to society and the awareness that we only receive to the extent that we give.

Government, the traditional orchestrator of society's affairs, is now accompanied on the world stage by new global actors, primarily civil society and business interests, but the interaction between them remains disjointed and unbalanced. Today's multi-stakeholder environment requires dialogue amongst partners and consulting with others as a form of governance, coupled with leadership that is participatory as well as inspirational. Leaders must take up the responsibility of serving as a seed or foundation for the society we wish to see, asking themselves what the world needs from them, and then role-modelling the values and principles society requires, sustaining it with their vision and example.

To every thing there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven.
Ecclesiastes

The time we live in is an age of many changes. The call of this time is to catch the wave of change and ride it to a new, safer shore. To do so, and stay on top of the wave, we must understand the nature of the underlying currents - the dynamics of the forces of change that are at work within the world and ourselves. This requires us to go beneath the surface trends of daily life within society and look at the attitudes, thought patterns and values that underlie our behaviour. We need to see beyond the physical dimensions of our identity and existence and reconnect with the spiritual. The next waves in the sea of change that is the story of human development must rise from deep within the human spirit, drawing on the realisation of the fundamentally spiritual nature of our identity. We must bring a stronger spiritual awareness back into life for only when we realise that the spirit is the core of the human being will we be able to maintain lasting happiness, peace of mind and well-being as the focus of development endeavours. Only by seeing and developing ourselves as whole human beings, and integrating the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of the self, can we begin to bring about integration within society. The time we live in is an age of many changes. The call of the time is to make it an age of spiritual change. It is this which will invoke the season of the better world that we have been searching for and that surely is our destiny

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

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