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The Idea of Peace

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Our contemporary times are full of talk of peace. Talk of human brotherhood, equality, welfare of all and absence of wars and conflicts is all part of the larger concern for stable, abiding peace. Why should there be peace? If struggle for survival is the universal law of nature and conflict is necessarily written into this struggle, which binds human as well as non-human life, why should man aspire for peace contrary to his nature? More importantly why should one man love another in an age of technology and life based on competitive spirit and material progress? In the Northeast too, we have talked peace for a very long time. In this paper I am attempting an account of the concept of peace as connected with the predicament of human existence. Hopefully this will facilitate a more purposeful and clairvoyant search for peace in our strife torn world.

The vision of man's destiny, whether viewed as lying in (a) a heaven-like world or (b) in a golden age of the past, or, (c) in the modern idea of the sovereign state which ideally would work with the premise of the indispensability of science and technology as a means for achieving the fulfillment of human destiny, rests on the assumption that human nature and the very existence of man are anomalous.

There is no denying the fact that man like other kinds of living beings is biologically born and is under the inexorable

necessity of struggling for survival. In the course of the struggle for survival in man, just as in the case of other living beings, man's self-interest is apt to be in conflict with what one may call, his other-regarding drives. In most cases of such a conflict self-interest is seen to triumph over the interest of others.

Immanuel Kant in his *Treatise on Perpetual Peace* has, while affirming the sociability of man, talked of his self-regarding vital drives which are apt to suppress this inclination. Consequently, Kant points out, man is ordinarily alienated from his fellows and simultaneously from himself on account of the suppression of his other-regarding drives. This goes to show that man's self-alienation and his alienation from his fellows are but two aspects of one and the same deprivation, which he ordinarily suffers. Man's self-integration and his integration with his fellows are the two inseparable parts of the fulfillment of his destiny. They are the two sides of the gravest deprivation, which he can suffer as a human being. Being inherently endowed with self-regarding as well as other-regarding vital drives his nature becomes anomalous, Kant calls it the 'unsocial socialableness' of man. Accordingly for him the original state of man is thus neither that of war nor that of peace but is an anomaly. Therefore individuals and societies have to find appropriate ways and means to counter the ill effects of the anomaly of human nature.

Also this accounts for the rise of governance and the state 'probably the first peace institutions.' However even where there are no established governments, there are communities (for instance in the Northeast), who devised ways to live peacefully with fellow humans as well as forces of nature, without submitting to any state power or functionaries. This does not of course mean that such communities live in a "state of nature" even if not of the Hobbesian variety. The idea of a state of nature where man is completely at one with nature is an incoherent one. There are many ways of showing this. One of them is to reflect on the idea of self-alienation and alienation from others. The question of self-alienation and alienation from others does not arise in the case of nature including animals. The special character of being human is that man must reflect on his predicament, assess it in terms of concepts like satisfactory/unsatisfactory, desirable/undesirable, good/bad, happy/unhappy and having different kinds of potential for his future. This is not the case with animals. Animals do

not reflect on their state of being, they react to situations, although much animal behaviour is complicated enough to be mistaken as expression of reflection. That is not to say that animals are mere automata. The destiny of nature is confined within the bounds determined by the biological law of survival. Though a part of nature, man is so constituted that he has to fulfill the most human of all demands, that of reconciling his self-integration and his integration with others. What follows from the above discussion is that the problem of peace is an exclusive concern of human beings and the state of peace should mean a state in which man is integrated with himself and with his fellows.

It is interesting to reflect on the historical assumption — in my view true — that none of the communities in the Northeast conceived of a law of peace, which would apply to communities other than themselves. If and when there was war it was fought according to recognized rules, the main thrust of which was the preservation of one's own territory rather than extension of it. Members of the community were expected to conform to the law — the traditional norms — of the community; competition was encouraged between members so long as it did not result in a loss of harmony and social equilibrium. To seek to violate the law would involve all sorts of psychological dislocation, social disorganization and disintegration of one's own personality. Thus it was generally accepted that actions performed in accordance with tradition were conducive to attaining the goal of peaceful co-existence.

There were those who defied tradition, social norms and the law of righteousness. Those who did so were appropriately punished by the lawful authority in the societies.

When the restrictions and norms that restrained them within their own community ceased to operate because of the changed circumstances, they were in a state of disarray. This is marked by a period of unrest and dissatisfaction. In a way this is the situation in many groups of the Northeast, as indeed, in much of our country. Like communities before them they succumbed to corruption and degeneration as soon as they came in contact with new types of economy, society and values. Historians and political scientists have written enough on the rise of this phenomenon. The will of a group of men (a) to get hold of some material advantage/political power, and (b) the will of a group of men to become conscious

of themselves as individuals, in so far as they are distinct in relation to others, have intensified political passions and what we treat today as communalism. The community instilled with the fear of losing its tradition and heritage, the basis for which has already been laid by modernism, falls easy prey to such groups. Occasionally the golden days of the historical past and the ancestors are referred to, to justify their i.e. the group's, ambitions. As a consequence of this there are varying degrees of suspicion of the man from 'outside'.

In this context let me state that peace in the region has come to be understood in the socio-political sense, being regarded as the resolution of conflicts between different tribes, communities and classes. Of course from time to time such conflicts have been "resolved". But what has ensued as a result, as history would testify, is only the temporary postponement of conflicts and not abiding peace. Various kinds of institutions/organizations, whether social, political, economic and religious have made significant contributions in the direction of peace. However I wish to state here that their ultimate success would lie in how far they are able to remove the deprivation which human beings inherently suffer, namely the twofold deprivation of alienation from oneself and alienation from others. "Peace as distinguished from temporary postponement of conflicts among human beings, can be brought about in one way and one way only, namely, through the means of their integration with themselves and with their fellows."¹

What we are witness to today is strife, conflict and greed for power at any cost by all kinds of forces in more or less the entire region of the Northeast. Scholars interested in understanding this phenomenon have highlighted different reasons for this. References are made to philosophies of nation-building and state-craft from across the globe. The concepts of liberty, equality, human rights etc., occupy a place of honour in the academic discourses but not — somewhat surprisingly — the philosophies of peace and non-violence. In a seminar on the relevance of Gandhi held at the North Eastern University, Shillong (2004) a group of young research scholars hailing from the different states of the region when apprised of the teachings of Gandhi reported that they were totally ignorant of the Gandhian model of non-violence and peace.

notions of justice and ideal human conduct enabled people with linguistic, ethnic and religious differences to live in peace and goodwill within their political systems.

Whether there was ever a period of complete peace or not, what should bother us now is the lack of it in the present times. Urgent solutions to conflicts, in terms of economic and political agenda, at one place, have not precluded the possibility of their occurrence elsewhere. "Conflicts are either stark actualities or reasonable possibilities or, as we should rather say, near-actualities. Peace on the other hand does not come under any of these categories, it is at best the temporary postponement of a conflict or conflicts."² Peace is a problem the difficulty of which lies precisely in the realization of its demand of reaching integration with oneself and with one's fellows, thereby removing self-alienation and alienation from others.

It is owing to the ignorance of the real nature of peace that the problem concerning it has more often than not been subjected to over-simplification to the extent of its distortion. The concept of peace has been trivialized to such an extent that it becomes a bed fellow of its opposite — violence. Thus, for instance, we feel no conceptual embarrassment in using phrases such as "peace keeping force". The diminution of the meaning of the concept of peace is also symptomatic of our times. We no longer believe in anything like the core meaning of a concept. Meanings are subject to contingencies of time, space and — perhaps we should add — relations of power. The human world is constituted by constructed meanings and they are forever changing in unpredictable ways. Thus what I have called "diminution" of the meaning of peace is perhaps not diminution at all, but just change. So our search for peace is really search for peace of our times. But I am still convinced that what I call the "original" meaning of peace is worth exploring, and that the human condition is reduced to something quite different if peace in this sense is no longer a basic aspiration of humans.

ENDNOTES

1. N.V. Banerjee: *Towards Perpetual Peace*, Motilal Benarsidas, 1988, pp. 4-5.
2. *Ibid.*