

Essay

Reimagining Multilateralism : The Ethos and Philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi has regularly invoked the spirit of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in his speeches to indicate that India deals with the world in the spirit of oneness—the whole world as a family. What does the concept mean? What is its philosophical basis? Is it relevant to contemporary strategic reality? Is it a practical concept? Is it relevant to multilateralism? We need to debate these questions when we think of reforming multilateralism.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam occurs in a verse in the Mahopanishad. This verse is also inscribed in the entry room of the Indian Parliament.

अयं बन्धुरयं नेति गणना लघुचेतसां उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्

Ayam bandhurayam neti ganana laghuchetasam udaracharitanam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam (Mahopanishad, Chapter 6, verse 71-72)

It means:

“Only small men discriminate saying: One is a relative; the other is a stranger. For those who live magnanimously the entire world constitutes but a family.”

A similar verse is found in the *Hitopdesha*:

अयं निजः परो वेति गणना लघुचेतसाम् ।

उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् ॥

Ayam nijah paro veti gananaa laghuchetasam

Udaar charitaanaam to vasudhaiva kutumbakam. (Hitopdesha, Book 1, verse 71)

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It means:

"Only people with a petty outlook differentiate, saying, this is my friend, and this is not my friend. But for those with a magnanimous mind, the entire world is one family".

The idea of oneness or *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is also reflected in the Vedic saying – *"yatra vishwam bhavati eka needam,"* or, "the world is a nest".

The philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* seeks to overcome the 'us-vs-them' mentality, which is at the root of conflict and violence. The leading International Theory, namely, Realism is based on the concept of 'the other'. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* reflects the universal yearning of mankind. The philosophy transcends any specific religion. It emphasizes inclusion. This philosophy is deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche.

Indian philosophic thought underscores the concept of unity or oneness in the creation. The universe is diverse but there is interconnectedness and harmony in it. The idea of interconnectedness is now being accepted. The concept of *global commons* underlines the interconnected relationship of man with nature and among natural systems. Being an idea that unites, rather than divides, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* can serve as the basis of the ongoing discussion regarding global cooperation for resolving global problems. It can underpin new multilateralism that the world needs urgently. The imposition of uniformity brings strife, clashes and bloodshed. A related concept in Vedic philosophy is *"ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti"*, which means "Truth is one, the wise call it differently". The idea that there are many paths to the one truth is deeply satisfying as it brings in the concept of inclusion in diversity. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* does not impose uniformity. It accepts diversity. That is why it is so relevant today.

The Upanishadic philosophy, of which *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is a representation, emphasizes the divinity of every living being. It believes that every human being is divine, thus there is no cause for conflict. According to Swami Sarvapriyananda, "Vedanta is the philosophical foundation of Hinduism; but while Hinduism includes aspects of Indian culture,...Vedanta is universal in its application and is equally relevant to all countries, all cultures, and all religious backgrounds. Vedanta affirms the oneness of existence, the divinity of the soul, and, the harmony of all religions." Since the *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* idea originates in Hindu philosophy, many people mistakenly regard it as a communal or sectarian idea. This interpretation should be countered. Explaining Hinduism to the Western world, Swami Vivekananda had stated in his Chicago address of 11 September 1893 that the spirit of acceptance and accommodation that informs Hinduism can bring peace and harmony, as it advocates the lofty view of the entire creation being one family.

Practical Aspects of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

For an idea to be useful, it must have practical applications. In the sphere of politics, we have to approach *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* with care as it encompasses the idea of tolerance. However, tolerance of the intolerant can lead to the destruction of the tolerant. We have to be aware of this paradox. Thus, for *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* to be useful as a workable idea, it must be accepted by all and it should be based on reciprocity. One-sided implementation of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* will not work. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is not a pacifist concept. Tolerance does not mean inaction. Lord Krishna in the Gita tells Arjuna to fight as it is his duty to protect *dharma*. A recourse to use of force or even war is not ruled out. But, the war comes after every effort to avoid it has failed.

In today's world, peace is endangered. Peace must be inculcated as a way of life. The UN declared the first decade of the 21st century as the decade of the Culture of Peace and Disarmament. The UN regularly adopts a resolution on the Culture of Peace. Anwarul Chaudhury, a Bangladeshi diplomat, observes, "...the Culture of Peace as a concept means that every one of us needs to consciously make peace and nonviolence a part of our daily existence. We should not isolate peace as something separate or distant. We should know how to relate to one another without being aggressive, without being violent, without being disrespectful, without neglect, without prejudice." The idea of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* can strengthen the UN efforts to imbibe the culture of peace amongst people.

Interestingly, the *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* idea is increasingly finding a place in popular culture as well. YouTube has several videos of people singing songs based on the *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* theme. Some leading singers of the world have lent their voice and music to this philosophy. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs' Annual Report of 2019-20 quotes Mr Sooklal, the South African Sherpa for BRICS, as recommending that the New World order should be based on the principles followed by Gandhi and Mandela as well as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and the African philosophy of Ubuntu ('I am because we are' or the belief in a universal bond of sharing that links the entire humanity).

The Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) has been engaged in a Hindu-Buddhist dialogue, *Samvad*, amongst scholars, religious leaders, diplomats, politicians and others since 2015. Prime Minister Modi and the former Prime Minister Abe of Japan had initiated the dialogue. In 2020 Prime Minister Suga of Japan also participated in a symposium on "Asian Values and Democracy". Prime Minister Modi sent a video message to the conference. In the six meetings held so far, influential religious leaders, philosophers and others from different religions have deliberated on how to avoid conflict and generate environmental consciousness. The essence of Hinduism and Buddhism, which inform Asian values, is

inclusion, tolerance, harmony, and respect for nature. The universal ideas of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, which emphasize alleviation of suffering, and overcoming of differences through dialogue, must be brought into the international discourse.

The *Samvad* dialogue has yielded many principles which can help make the world a better place. Some of these are: inculcating the values of democracy; conflict avoidance; protection of the environment; sustainable development; universal responsibility and ethical behaviour among people and among leaders; promoting genuine, open-minded dialogue held in the spirit of tolerance; mutual respect and peaceful accommodation as the best way to avoid conflict; and realising that material wealth alone cannot bring peace. Compassion, *karuna*, courtesy, generosity should be practised.

The key to real and lasting peace lies in 'mental disarmament' – disarming the mind from all kinds of poisonous defilement such as greed, hatred, jealousy and ego. Maintaining peace should be a priority. Hindu and Buddhist prayers invoke peace for everyone, peace everywhere, for example:

Sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarve santu niramayah, sarve bhadrani pashyantu, ma kashchid dukhabhagbhavet

Or,

Let everyone be happy, let everyone be healthy, let everyone see weal, let no one be unhappy.

The Hindus chant “*om shanti, shanti, shanti*”. *Shanti* or peace is invoked thrice to ward off three kinds of adversities—*adhyatmik*, that is, suffering inflicted due to one’s own body and mind; *adhibhautik*, that is, adversities created by other humans, animals, and the physical world (e.g. usual heat, cold etc.); and *adhidaivik* or adversities such as natural calamities (e.g. flood, cyclone, drought etc.), epidemics and pandemics, and so on. The prayer for everyone’s wellbeing and health is specifically relevant at the trying times of coronavirus pandemic. Such prayers abound in Hinduism and Buddhism. They should become part of the diplomatic discourse, including at the UN.

Multilateral discourse should be guided by the spirit of making the world more humane, and a liveable and happier place. In 2019, France and Germany took the initiative to set up an Alliance for Multilateralism. The alliance has been joined by several countries, including India. The objectives of the alliance for multilateralism include promoting the rule of law and rules-based order. This alone will not be sufficient. The post-Covid world order must be more humane, caring and tolerant. This must be stated explicitly in the alliance

declarations. There would be benchmarks for *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*: acceptance of the higher dimension to human existence; focus on harmony; relation-based and not contract-based family, society and world; intrinsic respect for women and nature; and acceptance of diversity. Imbibing ethics, morality and spirituality in international political and economic discourse would enrich multilateralism. Multilateral discourse should embrace the spirit of interconnectedness as reflected in the motto *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.

One may argue that these are utopian ideas, bound to fail in a self-centred world driven by power, politics, and intense competition. This is a valid criticism that cannot be taken lightly. International politics is not about ideals, it is about power and hierarchy. But the point is that this kind of thinking has brought the world to the precipice. Humankind is facing existential threats like climate change, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, the paucity of resources and so on. The coronavirus pandemic is the latest reminder of the consequences of highly self-centred and selfish thinking, which will do enormous harm to mankind. The philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is an antidote to the self-centred and selfish thinking, the consequences of which are proving to be disastrous for mankind. We need a new paradigm for new multilateralism. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* provides that paradigm.