

The Principle of Peaceful Coexistence¹

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It is a natural goal for every one of us to become better every day. The very process of growth and evolution that we all go through rests on this fundamental principle. If you watch a new born baby you will find strong evidence to this. Till the age of four or five, a child is in a steep learning curve as well as a faster physical growth. Constantly the child makes efforts to become better. After three months of its birth, the child begins this journey by watching the world around. It slowly begins to shake its limbs and stretch its muscles. By the time it is 9 months old, it develops a skill to move around. After a few months it learns to get up, perhaps stand up and then make a step or two. Also it begins to talk. As we all know, this journey goes on in life. The child becomes better day by day both from a physiological and psychological perspective.

This fundamental urge (or instinct) to become better stays with us forever. It merely takes a different perspective and context. For instance, when we are grown up, our notions about what it means to become better changes. Earning more, acquiring non-movable assets, getting recognized in the society and amongst the peers and good career growth and salary increases are some of the often counted items in our list of defining what better means. Our urge to become better day by day cannot be taken away nor stalled by someone. However, as we grow older it is important to know the rules of the game in our journey of becoming better.

Becoming Better – Is it a personal agenda?

While this idea is not wrong, the question that needs some answer is can an individual pursue this objective in an almost unfettered independent fashion? Are there some governing principles for us to embark on this journey? This question assumes importance on account of certain realities that we witness. The amount of toxic gases that we have emitted into the atmosphere in the last 100 years is more than what we managed in the previous 2000 years. In our journey to become better, we have inflicted major damage on the eco-system. Are we really in the journey of becoming better?

During the last 20 years we have witnessed more wealth creation in India, which many attribute to economic reforms. This is measured by the economists through GDP growth rate, per capita income etc. The per capita income during February 2013 is Rs. 5,730 per month. Recent estimates suggest that the per capita income has increased by 6.7 per cent per annum between 2004-05 and 2011-12. Despite significant economic progress, more than 25% of the nation's population is estimated to be living below the poverty line. Further, there is a wide-spread feeling that the rich – poor divide has been widening.

If everybody wants to become better, why is it that the poor continues to be poor? Many of us may think that the problem of poor is for the government or some NGO to address. If the

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poor people continue to languish in poverty will that come in the way of our pursuing the agenda of becoming better? It appears it might happen sooner or later. Poverty can lead to violence, terrorism, *adharmic* ways of conducting life, corruption and deterioration of moral and ethical values in the society. In a span of 30 – 40 years this can seriously challenge social sustainability. Therefore, in our ability to become better we need to be able carry along the society with us in a responsible way and take some larger issues into consideration.

In other words this cannot be a purely selfish agenda. Our ability to become better is inextricably linked to others in the system. It calls for honouring the cardinal principle of sustainability in the long run. Let us see what message *Gītā* has for us in this regard.

Peaceful Coexistence – A means for Social Sustainability

Every living entity in this universe is in a state of mutual dependence with others (including the apparently non-living entities such as rocks, rivers and soil). Unless this principle is well understood there is no case for creating sustainable solutions for anything that we pursue in our life. The principle of *Yajña*, as envisaged by our ancestors is primarily one of give and take, thereby promoting sustainability. In *Gītā*, this idea has been well articulated through *ślokas* 3.10 to 3.20.

Lord Krishna says, those who partake what they have after making an offering through the Yajna (*yajña-śiṣṭāśinaḥ*) are indeed noble and will be absolved of all sins (*mucyante sarva-kilbiṣaiḥ*). On the other hand, those who utilize (the riches) for their own benefit (*ye pacantyātmakāraṇāt*) will only be consuming sin (*bhuñjate te tvagham pāpāḥ*).

यज्ञशिष्टाशिनः सन्तः मुच्यन्ते सर्वकिल्बिषैः ।
भुञ्जते ते त्वघं पापाः ये पचन्त्यात्मकारणात् ॥ 3.13

yajña-śiṣṭāśinaḥ santaḥ mucyante sarva-kilbiṣaiḥ
bhuñjate te tvagham pāpāḥ ye pacantyātmakāraṇāt

This *śloka* has two dimensions to understand. First is the issue of performing a *Yajña*. If by not performing *Yajña* one consumes the riches for purely individualistic benefits it does not lead to any greater good. On the other hand it can only make us inferior in terms of our personal values and stunt our journey in building a great character and improving our spiritual quotient. The other aspect is much deeper in its implications. Anything we attempt to do with a selfish motive is not going to be sustainable in the long run. By such acts we are likely to severely limit our ability to progress and inflict more damage on us. This is indicated by saying that we will only be creating more sin (more trouble in the overall system). The earlier example of pursuing our goal of becoming better by being oblivious of what is happening around us will fit exactly into this description.

Through this *śloka*, Lord Krishna reminds us that the principle of *Yajña* promotes in the long run a mechanism for peaceful coexistence. This is the bedrock of social sustainability. It is the only means by which we can ensure that while each one of us pursue our journey of becoming better, we will not face any threat or obstacle in the process.

Give and Take as a way of Life

This puts a perspective into our life and provides broad guidelines for us to make many choices in life. We need to imbibe the value of peaceful coexistence in our daily life. This can happen only when we are able to put in place a larger framework of give and take. Our ancestors therefore instituted the concept of *Pañca Mahā Yajñas* as our duty in order to practically implement the idea of peaceful coexistence.

By offering *Bhūta Yajña*, we take care of small living beings around us (such as birds, domesticated animals, worms, insects etc.). By being very conscious of the environment we can extend this idea to plants, rocks and rivers. This is the extended version of *Bhūta Yajña*. What more do you need to address the vexing ecological problems that we face today. By *Manuṣya Yajña* we derive the joy of helping destitute, orphans, unexpected guests, poor and needy by offering whatever we can (in cash or kind, food) to them. By offering *Deva Yajña*, we express our thankfulness for what the Gods bless us (in terms of rain, and other bounties of nature) and continue to receive them in an overarching framework of mutual dependence. By *Pitṛ Yajña* we offer our respects and deep sense of gratitude to the departed souls in our family who are responsible for what we are today. By *Brahma Yajña* (by reciting the vedic hymns, Upanishads etc. and teaching them to others) we show our enormous respect to the great seers and *ṛṣis*, who gave us the greatest piece of wisdom that we can ever have. We also assure them by this act that this great knowledge is being handed down the generations with reverence and a sense of responsibility.

If we practice the concept of *Yajña* with diligence, we will acquire this great wisdom that all sustainable things that we do in life will be on the basis of mutual dependence. Our chances of becoming better in life will only brighten even more. On the contrary, by violating this principle, we will make everyone poorer in the long run even when we may temporarily experience some short-term gains.