

## WHERE IS SOCIETY HEADING?

Dr Chitra Singh, Sustainable Activist

“Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the Earth.”  
*Albert Schweitzer*

“As members of the human community, our behaviour should reflect a respect of human dignity and basic human rights. Since human life encompasses biological, cognitive and social dimensions, human rights should be respected in all three of these dimensions. The biological dimension includes the right to a healthy environment and to secure and healthy food; honouring the integrity of life also includes the rejection of the patenting of life forms. Human rights in the cognitive dimension include the right of access to education and knowledge as well as freedom of opinion and expression.”

*Fritjof Capra - The Hidden Connections' Harper Collins 2004.*

In the last thirty to forty years of the post-industrial era, we have begun to see the negative results of our so-called advancement – over population, climate changes, global warming and a sick society. We do not live like responsible citizens but rather like robbers, robbing the earth of all natural things, creating a false world of machinery, recklessly using huge amounts of energy and yet often feeling frustrated and confused.

“The new global capitalism has also created a global criminal economy that profoundly affects national and international economics and politics; it has threatened and destroyed local communities around the world.” *Fritjof Capra*

If we all behaved in an ethical and correct manner, we would have a safe, healthy and peaceful life. However, after heavy industrialisation, we are in a critical position. Which way should we go? Should we follow the life style of the West? Or of the East?

Every day we face various problems – health, family matters, financial crises, spiritual uncertainties. Suicide rates are rising every year. It seems that modernisation has brought with it many sicknesses. Seetha Ananthasivan writes in 'Eternal Bhoomi': “But we now have a huge range of often insidious demons – and young and old heroes and leaders are needed to embark on new adventures to deal with

them. Along with ecological sanity, we can begin redesigning our political system (the process has begun in many parts of the Middle Eastern world) as well as our economic, medical and education systems; and yes, we can look forward to new ways of finding fulfilment and joy – perhaps through growing food, eating natural foods, following a simple, low-stress lifestyle and community togetherness.”

In India, the suicide rate is above the average for the world. In the last two decades, it has increased from 7.9 per 100,000 to 10.3, with particularly high rates in the south. Moreover, 37.8% of suicides are less than 30 years old and nearly three quarters are less than 44 years of age. Many women who commit suicide have been the victims of domestic violence. We urgently need good counselling centres to help those who are most vulnerable.

Another sickness in our society is a matter of great shame. Humanity, which in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has reached such an advanced stage, is nevertheless witnessing a spate of honour killings – a truly barbaric and heinous crime. Women are seen as the property of men who kill them to preserve the family honour. As a Rajput myself, I am horrified to see that many men of my caste have been involved in this horrendous crime.

A survey carried out recently by the prestigious international advisory firm, Brooze and Company, found that the status of Indian women rates only 115<sup>th</sup> out of 120 countries surveyed – only just above Pakistan, Sudan and Chad. In this situation, women in India cannot utilize their full potential.

It is not just the poorly educated or those with low IQs who commit such crimes. So-called educated people are just as involved. Dr Vishesh Gupta reported that between April and August 2012, more than 40 couples were burnt to death on pyres. There are also reports of brothers and fathers killing their sons or brothers for falling in love with someone of the same sex. Homosexuality is seen as dishonour to the family and community in many parts of the country.

In Moradabad, S.P.Singh reported that out of 100 murders, 50 had been committed by blood relatives, a truly alarming number.

As a responsible citizen, I find such statistics very disturbing. I feel that we should encourage marriage with other communities so that inbreeding is reduced and children are healthier and brighter. There should also be help for traditional communities to deal with personal management, anger control and peaceful ways to settle disputes. It is also possible that a poor diet contributes to the bad behaviour of some people. Every facility should be provided to enable people to eat healthy diets. Positive pastimes should also be encouraged, for example, classical dancing, folk music and dancing, aerobics, yoga etc

It is not only in India, however, that there are problems in society. Although illiteracy, poor education and lack of awareness and powers of analysis mean that people in third world countries are more vulnerable, nevertheless in so-called developed nations, many problems are arising. I see myself as an international person, being fortunate enough to have travelled quite widely to visit my siblings in the U.S. and U.K. as well as my daughter in Australia. It is disturbing to learn of the problems that are faced there too.

Clive Charles Hamilton, an Australian professor of Public Ethics at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, said that the "world is on a path to a very unpleasant future and it is too late to stop it." He is particularly concerned about the shallowness of modern life with its emphasis on consumerism. He argues that there is an emergence of new types of alienation and exploitation in the form of ravages of the free market which have robbed life of its meaning. He is a great supporter of internet censorship because of its negative side effects.

He has published a book with Richard Dennis – "Affluenza" (2005) - which describes the present situation in Australia where "too much is never enough". Affluenza is a new term used to describe a contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste, resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.

Another deep thinker, Robert C. Gilman, has conducted extensive research into sustainability and Eco villages. He believes

that human activities should be integrated into the natural world without causing any harm to it and in a way that is supportive of healthy human development. He himself, with the help and support of his wife, Diane, designed and built a solar home in 1975.

Endless increases in materialism have led to feelings of worthlessness and dissatisfaction rather than feelings of happiness. Economic success and wealth do not satisfy people but instead leave them feeling unfulfilled and hungry for more. The very rich are in an odd situation; unable to get pleasure from the things they buy, their lives are dominated more and more by material possessions, to the detriment of personal relationships. When mere wealth feels worthless, the result is often feelings of guilt, lack of purpose, dissolute behaviour and an obsession with holding onto one's wealth at all costs.

One consequence of this is the growth of religious cults and the popularity of Indian "saints" in the West. In the U.S.A. alone, there are now more than 35,000 ashrams. In India, many rich people make substantial donations to temples, believing that this will balance out any wrongful deeds they have committed.

The British psychologist, Oliver James, suggests that there is a direct correlation between an increase in affluenza and an accompanying increase in material inequality. It seems that the more unequal a society is, the greater the unhappiness of its citizens. James interviewed people in Sydney, Singapore, Auckland, Moscow, Shanghai, Copenhagen and New York. He found that excessive seeking after wealth in consumer-led nations caused higher rates of mental illness.

Scholars like these pose an important question. "If the economy is doing so well, why are we not becoming any happier?" They call this "luxury fever" and argue that affluenza leads to over-consumption, consumer debt, stress, tension, over work, waste, harm to the environment and eventually psychological disorders and alienation. Frequently, people self-medicate by taking mood-altering drugs and excessive amounts of alcohol. On the other hand, those who have become more aware of the problems of modern society are now actively reducing their incomes and putting family, friends and happiness above money in determining their life goals.

Such people are very much in the minority but they can be found all over the world. They are often very spiritual people leading simple lives without the stress and complications of 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges. As far back as 1854, Henry David Thoreau, an American writer and naturalist, advocated a life of simple, sustainable living in his book "Walden". In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, E. F. Schumacher argued that bigger is not necessarily better and coined the popular saying "Small is beautiful".

India has a long tradition of a simple life following an organic, healthy diet and lifestyle. Even today, this can be found in the villages. There most people still follow natural, healthy, traditional principles. It is in the towns and cities that a market-based economy dominates, selling unhealthy junk foods that lead to many illnesses.

It is up to us to understand what is happening in society today and to do something about it. At the very least, we can improve our own lifestyles and have some influence on family and friends. We need to assess what matters in life, provide and carry out work that is truly fulfilling, rethink the kind of education we are receiving, invest in first-rate provision for early childhood, discourage materialism, promote responsible advertising, protect the environment and help build strong relationships and caring communities.

Hamilton and Dennis expressed their concerns. "Australians are anxious about declining moral standards. We worry that we have become too selfish, materialistic and superficial and long for a society built on mutual respect, self-restraint and generosity of spirit."

These concerns are not unique to Australia. They are just as relevant to India today. If we are to create a bright future for our young generation, then we must address these issues and take action now.

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