

**Compassion in Times of Crisis.
The Best Expression of Intercultural Concern.
Reflections for Covid Times.**

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Abstract

In a crisis situation, people try to tap every bit of resource available for mere survival: economic, psychological, cultural. Even when the first two run short, the last rushes to help as a last resort: the cultural heritage of every community. Cultural convictions play a greater role in human decisions and social processes than individual choices and personal preferences. Intellectuals with a sense of responsibility do a great service to humanity when they try to stimulate a community's cultural sensitivity and strengthen its cultural convictions with regard to values that repeatedly stood with humanity in its most challenging times, and which are urgently needed in these difficult days. One such value is *compassion*.

Keywords: Compassion, Anger-Reduction, Intercultural Concern, Covid, Pandemic.

The Pandemic has Stirred the Sense of Compassion in Humanity

“Man is only a reed, the weakest thing in nature” (Blaise Pascal).

According to Francis Fukuyama, the driving force of recent history had been the assertion of identities by Minority Communities, weaker groups and small ethnicities. However, of late, the trend is on the reverse: today, dominant communities seek to affirm their identities, seeking recognition and pressing for their rights. For example, Samuel Huntington's *What Are We* presents the *identity-concern* of traditional Americans. Trump was the very incarnation of that concern with his 'America first' call. Populist parties of majority communities are gaining support worldwide over the same issue. Who are we? Who are we as Americans or British, Indians or Chinese?

But all of a sudden, the question has changed under pressure from Covid-19. In a moment or crisis, we are pressed hard to ask a deeper question. Who are we as human beings? Man is only a 'breath', the answer comes from Blaise Pascal, a 17th century scientist and a thinker, "... a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him."¹²⁰ Man is only a reed, the weakest thing in nature, but he is a *thinking reed*, a reed with self-awareness, and to that extent infinitely precious even if most of the time, his self-awareness remains a mere dormant potentiality." It is often a crisis that awakens this potentiality, especially when it stirs *compassion* in the hearts of individuals and stimulates the sense of co-belonging and solidarity in communities, so that humanity shapes its ultimate destiny together. Different though we are in culture, we make one family, compassion brings us together.

Thus, with the eruption of Coronavirus, a *sense of solidarity* has been stimulated. Compassion has been stirred. China reached out with vaccine and masks to other countries. India offered assistance to South Asian nations. Many nations rushed to the help of India herself when she was in need. Western nations cooperated with each other and reached out to poorer countries. Vaccine production picked up pace. There was ready sharing of competences and skills. Compassion for each other stood out visible in a fragmented world.

Compassion: Humanity's Sturdiest Cultural Asset

"Oh men, direct your energies to promote the good of all mankind" (Rig Veda 8,49,4).

In an emergency situation, people try to tap every bit of resource available for mere survival: economic, psychological, cultural. Even when the first two run short, the last rushes to help as a last resort: the cultural heritage of every community. Anthropologists say that *cultural convictions* play a greater role in human decisions and social processes than individual choices and personal preferences. Intellectuals with a sense of responsibility do a great service to humanity when they try to stimulate a community's cultural sensitivity and strengthen its cultural convictions with regard to values that repeatedly stood with humanity in its most challenging times, and which are urgently needed in these difficult days. One such value is *Compassion*.

¹²⁰ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. A. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 347.

Thinking groups can join hands together with people of similar civilizational/cultural background for reflecting more deeply on their *respective cultural heritages*. In doing so, they are in fact assisting society to rescue certain core values, of which humanity itself is becoming forgetful of and negligent. A deeper search is the need of the day. For example, it is only in a moment of *deeper reflection* that we realize that being singularly selfish is self-defeating. “Self-interest, self-rights and self-preservation involve and are even advanced by self-sacrifice, self-discipline and self-giving.”¹²¹

It is in this context that Samuel Fleischacker, in his *The Ethics of Culture*, urges that communities of diverse cultural backgrounds bring together their collective wisdom and cultural assets from time to time in a common search for light and guidance in a society that is unperceptively losing their links with their cultural roots and ethical moorings. Pretentious philosophers and uprooted social scientists have attempted from time to time to develop cold social codes for their society, but these never succeeded to replace lived social values and ethical traditions derived from centuries old heritages.

Fleischacker feels that Enlightenment thinkers had despised the local cultural norms and traditional practices proper of various ethnic groups or regions in their eagerness to impose a well thought out moral philosophy. In consequence, several cherished *cultural values* and helpful ethical norms got lost. He says, “The enlightenment taught us to seek moral principles by way of philosophy, to abandon the provinciality and arbitrariness of cultural and religious traditions in favour of a universal theory of human nature. But over time we have found that philosophical theories have little to say about real ethical problems.” On the contrary, anthropologists have always argued that *culture is the source of all ethical beliefs and practices*. Philosophical musings tend to remain ethereal and distant. Cultures, on the contrary, give life, energy and relevance to values. Day-to-day guidance of inherited cultural norms is necessary for any community to continue to exist and function.¹²²

¹²¹ John Dalla Costa, *The Ethical Imperative* (Addison-Wesley: Reading, 1998), 105.

¹²² Samuel Fleischacker, *The Ethics of Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), ix-x.

Compassion Central to All Cultures and Civilizations, especially Those of Asia

*“I consider it my only duty to promote the welfare of all men”
(An inner conviction of Emperor Ashoka 268-232 BC).*

Ultimately, we need to admit that the *moral authority inherent in a society* no one else can substitute. It is a community that fosters, promotes and sustains a value system that meets with acceptability among its members. The authority of a community alone touches hearts and convinces minds.

We have referred to the *value of compassion* which is the greatest human need in times of crisis. It is a value deeply planted in the heart of all communities and cultures. Emperor Ashoka in this way, “I consider it my duty to promote the welfare of all mankind” (Rock Edict 6). Even if in this paper I make more references to Asian sources, this is an area where people of all cultural backgrounds and religious traditions can meet, dialogue, and share ideas and experiences together in order to construct a common future. Influenced by these teachings, many inspiring figures in recent history, like Mahatma Gandhi, have shown preference for a gentle approach to even the most complex problems.

Traditional cultures are most eloquent. Expressions like *Jen* in Chinese referring to goodness, and *Shu* meaning altruism, are powerful reminders of our obligation to cultivate such qualities. Human strength is derived from these virtues. *Tao Te Ching 22* teaches that when one is *loving*, one can be strong. The ancient wisdom of Indians too says, “Oh men, direct your energies to *promote the good of all mankind*. Let your relations with all be characterized by love, *peace and harmony*. Let your hearts beat in unison with human hearts” (*Rig Veda 8,49,4*). For, the Koran II says, “All people are a single nation.”

The Message of Compassion Should be Brought to Daily Lives

“Let every hand give comfort to all living things and let it be the giver of health to the whole mankind” (Rig Veda 10-137-7).

Compassion should not be identified with condescending love nor be associated with a patronising attitude. It rather finds best expression in a *radical commitment to the welfare of the natural order, society and humanity as a whole*. It does not remain in theory; it reaches out to concrete situations, disturbed conditions, public places, intellectual centres, discussion halls, policy-shaping assemblies; to situations of tension, conflict, and of international aggressiveness; to the streets and to the slums, forgotten attics and

collapsing huts, and for the benefit of the weak and the weary and the rest of humanity.

If the spread of Coronavirus has given rise to a crisis, similar crises have risen repeatedly in human history whenever the ambitions of decision-makers and power-wielders collided. And this has been happening in our times too in various ways, manifesting diverse faces. The less privileged in society have become the greater victims. In such situations, while there is a possibility of indifference on the part of those in safer positions, there is also a spontaneous urge towards sentiments of love, *kindness*, and mercy, prompting acts of *compassion* in behalf of fellow-beings who suffer. It also suggests initiatives that will eliminate the possibility of such things happening again, by influencing public opinion and through the formation of groups that are able to propose an alternative approach to problems.

Unfortunately, there is a Compassion-Fatigue in the World Today

“It is never too late to give up your prejudices” (David Henry Thoreau).

We often speak about ‘global warming’ in relationship to climate-change. The fact is that there is a ‘global cooling’ of human relationships in the world today. *Compassion is weakening* in a market-dominated society. Vaccine nationalism was only a pointer. Some speak of the return of the ‘ice age’, cold and detached relationships, due to a changed style of life and work, new technologies pinning people’s *attention on ‘things’* (quick returns, prompt profits, success, achievements), *not on persons*; weakening of family bonds; individuals working away from homes and their cultural roots; weakening of values; fragmentation of the mind and superficiality of interests in an economy-dominated society; accelerated pace of life. Communications with each other have become hurried and *impersonal*. Profit and efficiency are considered more important than warmth and companionship. Relationship with family members and friends have turned matter of fact and businesslike.

In addition, there is a *compassion-fatigue* rising out of growing indifference to human pain. Violence so dominates the news every day that we have become *de-sensitized to human suffering*. Society is no more shocked even by the worst human tragedy. In such an atmosphere, it is difficult for people to maintain themselves in compassion. They grow indifferent and insensitive. There is unconcern, *lack of commitment and of compassion* even among good people.

Reasons for Tension may be Diverse, a Dialogue Can be Initiated

“He who holds back rising anger, like a rolling chariot, him I call a real driver; other people are but holding the reins” (Dhammapada 17).

Busy with economic initiatives and fierce competition, people learn to *harden their hearts*. And this indifference in society creates a free space for *violence to spread* in different forms: race against race, ethnic/religious group against ethnic/religious group, majority against minority and vice versa. Violence may be in the name of religion, ethnicity, nationality, territory, political rights, human rights, or social justice. Buddha, in his times, was shocked when he saw people going “along the banks of the Ganges striking, laying waste, mutilating and commanding others to mutilate, oppressing and commanding others to oppress” (*Digha Nikaya 1,52*). In all these conflicts, the strong usually have their way. And those who feel that they are unjustly treated take to violence in response.

Even though many of these conflicts are far beyond the reach of ordinary citizens, they can certainly take certain initiatives to address local tensions. Those who have experience in conflict-resolution insist that the first thing to do is to work towards *bringing down the anger*. So, rather than become judgmental, they give every aggrieved group a hearing. They study the history of each grievance contextually and with sympathy and search for answers together with concerned communities. Gradually a *dialogue can be initiated* with the parties in conflict in collaboration with people of good will of all traditions. Similar efforts can be made for bigger problems at other levels according to the measure of one’s social or political influence.

Cultural Differences Not Handled Sensitively Can Lead to Tensions

“Colour is a fact. Race is a social construct,”¹²³ strengthened by prejudices.

Inter-community problems have been growing in many multicultural nations in the world. Minorities have been making their voices heard even in advanced countries when they feel their interests are not attended to by the majority community, e.g., the

¹²³ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste. The Lies That Divide Us* (New Delhi: Allen Lane, 2020), 67.

Basques in Spain, Welsh in the UK, Quebecois in Canada, African Americans in the US, Dalits in India. Wrong handling of *ethnic grievances* has often led to major conflicts, as it happened between the Hutus and the Tutsis in Africa. We hear of unease between the Dutch and the French speaking people in Belgium from time to time. Meanwhile Uzbeks have been fleeing Kyrgyzstan due to ethnic tensions. Something similar happened to the Armenians in Syria some time ago. There are frequent tensions between different ethnic groups in India, with over 4000 distinct communities and at least 42 political parties.

Such incidents in different parts of the world reveal the *power of ethnicity* and the *centrality of culture* in inter-community relationships in a multicultural society and the political life of a nation. There are not many countries in the world that do not have to deal with tensions related to ethnic and cultural differences. As the world becomes more and more multicultural, a deeper reflection on this issue has become necessary. Jonathan Sacks says, today we are able to see resurgent tribalism (exclusivism) as the greatest danger in our fragmented world.¹²⁴

Ethnicity defines for a community what it holds as most precious: its identity. For every community their own identity and culture are unique. They constitute the *ground for their selfhood*, collective existence, and for their ultimate destiny. That is why anthropologists consider self-affirmation of communities as something healthy, even necessary. We should not look at this phenomenon negatively. It provides the energy that a community needs for its very survival and self-enhancement. It serves a psycho-social purpose ensuring solidarity within the community in times of danger and motivation towards common goals. Compassion in this context will mean respecting the cultural identity of another community and showing concern for their interests.

Difficulties of Migrants in Places Where They Work

“If we believe absurdities, we shall commit atrocities”
(Voltaire).

People are on the move today. As job-seekers from rural areas rush to cities in search of employment, large numbers from Asia, Africa and Latin America have been moving into the US and EU for the same reason. Similarly, the number of migrant-workers from East Europe working in the West has increased. Over 3% of

¹²⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum, 2003), 47.

the population of the world is already *living in another country*, and over 60% of the migrants are living in the developed world.¹²⁵ Though there was an initial welcome for migrants during the post-War period for reasons of shortage of workers, the atmosphere changed considerably after the financial crisis of 2008 and more especially due to the intensification of migration during the political crisis in the Middle East in 2015. Some were, in fact, refugees.

Meantime, the *self-assertion* of the so-called '*sons of soil*' in many countries has been growing stronger day after day. They receive support from Right Wing parties which too have been gathering strength over the years. We ought to understand and respect the feelings of indigenous communities, especially as they experience threats to their jobs and fear for their culture. Their rights should be made secure. But at the same time, the human rights of migrants cannot be ignored.

Social observers foresee that this inter-mixing of people of diverse cultures, social habits, and religious faiths, is only going to intensify in this globalized world. There are no simple answers to all problems that may arise. All people of compassion and good will must come forward to help people in their need. In addition, every community has a right to be proud of their collective self and their *cultural heritage*. If they feel that their ethnic, cultural or historic identity is undervalued or threatened, and that their economic, cultural or religious rights are violated, they can become restive. If mutual relationships are not carefully handled, there can be instances of violence.

It is before these challenges that the present-day society seems to have broken down, clinging helplessly to one exaggeration or the other, with no *bridge-builders* between cultures and interests and with no agents of dialogue and reflection. We need *culture-translators* today, people who can explain the cultural meanings of one community to the other. There is a French saying, to *understand is to forgive*, to accept. Peace comes on the day when people understand that they need each other, they need each other's stock of energies, creative talents, cultural strengths, human resources, acquired skills and accumulated knowledge. Those who can make their respective societies see this are the greatest benefactors of humanity. But unfortunately, this is not what happens today. Populist leaders seek to confront each other; they provoke each other.

¹²⁵Milena Santerini, *Intercultura* (Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 2003), 51.

Unfairness in One Direction Invites Unfairness in the Other

“When a man hurts you, and you turn back to hurt him, that would not cure the first injury; it would only create in the world one more wickedness” (Buddha).

History tells us that fighters produce fighters, till all turn fighters. This is equally true of *trade war*, *gun battle*, and *street fight*. After all, most societies passed through the stages not only of being hunters and gatherers, but also of being invaders, marauders, intruders, and crusaders. That instinct is still with human beings. They do not need too much of provocation to get it ablaze. Christopher Dawson says that in Homer’s world *all were fighters*: only knights, retainers, princes, and pirates; no citizens, priests or merchants.¹²⁶ The possibility of such a scenario re-emerging on the world stage is not impossible to visualize.

An over-emphasis on one’s rights can lead to troubles. When members of a community move into the field absolutely conscious only of their own rights, but *not educated enough about others’ rights*, about the limits to their own rights, a dignified way of affirming their rights, and a persuasive way of regaining lost rights, they are certainly hurting their long-term interests. It is not an *intelligent approach* to problems. Compassion vanishes from the world scene. We are in danger of making that happen. With the deadliest weapons around, “In the future no one wins a war,” says Brock Chisholm. It is the duty of alert citizens to suggest creative ways towards the solution of these problems and bring the message of compassion into actual life situations.

The Sharp Edges of the ‘Market’ Need to Be Blunted

The idea that egotism is the basis of the general welfare is the principle on which competitive society has been built (Erich Fromm).

In this area of civic responsibility what we notice is an abominable failure. *Aggressiveness of the market* competes with aggressiveness of arms. Ego-centric lust for money and power dominates the world scene. Every sense of compassion is suppressed even as it makes the first move. Therefore, heroes/heroines of concern for others are falling in number, as *workaholic billionaires* accumulate wealth day after day. The ambition of these new heroes

¹²⁶ Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2002), 158.

is to wipe out their business competitors, with the result that fewer and fewer people come to own higher and higher proportion of the national/global wealth. For example, between 1980 and 2016 the richest 0.1% Americans saw their incomes quadruple.¹²⁷ The popular fashion is to applaud the so-called “wealth-creators.” Gene Sperling protests; she says, economic growth by itself should never be considered the ultimate goal for economic policy. Its value lies in the degree it serves what is most precious in people’s lives.¹²⁸

But unfortunately, the wars for colonies of the previous centuries have been replaced by wars for the domination of World Market. The vocabulary of profit-making and fortune-hunting fascinate the younger generations. All efforts for progress and development have come to be described only in terms of *adversarial relationships*, ruptures and discontinuities; not of collaboration, common endeavor and sharing of ideas, heritages and resources. That is why we are moving from one crisis to another. Mariana Mazzucato insists that value creation is a collective effort, every section of human society and every sphere of human activity co-shaping and co-creating markets, and playing an active role in contributing to its endeavor.¹²⁹ Those who forget this truth will have to pay the price, if not today, tomorrow. Companies that “exploit their workers, degrade the environment, deceive the consumer, and create a waste culture, will perhaps gain in the short term,” but lose out later.¹³⁰

The Mission of Anger-Reduction

“Here in this world anger is never pacified by anger. By non-anger is anger pacified. This is the ancient law” (Dhammapada 1,5).

Tensions can arise in any situation of clashing interests in the world. It can rise sky-high. In a particular situation, violence may have erupted and gone beyond control. And yet, a *compromise is possible*. Even stubborn opponents can come together after a serious conflict and emerge from the vicious circle into which they have been caught: rough words, harsh replies, violent action, and violence in return. Anger flares up and retaliation takes a new

¹²⁷ Heather Boushey, *Unbound* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2019), 5.

¹²⁸ Gene Sperling, *Economic Dignity* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 5.

¹²⁹ M. Mazzucato, *The Value of Everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018), 280.

¹³⁰ Piero Ferrucci, *The Power of Kindness* (New York: Penguin Group, 2007), 13.

shape, whether it be in Afghanistan, Syria, Myanmar, or in other situations of violence.

Every citizen can make his/her own contribution to bring balance into discussions and relationships between persons, communities or nations caught in a conflict situation. Sensitive persons make an effort to build up a creative opinion that seeks to bring a measure of ‘*anger-reduction*’ in the community as the first step towards smoother negotiations. It is for this that we need to tap the cultural heritage of *compassion* deeply implanted in our cultures.

Working for anger-reduction has become a mission by itself. Centuries ago, Buddha said, “Never in this world will hatred cease by hatred ... hatred is ceased by love.” It will only be after anger is reduced that we will succeed in bringing logic into discussion, good sense into conversation, persuasive skills into discussions, and fairness into conclusions. Regional or national conflicts, clash of economic interests, ethnic or ideological collisions, will call for *higher levels of thought* than those generated by immediate interests. Compassionate considerations that invite a deeper sense of justice and surer forms of mutual solidarity must be invoked. This pedagogy and approach will prove valid, whether it be a small family quarrel of simple people or a major war involving many nations. *A pedagogy of persuasion* is the only way forward.

Forgiveness for Historic Injuries

“He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me” – in those who do not harbour such thoughts hatred will cease (Dhammada 4).

It can happen that anger accumulates over the years and is handed down from one generation to another: hurtful emotions connected with national humiliations, defeats, historic injuries received centuries ago, remain fresh in *collective memory* as though they happened only the other day. These are the negative assets, deficit capital of a society, of a religious community, ethnic group, and sovereign states. What are remembered most as biased accounts. Most historians claim to be avoiding a communitarian bias and ethnocentricity, but rarely succeed in doing so.¹³¹ Unconsciously they remain close to their national or civilizational perspective, handing on collective prejudices and negative memories to the next generations. Dormant anger built on such

¹³¹ Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.

memories can explode any day. The *Chinese or the Koreans* may remember the Japanese occupation of their territory, African Americans and colonial countries the hardships they suffered at the hands of their colonial masters. Such memories can be deliberately kept alive; but they can also be consciously set aside.

M. J. Akbar tells us how for the Muslims, the rapid advance of early Islam is a matter of great pride. It entered India in the same year, 711, that it entered Spain.¹³² As its pride thrives on its historic achievements, its anger feeds on the memory of the battles lost: their capture of Constantinople in 1453 or their *defeat at Lepanto in 1517*.¹³³ The destruction the Twin Towers in 2001 has something to do with the accumulated anger built around these or other similar humiliations. We hear of such expressions of anger that keep recurring from time to time in different parts of the world.

But healing can be brought even to historic memories. As Japanese Prime Ministers have apologized to China and Korea, Tony Blair *apologized to Ireland* for the Irish famine. The rebuilding of Europe under the Marshal Plan helped a great deal to bring healing to western memories after World War II. Barack Obama and Shinzo Abe visited Hiroshima together to cry together "Never again!". Creative people look for creative ways of expressing *mutual forgiveness*. Mahatma Gandhi did this in his own unique way after each inter-religious clash in his country.

In any case, ultimately *forgiveness and healing* must come into the streets, into byways and side-lanes, into market places and worship places, into homes and hearts! All the accumulated energies spent on hate-filled ruminations and thoughts of revenge among people, can be directed to life-saving and prosperity-promoting activities in future. Should not people of various cultural traditions engage themselves in dialogue in view of these possibilities? Compassion must become the cornerstone of justice.

There was a great Emperor in India who in his young days was all set on world conquest. History tells us how he led a mighty army against the Kalingas (Odisha) and killed a 100,000 people and led a bigger number into exile. But then, the instinct for *compassion*, caught up with him. He was filled with *deep remorse* and was converted to a philosophy of non-violence (*Ahimsa*). His name was Ashoka (269-232 BC).

¹³² M.J. Akbar, *The Shade of Swords* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2002), 146.

¹³³ Andrew Wheatcroft, *Infidels* (New York: Random House, 2004), xxx.

He gave up his ambition to conquer the world by means of arms. He developed another strategy: one of *conquest by dharma* (goodness, uprightness). He felt, this manner of conquest would give satisfaction to victors and vanquished alike. He encouraged the spirit of *happy relationships and dialogue* among differing religious groups and cultural traditions in his empire. He became a totally dedicated person, asking that reports about the welfare of the people to be brought to him at all hours of the day wherever he was, even if he was at his meals or in bed. “I consider it my only duty to *promote the welfare of all men... .* There is verily no duty which is more important to me than promoting the welfare of all men” (*Ashoka’s Rock Edict 6*). It was Ashoka who sent out Buddhist missionaries all over Asia.

Bringing Compassion to the Highest Levels of Planning, e.g. to Arms Race.

“Violence is suicide” (Mahatma Gandhi).

Compassion can be brought to the highest levels of political and economic planning: for example, in the context of the world today, to situations of Arms Race between neighbouring countries, to border disputes, and murderous competition. The biggest arms producers in the world today are in the developed world. Arms sales have become one of their chief sources of income. Unfortunately, this trade itself has been moving into irresponsible hands in many countries with the privatisation of arms manufacturing. Weapons move also into the hands of sales agents and distribution teams that *lack any sense of social responsibility and transparency ...* and reach armed militias, insurgent groups¹³⁴ and totalitarian regimes. Does compassion have a say in any of these matters?

What is more alarming is that democratic governments themselves seem to be sliding into the hands of corporate giants who contribute to their elections. This is truly worrying. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse quotes Trevor Potter, the former Chairman of US Election Commission, “More and more citizens felt that government had become a tool of campaign contributors rather than responsive to average voters.”¹³⁵ While these deviations in political trends in major democracies are not within the reach of every citizen, everyone can do something to set society thinking.

¹³⁴ Andrew Feinstein, *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), xxiii.

¹³⁵ Sheldon Whitehouse, *Captured* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 21.

Everything begins in a citizen's mind: an *attitude of concern for others*, for other communities, other nations, other societies ... invoking one's own stock of compassion and building up determination. In a democracy, everyone's opinion counts, whether spoken or written. "Words have wings," said Homer centuries ago (*Iliad I.1.201*). Thus, every citizen can develop a political opinion that seeks to set politics of one's own country in order and to develop policies that favour international peace and healthy relationship among peoples. It sets in motion processes of conversation, dialogue, discussion, and debate, which ultimately influences decision-making. In this manner, compassion can be brought even to the highest levels.

Some creative thinking may be good, asking how *compassion* and balanced thinking may be taken to places like the Universities where ideas are generated, Legislatures where policies are shaped, the Media where information is shared; the Market place where the livelihood of ordinary people is generated ... always sparing a thought for the poor, the weak, and the environment.

Compassionate to Nature

"All nature, oh my heart, is your fellow-creature" (Iqbal).

Today everybody will agree that *compassion* is due not only to fellow-human beings; it is due to every element in nature as well. Asian sages were highly sensitive to the needs of *all living things* and to all other elements in nature. In modern times, human society has lost something of that sensitivity. The products of technology and supermarkets have made people's life easier, faster, more efficient, but also colder and harsher: harsher to weaker cultures and traditions; harsher to life in its multiple forms, harsher to nature in its diverse existences. And yet *human life depends on nature*; human beings are nourished and nurtured by nature. Apart from it, they would be reduced to nothing. All their impressive achievements would be mere empty show. Theodore Roosevelt used to look at the *stars and galaxies* to remind himself how small he was even though he headed the mightiest nation in the world.

Centuries ago, Jain sages had taught, "A wise man should not act sinfully toward the earth, nor cause others to do so" (Jainism: *Acaranga Sutra* 50). "Reckless men who cut trees down for their pleasure destroy many living beings. By destroying plants...a careless man does harm to his own soul" (Jainism: *Sutrakritanga I.7.9*). Emperor Ashoka, to whom we referred earlier, forbade the destruction of forests. The Muslim poet Iqbal sang, "All nature, oh my heart, is your fellow-creature." And Rabindranath

Tagore, “I asked the tree, speak to me about God. And it blossomed.” *Compassion* towards nature is an area of most relevant dialogue in modern times. If we do not respect nature, we poison ourselves.

Bring Compassion to Leadership in Society

“There is a way to get the people; get their hearts and the people are won over” (Mencius).

Mahatma Gandhi’s teaching about having a milder approach to most complex political problems has impressed the world. What he was doing was fully in keeping with the most ancient traditions of Asia. That is why he was able to command millions. Confucius used to say, “If you are *kind*, then you will be able to command others” (*Analects 17.6*). And he himself, a great teacher, showed how he intended to be kind, “If even a simple peasant comes in all sincerity and asks me a question, I am ready to thrash the matter out, with all its pros and cons, to the very end” (*Analects IX,7*).

It is something admirable to have the capacity to *understand other people’s feelings* and their points of view and have *empathy* for them, even when we disagree. We need to step out of ourselves and enter into other people’s lives with understanding in situations of conflict. That is *compassion*. That sort of relationships nourishes the life of communities. It is absolutely needed for promoting collaboration and preserving *social cohesion*. Vivekananda, an Indian thinker, used to say that the sole aim of his life was to stop mutual wrangling, to teach universal truths, to *bring all people together*, so that they might love one another and work in peace for their common good. In this sort of generosity, the giver himself becomes a beneficiary. The more the sage “gives to people, the more he has” (*Tao Te Ching 81*).

If Kindness Helps You, It Helps Others Close to You

“You do yourself a favour when you are kind” (Prov 11:17).

If kind leaders bring blessings to their followers, warm-hearted parents ensure physical wellbeing to the children they nurture. Recent researches show that people whose *parents were warm, patient* and affectionate have lower incidence of ulcers, alcoholism, heart disease; the opposite group manifest opposite conditions. Human warmth is expressed in diverse ways: a smile, a brief chat, a pat on the back, or a wave, these and such things are extremely powerful in creating a sense of belonging. In search of this *sense of belonging*, young people seek affiliation even in the

most radical groups and armed outfits in difficult situations. These are issues over which an intelligent dialogue among people of diverse traditions would be useful.

Piero Ferrucci says, being kind to others and being kind to ourselves is the same thing. It is strange: the more we promote others' interests, freedom, happiness, wellbeing, the more we promote ours.¹³⁶ Compassion confers unforeseen blessings. Modern medical sciences confirm that this is true: that kind people are healthier and live longer, are *more popular and productive*, have greater success in business and lead happier lives than others. This is because thoughts of human beings influence each cell in their body, affect blood pressure and the blood flow, nourishing every organ and every faculty. They ought to remember more than anything else that they are internally so 'designed' as to be caring, empathic, and open to others. That is why they find it a pleasure to help, and that is why their constitution benefits, because *they are born to be kind* and compassionate. They will sleep more easily and wake more cheerfully because when they love people. Other people will love them; external dangers will not harm them. Their faces will be radiant and mind serene. They will be able to serve humanity.

Compassion in the World of Intellectuals

"Kindness in words creates confidence. Kindness in thinking creates profoundness. Kindness in giving creates love" (Lao Tzu).

Last of all, let us come to the world of intellectuals: being good to others in their case means paying respectful attention to the studied opinions of other savants. For example, Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice* points out how much injustice has taken place in recent history in the name of justice, because the contending groups did not have the ability to *respect each other's' point of view*. The Nobel Prize winner, asks that such matters be subjected to what he calls "*Public Reasoning*." When opinions of intellectuals differ, mutual respect and eagerness to look at things from another person's point of view will open the door to further understanding of the issue.

Compassion here makes an entry under a new garb: *deference to others' considered opinions*. Thus, Sen urges a scholar to recognise that another scholar's theory may be equally impartial,

¹³⁶ Piero Ferrucci, *The Power of Kindness*, 274.

fair, unbiased, and dispassionate,¹³⁷ that he/she may have additional information¹³⁸ and may be guided by competing principles with equal validity, and may be looking at the same facts from another perspective.¹³⁹ In addition to all these, they must recognise that people of other cultures and other continents may be viewing the same issue through their own cultural categories.¹⁴⁰ Respect for cultures is as important as respect for other scholars' opinions.

On the one hand, people feel that cultures and values are dying out; on the other, there is hope. Values proposed by centuries-old cultures cannot die out totally. For example, compassion clings to us even when we act against it. So, the cultural energies that are under intense pressure from global materialism will show their strength as need arises. Covid-19 has drawn forth what is best in all of us. For, *cultures have an inner sturdiness* of their own. What is important is to avoid all sorts of fanaticisms constructed around cultures and exclusive attitudes. "Made up of history and experience, memory and expectation, cultures have their resiliency."¹⁴¹

They teach us compassion, and *compassion is here to remain*. It will save us not only from Coronavirus, but from every divisive trend in human society.

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¹³⁷ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Allen Lane & Penguin Random House, 2009), 57.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 409.

¹⁴¹ John Dalla Costa, *The Ethical Imperative*, 220.

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