

Issues / Discussion Forum

The Secret of Progress

-Wahiduddin Khan

A rose-bush has a wonderful lesson to teach us—about how to live in this world. The rose-bush has beautiful, sweet-smelling flowers. At the same time, it also has many prickly thorns. An intelligent person plucks the rose while carefully leaving aside the thorns. Likewise, in life there are both favourable as well as unfavourable aspects and conditions. And so, here, too, the wise approach is to accept what is favourable and to carefully avoid confronting the unfavourable.

If you want to live in peace and harmony, this is a golden rule that you must follow. An individual or community can progress only by availing the existing opportunities while avoiding contentious issues and abstaining from clashing with others over them.

While driving a vehicle, you notice many other people also driving on the road. And so, you carefully avoid crashing into them and drive on ahead. We should navigate our lives in exactly the same way. No one is alone in this world. We are surrounded by fellow humans all the time, and everyone of us is engaged in our own respective race to get ahead. In this situation, the only way to succeed in life is for us to take all other people into account. You give way to others, and, at the same time, also move ahead, just as you would when driving a vehicle.

Taking others into consideration is a guarantee for a safe and successful journey. This rule applies as much to individuals as it does to communities and nations.

India is home to people of different religions and cultures. It is not possible to do away with this diversity and make all Indians follow a single religion and culture. If someone tries to impose this sort of uniformity, it is bound to fail. Moreover, it is bound to destroy the country. Hence, the only way the country can survive is by respecting pluralism and desisting from seeking to impose uniformity. This is the only realistic approach and the only way India can progress.

The greatest thing that we lack today is tolerance. Tolerance means respecting other people's right to follow their ways while remaining established in one's own way. This tolerance was part of Indian tradition for centuries. And it only through this tolerance that India can survive in the future, too. Tolerance is necessary at the level of the individual as well as in terms of intra-community and inter-community relations. You can succeed in life only if you are willing to tolerate others and take them into account. Even a family can survive and prosper only if its members accept and generously tolerate each other.

Some years ago, I went to Sholapur, a town in Maharashtra, where I attended a public meeting. I had the opportunity to hear a Hindu gentleman's speech. He related, "My father was a non-vegetarian and my mother a vegetarian. But the two of them never quarreled with each other. My mother would get up in the morning and cook food for my father and place it on the table. Then, after taking a bath, she would make vegetarian food for herself. This is how the two of them lived together till the end. They led a very happy life."

This sort of respect and tolerance for others is the only way for communities and nations to progress. In social life, individuals as well as communities should accept and tolerate each other and relate to each other with mutual respect on the basis of their common humanity. If one religious or cultural community thinks that it should have the freedom to follow its own religion or culture, it must be ready to accept the very same right for other communities, too. This is what tolerance is about. Religious and cultural differences must be accepted, rather than made a cause or excuse for conflict. Only in this way can individuals and communities manage to live in peace with others and, at the same time, move ahead in life.

Suppose members of a certain religious community take out a procession on the streets. The processionists begin to raise provocative slogans that members of another community take offence to. Often, this triggers off a deadly communal riot, in which dozens of innocent people lose their lives. But the intelligent way to respond in a situation like this is for the community that feels insulted by the slogan-shouting processionists not to make it into a prestige issue, a question of honour. It must not rush out to confront the processionists or throw stones at them or stop them or insist that they change their route—which is often what actually happens. Rather, the way to solve the problem of the procession is to ignore the procession, and not to confront it.

If this method of avoidance is adopted, in a few minutes the procession will pass by and the problem will have got over by itself. But if, instead, the community that feels aggrieved seeks to stop or confront the procession, it will prove to be counter-productive for it. What was, to begin with, simply a small procession will quickly snowball into a bloody riot. By ignoring the slogan-yelling processionists and restraining yourself in the face of seeming provocation, you save yourself from having to face wild bloodletting and tremendous loss of life and property.

In this world, human beings are constantly faced with two things: problems, on the one hand, and opportunities, on the other. This is a basic law of nature, and it simply cannot be avoided. If you choose to clash with the problems, you will only make things even more difficult for yourself. And so, the wise approach is to ignore the problems and to avail of the existing opportunities. This approach is indispensable for individuals, communities and nations to move ahead in life.

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan heads the New Delhi-based Centre for Peace and Spirituality. He can be contacted on info@cpsglobal.org. A prolific writer, many of his writings can be accessed on <http://www.cpsglobal.org/articles/mwk>

-(Courtesy: CounterCurrents)