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THE WHOLE WORLD IS ONE FAMILY

In recent weeks South Africa has been caught up in the social media 'race' debate, with the media reporting widely on the rage of Black people and the widespread reaction of people across the racial divide. The issue was triggered by a white woman who was annoyed by the behaviour of beachgoers over the festive season and likened Black people to monkeys. Her opinion caused a major outpouring of anger and has polarised the different race groups. The issue has drawn out the worst in us with insults and dark threats being expressed freely, causing unease and fear amongst minority groups. A prominent DJ retorted by saying that more than two decades after our transition from apartheid to democracy, people still do not understand what free speech is all about. And so the debate continues, with leaders from all sectors of society calling for dialogue and engagement amongst the different race groups.

Racism! Everybody loses

Our beautiful country has emerged from a history of oppression and the deprivation of the majority indigenous population for almost a century. Racism has serious consequences for the people who experience it, as it can shatter their confidence and sense of self-worth. It dehumanises them and undermines their ability to become the best at work and play. Broadly speaking, racism locks people out of social, sporting and economic opportunities and entrenches disadvantage. It

adds unnecessary costs to our workplace and our economy and it works against our goal of building a fair and inclusive society. Ultimately, everybody loses.

A number of angry people have called for racist speech to be criminalised. This would create more antagonism and conceal how people really feel about each other. Another likely outcome would be that freedom of speech will be curtailed. A political analyst, Moeletsi Mbeki, says racism is a psychological state, driven by a superiority complex. He adds that if somebody has a superiority complex, that's how they think, and questions how one can write a law that says you can't think in a certain way. Even if the law were to criminalise the racist speech of an individual, it still does not deal with how they feel. It is impossible to pass a law to criminalise how a person feels inwardly. Such a law will serve to limit free speech which is needed to expose racism and racists.

Constitution sets out freedom of expression as a primary right"





Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression has been established as a key freedom required for any democracy. The Constitution sets out freedom of expression as a primary right in its Bill of Rights. Freedom of expression encourages everyone to tolerate the views of others and it protects the right of the dissenters. It is for these reasons that the right to freedom of expression is regarded as a key right which is worthy of observance and protection in any free society. Every individual can express his independent thought and has the freedom to give publicity to it. Also, freedom of expression is the best way to get to the truth. It allows one to criticise or engage in a conversation with another person without fear. However, with every right comes responsibility and there is the need for discretion on the right to freedom of expression so as to prevent the destructive effect it could have. Speech should not be hurtful, harmful or promote hatred.

Freedom of expression is also a key element to hold any government to account. Open debate influences the manner in which the government thinks and acts in relation to the people it governs. The right to protest is one element of freedom of expression. Groups are then able to make their grievances and concerns known to the government which, hopefully, would listen to the voices of the people and take the necessary action thereafter.

A government that has the interests of its people at heart would listen to these voices. The Institute of Race Relations has conducted a study which shows that South Africans overwhelmingly hold the view that the key to

sound future race relations lies in the economy. Not surprisingly, it's thus a question of access to the job market and the majority sharing in the country's resources.

What the Vedas say

Broadly speaking, the media has brought into sharp focus two main issues, viz. racism and freedom of speech. Does religion have any role to play in finding solutions to these thorny and topical issues? The answer is a definite yes. All religions preach goodness and when we are faced with challenging situations it is always an option to consult our religious texts for guidance. Many will have no difficulty in accepting that scripture lays down the ideal and it then becomes a question of comparing how far the current behaviour has strayed from that ideal.

The title of this issue may sound like some fanciful ideal that is not achievable, but it actually is the basis of Vedic teachings. The Vedas are reputed to be the oldest spiritual and philosophical

texts in the world. There is the saying in Sanskrit, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which means "the world is one family". If we all internalise this thought, then our behaviors will change. We will become more aware of how to interact with each other and not see others in terms of race. The Vedas do not preach the superiority of one race or one religion over another, but espouses the teaching of santana-dharma, which is the eternal path for all living beings based on the nature of the soul.

We are spiritual beings

The Vedic premise is that we are all spiritual beings who are not merely these bodies that house them. Our real identity is not whether we belong to a certain ethnic group or culture. We may follow a certain path or religion, but these can be changed and the soul is above all such temporary labels. And the nature of the soul is to love and be loved. Everyone is working and wishing for that, because happiness is found in relations, and no happiness is higher than a deep loving relationship. But the highest relationship is that which we, as spiritual beings, share when it is based on devotion to the Supreme Being. That is the eternal spiritual path, or santana-dharma.

By having a solid understanding of such spiritual knowledge, there is automatically a respect for all others regardless of race, sex or species. This brings a moral and peaceful social behavior in everybody towards everyone. By having respect for everyone's spiritual identity, also brings an inner happiness in us all. The Yajur Veda 40.6 says, "One who sees all creatures as if they were his own self and sees himself in others, his mind then rests in tranquillity with no suspicion to disturb it and ceases to hate anyone. This sense of separateness gives rise to many selfish desires and to exploit others."

We can understand that we are only visiting this planet for a short time, and that we are all in this together. In other words, my contribution to your well-being, especially spiritual well-being, will be an automatic contribution to my own existence. In this way, society at large is in a state of constant improvement. That is the goal of the Vedic way of life. The Vedic system means a way of life that aims at the elevation of everyone in society to a higher level of consciousness.

Clash of Egos

The trouble we see so much of in the world today is a clash of individual egos of people who associate their bodily identity and cause with their race. It is the tendency of the human mind to cling to those people who are similar, and claim superiority over those who are different. Thus, there is a tendency to defend one's own weakness, inferiority or insecurity by unnecessarily criticizing and hurting others, to establish one's own sense of position and superiority. But this behavior ignores the very love, compassion and tolerance that most religions claim to represent or teach. And it certainly ignores the very love, mutual respect and cooperation that we seek, and that the world depends on if we and this planet are to survive. How much easier it could be if we focused on our similarities instead of our differences.

"...a person should not be docile and tolerate injustice and falsehood..."

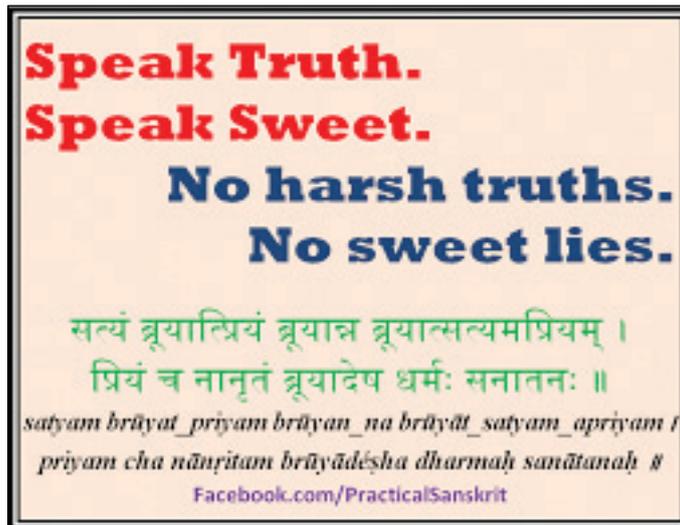
A verse in the Atharva Veda says: "We are birds of the same nest. Wearing different skins, speaking different languages, believing in different religions, and belonging to different cultures – yet we share the same home, our earth. Born on the same planet, covered by the same skies, gazing at the same stars, breathing the same air, we must learn to progress happily together or miserably perish together. For humans can live individually but can survive only collectively."

May we look at all with a friendly eye

The Yajurveda, verse 36-18 says, "May we all look at all with a friendly eye". This is the spirit of the Vedas, where a person's disposition towards another should be one of peace and friendliness rather than hostility. This does not imply that a person

should be docile and tolerate injustice and falsehood in whichever quarters they may fester. A person must cultivate much patience to tolerate the follies of others, but in case of necessity he must not hesitate to apply strength and valour to confront them. There are a number of examples of ancient sages taking the proper initiative and action against egoistic and aggressive emperors to eliminate their wrong doings and unethical behaviour, and finally defeating them to restore justice in society.

The Atharva Veda (Brahma Gavi Sukta) contains verses relating to freedom of speech. All rulers of the world would do well by contemplating the following verse. "O ruler of people, Master of the Nation, know that the silenced voice of the people is as dangerous as a poisoned arrow. It strikes like a serpent. Speech is the most powerful weapon (bow and arrow) of the people. It can pierce the one who tries to suppress the opinion of the people. It destroys him." Thus we see that ancient scriptures such as the Vedas recognised the importance of free



speech and how this is a powerful means to keep rulers in check.

“...dethrone the God of Hate and to consecrate the Goddess of Conversation.”

The Vedas also provide guidance on how a person should speak ‘truth’. It says, “Speak truth in such a way that it should be pleasing to others. Never speak truth, which is unpleasant to others. Never speak untruth, which might be pleasant.” This is the path of eternal morality, sanatana dharma.

To speak truth is an eternal value irrespective of time and place. But the expression of truth should be accompanied by two conditions. Firstly, it should be presented in a loving manner and secondly it should be spoken for the betterment of others. How you speak is as important as what is said. We should be careful to speak truth but also mindful of not hurting others. The purpose and words chosen should be good, as well as the manner in which they are spoken.



So how does one go about combatting racism which, by all accounts, will not disappear overnight as it is so deeply ingrained in the very fabric of our society? There are a number of actions one can take.

Educate yourself and stay informed.

Consider that racist stereotypes are largely rooted in ignorance. Confront ignorance with truth. Try to keep an open mind and step outside of your shell. Learn as much as you can about other races, languages, and cultures. Knowledge is power. Share what you learn

with your friends, family, and larger community. Learn to teach and teach to learn. Pandits must raise topical and contentious issues at their satsangs and educate congregants about social ills such as racism.

Keep an open mind.

Accept others, even if they don't accept you. You do not need to become “colorblind” – you can appreciate other races and cultures for the things that make them unique. Embrace uniqueness wherever you encounter it.

Find your voice.

The Internet makes it easier than ever to reach, teach, and influence people beyond your normal sphere of interaction. Share articles, videos, and stories on social media to broadcast your perspective. Encourage your family, friends, and broader community to respect and accept individuals from different backgrounds. However, be careful about what and how you post on the Internet.

Create dialogue & embrace the conversation

Listen to people from all races and cultures. Find the things that you have in common, and seek to understand what divides you. If you make a mistake or are faced with a challenge, ask people of all colours how you can fix it. Learned Vedic scholar, Swami Agnivesh says, “The truth is that conventional weapons, including knives, kill more people than the so-called weapons of mass destruction. They need to be eliminated from the face of the earth; for they bear witness to the barbarity that lurks beneath our skins. The universal killer is not a weapon, it is the spirit of hate. We need to engage in our dialogues to dethrone the God of Hate and to consecrate the Goddess of Conversation.”

Reference

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