

GFCH India

Global Foundation for Civilizational Harmony India

An Approach Paper

Civilizational Evolution : Dynamics

Historically civilizational changes have been subtle, slow and less discernible than other forms of changes. But the suddenness of the impact of the intense and intimate communication models since the advent of globalization and the internet and electronic technology have turned the changes in the cultural and civilizational spheres into a kind of Tsunami. These changes, many speculate, forebode clash between different civilizations and particularly between the external and the indigenous.

Today the world is changing and moving at an unheard of pace and the directions of the change and movements are unpredictable. Unprecedented changes in technology, business, environment, living models and patterns of politics and power have taken place, all of them cumulatively, and sweepingly and suddenly that their impact and consequences are unimaginably complex and are therefore extensively debated. The changes in the mode and technology of communications, particularly the electronic and internet modes, have exposed every place and people in the world to the others as if the changes are taking place in their neighbourhood and in front of everyone. This has had intense and immediate impact on culture and civilization of different societies. The new ideas and institutions driving globalization have made the situation even more complex.

Civilizations unprotected against internal decay and external threats perish:

- A civilization requires protection by its adherents for the civilization to protect them and their life style. History stands to prove that a civilization unprotected fails and also exposes its adherents to physical and philosophical death and destruction. A civilization requires protection against internal decay and against

external threat. Mankind has witnessed decline and decay and even withering of many once vibrant civilizations, and consequently their religious, military, political, demographic and sociological models due to their internal instability and weaknesses. The irony of civilizational decay is that the withering civilizations are seldom aware that they run the risk of decay by commission and omission and equally unaware that they have to work constantly to derisk themselves. More, they often mistake their cultural, philosophical or material superiority, once achieved, as an all time guarantee of their immortality. The generations living in the twilight zone are rarely aware of the impending darkness; often mistaking dusk for the dawn.

- The strategic thinkers, spiritual leaders and men of deep intellect and vision who suspend themselves from the impact of the obsessive present and can see beyond the time and space in which they live are the leaders who can set in motion correctives to avoid civilizational decay. But even they need to be motivated for synergized initiatives by a critical and conscious team of dedicated persons.
- History bears testimony to the fact that particularly non-aggressive civilizations and cultures are slow to perceive threats from outside and even fail to perceive it till they are almost decayed and dead. But ironically it is the non-aggressive civilizations of antiquity that hold the key to global peace and harmony particularly in the present context of the widely perceived clashes among civilizations and cultures. It is in the context of where the world stands today, that is the spectre of civilizational clashes looming large over it, that there is a need for a civilizational perspective with solution-driven and strategic foundation for promoting interface and dialogue among civilizations, particularly civilizations driven by religious beliefs.

Conflict Avoidance Model from the East

Many concede that conflict among civilizations is no more a remote possibility. Many think that we are already in the thick of it. Our low awareness of what we are in and what we are heading for, in itself has ominous portents. Developments at global level, in our

immediate neighbourhood and within our civil society are disturbing and have serious import for our civilizational survival. It is no more a subject of academic debate but it is part of the agenda of the United Nations itself.

In its November 2006 refer, the High Level Group set up within the framework of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations has aptly stated, “We live in an increasingly complex world, where polarized perceptions, fueled by injustice and inequality, often lead to violence and conflict, threatening international stability. Over the past few years, wars, occupation and acts of terror here exacerbated mutual suspicion and fear within and among societies. Some political leaders and sectors of the media as well as radical groups have exploited this environment, painting mirror images of the world made up of mutually exclusive cultures, religions or civilizations, historically distrust and destined for confrontation.” This statement is an admission that the world is in the throes of a large scale civilizational disturbances and clashes as a result of some civilizations driven by religious faiths claiming to be exclusive and some claiming to be universal, both producing the same result, namely clashes and violence not only between themselves but also as between them and those faiths and civilizations which fundamentally believe in diversity of faiths and cultures. Many leading thinkers of the world also have been theorizing on how the theologically exclusive and universalistic civilizations have the potential to generate large scale violence and clashes.

Though the High Level Group recognized the problem in its extensive form, but it limited its attention to the conflicts essentially between the ‘exclusive’ cultures, religions and civilizations which in substance means monotheistic phenomena of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, of course without mentioning them by name. It gave a number of suggestions with a view to moderating conflicts between them. This Abrahamic perspective to the whole issue of civilizational conflicts and the conflict avoidance models misses out the most majority of ancient civilizations of the east which have no potential for promoting conflict with other civilizations, and which on the other hand have great potentiality to provide solutions to the conflicts generated by the exclusive faiths, cultures and civilizations.

Because of its confined perspective the High Level Group of UN Civilizational Alliance did not look for any alternative model to avoid the risk of emerging civilizational clashes which other civilizations, particularly outside the West and the Middle East could provide. Nor did the Group weigh the contribution that their traits of acceptance, inclusiveness and flexibility could make to build a global mosaic of peace, harmony and mutual enrichment. The potentiality of the eastern faiths and civilizations to provide an alternative formula was expounded by a spiritual leader from India Swami Vivekananda over a century ago in the first World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in the year 1893. In his famous address Swami Vivekananda placed before the World Parliament of Religions the formula from the ancient East largely preserved in the Hindu-Buddhist geographies which had the potential to save the world from religious fanaticism and violence. This is what Swami Vivekananda told the religious leaders from all over the world at Chicago:

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful Earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often with human blood, destroyed civilization, and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now?

“But their time has come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions, with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.”

The spiritual master from the East pleaded as early as a century and more before for the death-knell of all fanaticism and persecutions with the sword or with the pen and of all other uncharitable feelings which would include even condescending ideas, ‘I am superior to you and yet I tolerate you’. He cited the Indian-Eastern alternative of acceptance of all faiths and life models as sacred as the formula for world peace. This formula is as valid and perhaps more valid today for avoidance of civilizational clashes and for bring about global civilizational harmony. Considering that this warning about

religious and sectarianism and the message that the World Parliament of Religions would sound the death-knell of all fanaticism was given in the US and is so relevant today, it is surprising that the High Level Group on Civilizational Alliance did not consider the potential of the Eastern Contribution to solution driven conflict avoidance models while dealing with the emerging issues of civilizational clashes. It is unfortunate that the Eastern Hindu-Buddhist clash de-risking model which Swami Vivekananda had unveiled before the most august gathering of religious and spiritual scholars of the world a century and more before was ignored by the 20th Century religious, political and social philosophers and leaders of the world till the high voltage violence that had incubated, exploded in the final years of the 20th Century and reached its high mark on September 11, 2001. With the result, the prophesy of Swami Vivekananda in 1893 that the time of fanaticism had come did not fructify till fanaticism announced itself on the global stage, to the view of the world on September 11, 2001, exactly 108 years after the spiritual monk from India had told the world about what fanaticism had done and was capable of and what was the solution for fanaticism and its yields.

Background to the Recent Civilizational and Religious Clases

The oil boom of the seventies in the Middle-East and availability of huge petro-dollars for the Islamic cause brought in a new element of far-reaching consequences in the global setting. The fundamentalist variant of Islam started eclipsing the moderate variety. Money started getting siphoned off to various parts of the world particularly in areas where Muslims constituted a sizeable minority, for propagating Wahabism and other forms of aggressive Islam. The success of jihad in subduing a superpower in Afghanistan leading to its eventual eviction gave a new confidence and experience to the Islamic zealots. September 11, 2001 was watershed point which demonstrated the reach, capability and commitment of jihadi groups to hit US in its homeland. Osama Bin Laden emerged as an icon to be emulated by all Muslim groups who felt that terror and violence were viable means of achieving their objectives.

Indian Scenario

India, the shone of several major ancient civilizations, is sandwiched in a widely extended Islamic region stretching from East of Europe to West of Australia which is increasingly coming under the influence of the extremist and violent forces within Islam.

GFCH – Genesis and Concept

Some highly informed and concerned individuals who had been closely monitoring and analyzing the global and indigenous civilizational trends felt that the world was inevitably hurtling into a self-destructive and increasingly conflict-prone mode in which all civilizations, and particularly the non-aggressive ones, stood seriously disadvantaged. They also viewed with concern the emerging “clash of civilizations” which meant essentially the clash between civilizations which have a historically proven tendency to clash without a formula for resolution of their disharmony. The clash may be prolonged and brutal and societies and communities which have large segments of minorities, particularly minorities linked with globally influential religions, dispersed over large areas (like in India) may suffer from it the most. The inherent strength and civilizational experience of non-aggressive civilizations, however, lie in their potential and capacity to promote conflict-avoidance and offer conflict resolution models. If imaginatively strategized and effectively executed, the non-aggressive civilizations, as Swami Vivekananda had envisioned in the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, could provide a solution to avert the apparently inevitable man-made calamity.

They organized a conclave in Ahmedabad (Gujarat State in India) from January 2 to 4, 2006 and extensively deliberated upon various aspects of the problems. A substantial number of delegates from abroad, particularly the US and UK, participated in the conference besides participants from different parts of the country. The foreign participants had been actively associated with a leading role in various cultural, social and religious activities in their respective countries. They concluded that a strategic

initiative from the Hindu, Buddhist and other ancient civilizations could be a unique experiment in promoting global harmony pursuing the twin-goals of conflict-avoidance and conflict-resolution. Their belief emerged from their civilizational experience of coexistence with total harmony for centuries despite pursuing diverse faiths, which is in contrast to the current perception that conflict-avoidance was not possible without the intervention of the state. It was visualized that a Global Foundation for Civilizational Harmony (GFCH) could be formed as a platform based on a non-conflicting paradigm which is founded on the conviction that all faiths are valid and sacred and therefore sees validity and sacredness in all faiths and believes that a harmonious relationship between them can be achieved based on that conviction. The GFCH will endeavour to highlight the contributions of all major faiths, harmonize them with modernity and strive to build a global society which can exist in harmony preserving their civilizational, cultural and religious identities and try to promote an intellectual and normative basis for a global society. In this endeavour the major initiative will have to come from non-conflicting civilizations which will try to effectively engage and build moral, intellectual, ideological and political pressures to induce everyone to adhere to a non-conflicting and accommodative course. The GFCH also will endeavour to change the notion that there is adversarial relation between modernity and tradition and will work to create compatibility between tradition and modernity.

The GFCH will endeavour for a paradigm shift in thinking from the now prevailing notion of tolerance of other faiths as the ideal to the ideal of acceptance of all faiths as valid and sacred to achieve peace and harmony based on mutual accommodation. Such re-orientation of thinking will promote positive complementarity among faiths and cultures, rather than reluctant and condescending tolerance of each other. The GFCH perceives a need for a thorough review of the benchmarks used to define the world's self-image. The GFCH will prepare the non-proselytizing, non-conflicting faiths for a global dialogue among themselves and also between them and the others. The GFCH considers the propensity to convert people of other faiths to one's own faith as a potentially violent idea as conversion resets upon the notion of some faith being superior to the other faiths.

It is the understanding of the GFCH that the battle for peace and harmony is to be waged at the global level for any country of people to live in peace. Today the aggressive forces of intolerance and violence are organized at the global level and lend support to all efforts to promote disharmony and violence at the global level and target different nations particularly nations like India that have a tradition of harmonious and peaceful co-existence. So the non-aggressive civilizations need global level networking with other civilizations of similar nature and all organizations and institutions which share the post-modern idea of peaceful co-existence by acceptance of all faiths as valid and sacred and not by the modern idea of tolerance of other faiths which is a condescending concept containing within itself seeds of violence.

Need for Synergized Strategic Response

Ancient and non-aggressive civilizations in their long history have faced challenges to their existence from time to time. However, strategic thinkers and a host of spiritual leaders emerged at critical junctures to meet the challenges of their times. It is no mere coincidence that despite hundreds of years of political dominance and religious persecution by aggressive faiths, these civilizations were able to survive, though profusely bled and beleaguered. It is an irony that India, free after centuries of dominance is confronted today with civilizational threats more acute than ever before. The ancient civilizations today need to carefully ponder over emerging threats and their leaders need to collectively strategize an effective and adequate response, which could ensure self-sustenance of a religiously diverse world order.

The response strategy could have the following guiding ingredients:

- a) There must be a determined effort to make different spiritual, religious and cultural institutions and leaders who have fundamental and philosophic conviction in non-aggressive approach to other civilizations, faiths and cultures, conscious of the need for a platform at the global level for networking to promote civilizational harmony through dialogue and

understanding, without any resulting hierarchy, among them and without any impact on their individual and distinct identity.

- b) A plan of action must be evolved to create awareness and commonality of interests among indigenous civilizations and to promote strategic thinking among them so as to network and force-multiply within the non-proselytizing and non-aggressive civilizations, which would lead to force-multiplying complementarity among them and solution-driven initiatives and actions by them in a coordinated manner.
- c) The common dangers and common interests must be highlighted to network and forge alliances with other non-proselytizing and non-aggressive civilizations on mutual interest.
- d) There must be an effort to address and involve civilizational groups linked to the Christian and Jewish faiths, sections of which, even though they have conflict of interests with non-aggressive civilizations. There must be an effort to make them conscious of the real need for a solution driven civilizational approach in the context of the increasing perception that militant Islam is the most potent threat at the current historical juncture. Concurrently, denominations among the Christians, like Russian Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, which are not fundamentally proselytizing in nature, could be leveraged to make global opinion against religious conversions which is amongst the principal reasons for civilizational disharmony particularly between the proselytizing faiths and non-aggressive Hindu-Buddhist faiths.
- e) This effort must reach a reasonable number of important institutions and individuals and acquire the legitimacy and the critical mass to engage leaders of opinion – religious and societal – in a creative dialogue to promote civilizational and religious harmony. This can be achieved only by promoting honest, frank and free exchange of views and not superficial discussions which are politically correct for the occasion but suppressing the truer feelings and emotions inside. The object will be to promote flexibility and mutual accommodation and coexistence in diversity. The moderates should be

supported in their efforts to extricate youth from the stranglehold of the fundamentalists.

Envisioned Tasks:

- a) The GFCH will strive for paradigm shift in thinking and work for capacity building and force multiplication for a dialogue and understanding to prevent any threat of violence and chaos resulting from the emerging clash of civilizations.
- b) Identifying and accessing credible organizations/individuals to explain to them the concept and vision of GFCH and enlist their support to promote networking among them to bring about synergy in their efforts.
- c) To undertake research studies, both directly and through outsourcing to develop strategic inputs and sharing it with academic and relevant NGOs. It will disseminate information through e-news letters, circulation of relevant features, news items etc. to concerned organizations/individuals.
- d) Building up a data bank of civilizationally relevant organizations and individuals. The data bank will work as knowledge resource center both for referencing, networking and research.
- e) To create awareness among people regarding civilizational threats, implications of various contemporary developments, possible responses etc. through meetings, seminars, publications etc. leveraging GFCH linked organizations.

How to work to promote civilizational and religious harmony through the vehicle of GFCH:

1. The GFCH seeks the support or association of institutions or individuals and such support and association with the cause of GFCH itself is a major contribution. It lends legitimacy to the effort and broadens its support base. The GFCH team would appreciate your supporting and propagating the idea during various meetings, congregations etc. attended by you in India and abroad.

2. The GFCH seeks the involvement of spiritual and religious leaders and institutions, intellectuals and academics, persons of influence in the society and anyone, not falling within the category of religious, spiritual, intellectual or influential persons, but, who has the desire and the drive to give time and to work for the cause.
3. The GFCH needs to access other organizations and people of eminence of different civilizational descent and get them interested/involved. Those who help to accomplish this agenda will make a major contribution for advancing the cause of civilizational harmony. Involvement of the religious, social, philanthropic organizations of stature will enable the initiative to acquire the desired critical mass required to exert moral and intellectual influence. Organizations and people of all faiths, belief systems and civilizations who subscribe to the idea of conflict avoidance and conflict resolution should be motivated.
4. The launch of the GFCH is proposed on January 22, 2008. We solicit your presence and active participation in this and also your ideas and suggestions to make it a big success.