



A Values-based World Order

Ashok Natarajan

Secretary and Senior Research Fellow, The Mother's Service Society, India;
Fellow, World Academy of Art & Science

Abstract

The challenges we face today can be transformed into opportunities if the motivation of short-term, myopic social values is replaced by commitment to psychological values such as unity, harmony, freedom and equality. Values are commonly dismissed as utopian ideals of little practical relevance, whereas in fact they possess an enormous power for self-realisation. A study of history makes this apparent. The utopian values espoused during the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, the Indian Independence Movement, the founding of the United Nations, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have gradually acquired the status of law and been transformed into globally accepted social standards and goals, as embodied in the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The article examines crucial socio-political issues and analyses the role of values in determining their outcome. Current social theory focuses mainly on the role of objective external factors such as economics, geography, and technology in determining the course of events. In doing so it overlooks or grossly underestimates the role of subjective factors such as rising social aspiration, acceptable norms of behavior and universal values. A valid theory of history must come to recognize and give due importance to the determining power of the psychological forces that govern the course of human events. This theory will confirm that the solution to humanity's problems lies along an evolutionary axis toward a values-based world order.

The world is far from being ideal, beset as it is with so many imperfections ranging from global disharmony, internal civil wars, terrorism, COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, environmental pollution, nuclear arms pile-up, unemployment and scores of other afflictions. These imperfections stem from our short-sight, greed for consumption, mutual mistrust and unwise economic policies etc. These can be remedied if the world reorganizes itself to function according to values such as unity, totality, harmony, human security, freedom and equality. The call to uphold values has been there from time immemorial voiced by religious prophets, wise men and philosophers etc. But these calls have never been taken seriously and so the world continues to remain badly organized and imperfect in many ways.

Values are often dismissed as idealistic platitudes which no one really intends to respect or act upon. But in reality they have an enormous power for self-realization, even though the time required may be measured in years, decades or even centuries. The idealistic values in the American Declaration of Independence did not bring about the abolition of slavery in USA until 90 years later. And the passage of the 13th Amendment was not effectively enforced to replace many forms of discrimination against Afro-Americans for another century. And

it took another 50-60 years for the first mixed race president and female vice-president to be elected in USA. But never doubt it was the power of the original values that was finally realized.

“When physical and economic insecurity are high, as they were during the two world wars and the Great Depression, authoritarianism can appear attractive to those in want and under threat. Strength and security first, freedom afterwards.”

Let us consider then the value of global unity. Global unity is a fairly recent concept, formulated after two disastrous world wars and the failure of the League of Nations to guarantee world peace. The League was replaced in 1945 by the United Nations, which was expected to be more effective in dealing with issues of war, peace and security. But the rapid onset of Cold War tensions between the U.S and Soviet camps quickly dispelled the illusion that peace had finally been secured. The aggressive spread of Communism in Southeast Asia aggravated the situation leading to American participation in the Korean War and Vietnam war.

Fortunately, Cold War tensions and the arms race declined following the collapse of Communism and fall of the Soviet empire. But though there have been some relative improvements from the peak tensions at the height of the Cold War, the world is still far from being united in global terms. It is still beset with Islamic terrorism, leaving Europe, North America and other nations apprehensive about where terrorists might strike next. Moreover, European and New World governments are also confused about how to appease terrorist groups and how far their demands can be met without sacrificing Western interests.

As if the terrorist threat is not enough, festering sores like the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir and the tensions between Palestinians and Israelis over Palestine still threaten to explode at any time. Given such an unsettled atmosphere, it remains to be seen how global unity can be maintained as a value. The world became truly global by the end of World War II. Consciousness of global interdependences remained very vague for newly independent Asian and African countries which were preoccupied with how to safeguard their newly won independence in the global arena. This was marked by anti-imperialistic rhetoric in UN and other international forums. But the dangers of economic recession spreading all over the world along with the existential threat of climate change and onset of the global pandemic have made many people realise the pressing need for global cooperation and cooperative human unity.

The great European empires of the 19th century, especially the British, had the opportunity to transform its empire into a showpiece model for world unity even before the onset of WWI, had it only acted with the same vision with which it granted independence to India a half century later. But the policies of the great imperial nations were short-sighted and they were only directed at exploiting their colonies for the welfare of their imperial masters

and nothing more. As a result, subject nations only grew increasingly resentful and started demanding their own independence. Their calls were met with some stiff resistance until the end of World War II. Even then, they exhibited no intention to renounce their overseas possessions. Then in less than two decades, the imperial enterprise of two centuries collapsed and vanished into thin air. Today, one would like to believe that the opportunity missed earlier can be attempted with hopes of some success in the 21st century.

Achieving and maintaining world unity demands that the leading nations understand the historical, geopolitical and cultural factors which govern national conduct and pardon the shortcoming and wrong doings of other member nations as they condone their own past lapses and national insufficiencies. Without such tolerance any sense of unity is impossible. In a country like India where joint families were prevalent till 1970s, the head of the joint family could maintain that semblance of unity only by overlooking the faults and wrong doings of other members of that family. When Germany lost the First World War, the victorious allies imposed such severe penalties on it that it generated fertile conditions for the outbreak of 2nd World War. The second time around, they reversed that earlier behavior. America's Marshall Plan supported the speedy recovery of the aggressor and transformed the former aggressor into a long-term ally.

The capacity to maintain unity also demands that nations are able to recognize the truth in the point of view of other nations. That recognition will enable them to remain friendly with other nations that they normally disapprove. Today the USA and China represent the two polar ends of the values spectrum—liberal capitalist America has been extolling the supreme value of individual freedom and minimizing the responsibility of the collective for individual welfare. China has been subordinating and suppressing political freedom to rule by the communist party while implementing development strategies which have raised hundreds of millions out of poverty. While the extremes are bound in competition, Europe has sought a more balanced reconciliation of the two values in social democracy, which is itself under pressure from the neoliberal onslaught that followed the end of the Cold War and globalization of the world economy. The right balance is yet to be attained and the conflicting value systems divide societies and nations, refueling competitive nationalism and Cold War tensions.

China's remarkable achievements in recent decades demonstrate that liberal capitalism is not the only route to development, but even in far less developed democracies such as India, there is no evidence that the population is willing to forego its democratic rights for greater material benefits and the nation persists in seeking a reconciling middle way. Even in the West, social conformity had far more prevalent value in the early stages of its development than when the same nations reached a higher stage of prosperity. From this we may conclude that when physical and economic insecurity are high, as they were during the two world wars and the Great Depression, authoritarianism can appear attractive to those in want and under threat. Strength and security first, freedom afterwards. In a market economy, employment is the essential condition for economic freedom. Without an assured income for economic survival, political freedom loses much of its appeal, and populations are easily swayed by populist rhetoric that attributes their woes to immigrants, religion or ethnic minorities.

Therefore, it appears that understanding and respect for the differences in different cultures and stages of development are an essential precondition for fostering global unity in future.

Totality of understanding—a comprehensive, inclusive, total vision—is another value that we must cherish if we want the world to be a better place for us to live. Human vision is characteristically partial. Totality or a whole viewpoint is not natural to the human mind, which thrives on dividing reality into smaller and smaller bits. But whether we are partial or total, good living demands a total vision and if such totality is absent it generates problems. The environmental pollution that we are facing today is the result of an exclusive preoccupation with greater production and consumption without regard for its impact on the sustaining environment on which all life depends. The preoccupation with the wholesale exploitation of natural resources to support unbridled consumption to meet ever-rising demands and expectations is unsustainable. It is equally true that the earth's capacity for absorbing waste is limited and that our lifestyle must remain within that carrying capacity of the planet. Today we are reaping the consequence of mindless uncontrollable behavior arising from a partial viewpoint. Climate change is the direct result. The alarming disappearance of the polar ice caps threatens to bring about flooding of all coastline areas, displacing tens of millions living there.

If our approach to the earth lacks a total vision, our approach to our economic affairs is similarly deficient. Economy is only a part of Society and fully integrated with other aspects of social life. Rising levels of inequality have profound political and social consequences which undermine the stability, shared identity and social harmony on which society depends for its existence. We have forgotten such an integration and continue to treat economics as something separate and independent with little relevance to other aspects of our life. The steady and increasing recognition of human rights naturally drives up the price of labor, a natural result of social progress. But economists view only its economic impact on profits and strive to prevent it, oblivious of its deeper social significance and essential role in social evolution. If the price of human labor goes up, naturally the products of that labor will also go up and that will come in the market as higher cost of goods in store shelves. The long practised policy of central banks to raise interest rates to prevent inflation as unemployment falls below what were once considered “natural levels” is now being discarded as a trade off which benefits the wealthy elite at the expense of the masses. If only we had a whole perspective, we will be able to look at inflation as a sign of increasing social development, instead of an unwanted affliction. So too the mythical notion of what constitutes too much national debt is now being discarded to confront the demands of the pandemic for quantitative easing and other forms of economic stimulus because even the wealthy have come to realize their dependence on the working class to support the economy.

1. Trust and Harmony

Mutual trust and Harmony are essential values for building a peaceful progressive world order. And these two values are difficult to sustain in times of rapid change and increasing uncertainty. Today people around the world express a steep decline in their trust for social institutions, including national governments, business and the media. The greatest trust today

is placed in the medical profession and science, but even that is under threat by populists who reject COVID-19 vaccine or debunk the dangers of climate change for one reason or another.

“What prevented the UN General Assembly from drafting and bringing to effect in 1970 the UN Treaty on Prevention of Nuclear War, which came into effect five decades later in January 2021? Did it really require a half century for these nations to recognize the existential threat of these weapons? What prevents the whole world from doing so now?”

Restoring trust in our institutions and social harmony should begin with restoring trust in the media, which has been severely undermined by the rapid expansion of unregulated social media. The press, which was once considered the last bastion of freedom, a role it has played well since the French Revolution, is now under attack from those who use the media to manipulate public opinion by false assertions and fabricated information powered by algorithms that can spread deceit far and wide faster than any regulatory body can act. The freedom which protects the public from arbitrary suppression by governments leaves it completely vulnerable to the onslaught of fabricated and strongly partisan news. If a government is unable or unwilling to act, then an independent international authority, similar perhaps to the World Wide Web Consortium, should be constituted by organizations such as WAAS, the Nobel Peace Prize Laureates, Wikipedia or the like to establish an independent authority to rate major media sources globally on criteria such as objectivity, rationality and non-partisanship and the procedures they have in place to prevent the dissemination of false news for political, commercial or social purposes. Without reestablishing trust in the media, fostering social harmony within and between nations—preconditions for effective democracy—cannot succeed.

Surely, we cannot expect to have the earth peopled with only those who are in alignment with our own values and beliefs. As the earth houses grassy plains, steamy jungles, hot deserts and polar ice caps all within its borders, so must human society house within its confines monotheistic worshippers along with polytheistic believers and atheists, sedentary agriculturalists along with mobile nomads, those who prefer individual freedom to social conformity, human security to national military preparedness. The evolution of humanity bears witness to the facts that human beings are quite capable of accommodating people of different cultures and religions. Polytheistic Hindus and monotheistic Muslims lived side by side in India for many centuries before going their separate ways.

A chief impediment to harmony is the human tendency to be possessive about the land and other natural resources that they are familiar with. The Arabs have lived in Palestine for many centuries and they are unable to reconcile themselves with Asiatic and European Jews coming back to live there claiming that this was their ancient homeland. Similarly, the

Indian state of Karnataka is unable to share the waters of river Cauvery that passes through its borders with neighboring Tamil Nadu, through which also the river passes before emptying into the sea. Just because the river originates in that state, Kannadigas claim it to be their river unmindful of the fact that a good section of the river traverses through Tamil Nadu also. What both Kannadigas and Tamilians are forgetting is that both are Indians and that both have equal rights for sharing Cauvery water treating it as a common national resource.

Disputes over land and water can only be solved if the concerned people come forward to be broad-minded and not be so petty as before. Religious differences between Catholics and Protestants that have occasioned many wars in Europe have mellowed enough to allow both factions of Christians to live in the same state as is being done in many European countries now. The same type of broad-mindedness is expected of Palestinians and Israelis now so that both can amicably live together instead of perennially quarrelling. It is all the more urgent given the fact that Israel is a country with nuclear weapons, the use of which can bring about great destruction. A similar give and take approach is necessary between India and Pakistan over Kashmir for which both countries are fighting from 1947 onwards. It is true that a majority of Kashmiris are Muslims and as such Pakistan has a rightful claim over Kashmir. It is also equally true that India regards the division of Kashmir on religious grounds a direct contradiction to the inclusive secular principles and cultural heritage on which the religious, linguistic and ethnic groups are united and living in relative harmony as a single nation and feel that any abrogation of that fact constitutes an attack on the soul of the nation.

Differences between the rich and poor have long been a cause for major disharmony between people. The French peasantry supported the French Revolution against the aristocracy, clergy and monarchy because of the unconscionable inequity of wealth distribution between commoners and the elite, supported by high levels of taxes on the poor and broad exemptions for the wealthy. The Russian Revolution was triggered by Lenin's proclamation to the Common Russians that they can emerge from their poverty and enjoy prosperity only if they can get rid of their Czar and the Russian aristocrats sided with him. It is hoped that the SDGs formulated by the UN will help reduce the enormous gap between rich and poor nations and between the classes within nations. Doing so would vastly reduce the sources of material insecurity, political conflict, social unrest, and violence so prevalent at a time when the world is more prosperous than ever before in history.

What prevented the UN General Assembly from drafting and bringing to effect in 1970 the UN Treaty on Prevention of Nuclear War, which came into effect five decades later in January 2021? Did it really require a half century for these nations to recognize the existential threat of these weapons? What prevents the whole world from doing so now? For decades Pakistan has fueled paranoia about the threat of Indian aggression to justify the necessity of military rule at home, at enormous expense to the prosperity of its own people and that of its neighbors.

Human civilization can only thrive on the basis of safety and security. That safety has been endangered now with the introduction of nuclear weapons and the persistent threat of nuclear holocaust. The two world wars of the 20th century which caused the death of more than

60 million people were a big blow to the security of the world. The world survived those two disasters only to be followed by the Cold War confrontation between the US camp and the Soviet camps that lasted nearly 45 years while the world lived under incessant fear of nuclear annihilation. Those tensions ceased following the end of the Cold War but now appear to be rearing their heads with the beginning of a new nuclear arms race threatening the safety and security of the whole world. The threat persists because the Nuclear Powers still possess a considerable number of nuclear weapons and refuse to sign a law that paves the way for abolishing these weapons. Moreover, terrorist attacks stemming from terrorist groups operating from the Middle East have cast a shadow of fear all across Europe and North America and made people feel very insecure about moving in the public. Governments are not willing to listen to terrorist demands or negotiate any settlement with them. The free availability of guns to the American public has endangered public safety in the US and the American government is finding it difficult to pass any law tightening gun control owing to the defense of the gun lobby and resistance from those who believe in the right to carry arms for self-defense. Added to all these woes is the arrival of COVID-19 which has made domestic and foreign travel very unsafe.

“Terrorism as a global threat will disappear only when its root causes are addressed.”

The world community seems to have a very casual attitude about its own safety. Occasionally the world public erupts in protest, as in the protest march by the million Moms in Washington D.C some 30 years ago after more than 15 students were murdered in a school shoot-out in Colorado. For another 25 years, the world community largely ignored the climate threat until a Swedish student awoke to danger of global warming and enlisted millions of students around the world to support actions to combat climate warming. Recently, world governments have tightened the flow of funds for terrorist purposes and the UN has started labelling states that support terrorism as rogue states. In spite of some effect, support for terrorism persists. The world community needs to introduce more stringent punishment for those who indulge in terrorism. Recently a New Zealand Court imposed life imprisonment without any parole for a terrorist who gunned down worshippers in a mosque. But terrorism as a global threat will disappear only when its root causes are addressed. As a doctor cleans the patient’s sore and applies medication and proper bandage, the world community must come forward to address legitimate complaints rather than simply condemning the violence of those who see no other way in which to protest against perceived injustice.

2. Equality

Equal economic opportunities and social benefits have long been a dream of humanity since the dawn of civilization. But equality has remained a distant dream and societies have always remained divided and unequal in political, economic and social rights and power, even in societies founded on strong egalitarian principles. When Socialism began to gain ground in late 18th century Europe, socialist philosophers envisioned models of a classless society. But it was Karl Marx who came up with what he called Scientific Socialism in the form of his Communist Theories. The Soviet Union became the first Socialist state in 1920.

It did raise the lowest levels of the society with assured education and employment, but the inequality of power, privilege and wealth remained far from the ideal. Instead of the withering away of the State, the state became all-powerful and began persecuting enemies of the Socialist Revolution, real or imaginary, by the millions. When President Gorbachev relaxed some of the state controls with a view to making Communism more people-friendly, the movement acquired a momentum of its own and ended up unravelling the Soviet state and empire and the communist system itself.

Inequality is deeply embedded in law and social institutions, so much so that even 150 years after passage of the 14th Amendment in America, Afro-Americans and women still struggle for equality before the law. The roots of the inequality lie not in the institutions but in the consciousness of the society that is rooted in the quest and worship of power rather than justice. It is social power that governs law and institutions and it is the human ego's quest for domination that presides over more idealistic values.

The dissolution with idealism has occurred after every forward progress, from the French Independence and the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement. Still the world seeks to attain the highest values it espouses and values once placed on paper have an inevitable tendency toward realization in life. As the world has found out that Communism has many shortcomings in its practical application, it is now searching for a more effective approach to abolishing global poverty and ushering in an era of global plenty.

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, none of the signatory countries were willing to accord the UDHR the status of law or grant powers to enforce it. Yet these values constitute the very foundation of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by 193 nations in 2015 with a commitment to achieve the targets by 2030. The 17 SDGs address the full range of human needs including the abolition of poverty, hunger, provision of clean water, housing and enabling gender equality and safeguarding the environment from pollution etc. Taken together they constitute a complete formula for Human Security. Experts estimate the investments needed to achieve them range from 2.5 to 5 trillion U.S. dollars per year or more, depending on what is included. A sum looks fantastic, the attempt daunting, yet the world possesses more than sufficient resources to achieve Agenda 2030 in time, even now, if only it is fully committed. The Conscious Capitalism movement has been channeling an increasing volume of funds for this purpose. The fulfillment of those commitments appears unlikely, but none can doubt that nations around the world are making decisions and investments in support of realizing them. That is the power of an idea once accepted and enunciated. Values are power.

Where there is a will, there surely is a way. Many tasks considered impossible were achieved because some man came up with an idea that these could be achieved. When the vast majority of Indians were resigned to being ruled by the British, Mahatma Gandhi came up with an idea that freedom could be won using Satyagraha. He followed it up with an action program that brought the results by 1947, though it took 27 years. Franklin D. Roosevelt became President of the USA in the midst of the Great Depression and the worst banking crisis in American history, which had defied every remedy over the previous three years. FDR

assured the people that the banking crisis could be ended if only the people recovered faith in themselves and the nation. The people responded to his call and saw to their amazement that the banking crisis was overcome in a matter of days.

When Europe was paralyzed with fear, convinced that the Nazi juggernaut was unstoppable, the lone voice of Winston Churchill, the wartime British Prime Minister, claimed that the Nazis could be stopped and defeated. The German attack on Britain failed and the Germans withdrew within three months. Within five years the Nazi war machine broke down and brought Germany to its knees.

The same can be the case with the present task of achieving the implementation of the 17 SDGs within the time frame predicted. At present this initiative has been taken by the U.N. and there is some amount of awareness at the governmental level across the world. But any revolution needs to be mass-based, if it is to deliver results at all. Voltaire and Rousseau may have given the theoretical framework for the French Revolution. But it is the enthusiastic people's participation that enabled the dethroning of the royalty and installation of the revolutionary regime. In a similar way, if ordinary citizens become convinced that a global Prosperity Movement is possible, they will not rest until it is achieved.

In the 90s talking about a monthly income of 100,000 rupees for an Indian family sounded like a fantastic idea. But in 2020 after the arrival of the IT industry, such an income has become commonplace. Young men are not able to find a bride unless they are earning an income of that level or more. If this is possible in India, which was a bastion of poverty, what is not possible on the global scale if globally this movement wins the support of the global community?

Author contact information

Email: ashokmirra@gmail.com



Cadmus

Promoting Leadership in Thought that Leads to Action

Help us improve Cadmus Journal with your comments and suggestions. Your feedback matters to us! Please take this quick [survey](#) online.