

## BOOK REVIEW

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*Bahudhā and the Post 9/11 World.* Balmiki Prasad Singh.  
Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

As Mahatma Gandhi reminded us, in darkness there is always light, and in the most troubled times there are always voices seeking solutions rather than emphasising the problems. This timely work is, as its author states, “an individual’s effort to seek a way of reconciling the disturbing disorder of our times” (p.xvii). Appropriately enough it has a foreword by that apostle of peace and reason, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet. Its author, Balmiki Prasad Singh, now the Governor of Sikkim and formerly Culture Secretary (1995-97) and Home Secretary (1997-99) in the Government of India, was serving as one of the Executive Directors of the World Bank representing India, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in Washington on 9/11, when the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon took place. Clearly there were many—indeed an overwhelming majority of America’s leaders—whose first thoughts were of war. But as history already tells us, a more thoughtful and considered response was actually needed.

John Lennon, quoted here in the opening lines, *imagined*, we might say dared to imagine, a different world, one in which mankind could live as one. Like Gandhi he paid the ultimate price despite his hopes of peace, and how that world might be created was left to others to dream of, and to plan. Already we live in an interdependent world, as the earlier and subsequent attacks on Mombassa, Mumbai, Bali and a host of other places has demonstrated. But the question remains; how might this world be one of peace and harmony?

The concept of *Bahudhā* (from the Sanskrit *bahu*, meaning many forms, ways, or paths; adverbialised by *dhā*), which might be best rendered in English as ‘pluralism’, is the model advanced here as a solution to the problems of humanities’ multiple conflicting aims. The term is used here, “to suggest an eternal reality or continuum, a dialogue of harmony, and peaceful living in society” (p.xiii). It is a multi-layered concept, allowing the centrality of diverse religions in the modern world yet reflecting also an essential humanism, involving a

deep respect for others which facilitates dialogue between individuals and states.

*Bahudhā and the Post 9/11 World* begins by situating the modern world in a historical context which emphasises the eternal centrality of government to society. At its most basic, a compact exists between ruler and ruled, ideally the former expressing the will of the latter. In the context of Indian society, the second chapter considers the Vedic worldview, born in the conflicts of migration into the Punjab under Indra's banner, but through the philosophical and spiritual speculation and revelations of the Vedic poets, the *rsis*, emerging with an understanding of the necessity of respect for the points of view of others. In the more morally complex, even ambiguous message of the Epics, conflict resolution emerged in a Dharma-based moral order, with Dharma the central foundation of social harmony. Here perhaps, the author might have gone further, for, as I understand that concept, the ultimate authority in deciding what the Buddhists call 'right action' in the context of an individual's *varnashramadharma* is the individual themselves, which implies our own individual responsibility to community and as global citizens.

The Indian heritage absorbs, generally peacefully, many cultures within its own, thus allowing multiculturalism. But the Vedic world and its inheritors were not without fault, for as the author stresses, the failure to allow the education of women and the creation of untouchability (scheduled castes) outside of *varna* were both detrimental to progress, and in the modern world, anachronistic and anti-national. Yet from that Vedic heritage, the experience of conflict resolution produced individuals and an over-arching ideology that is relevant to much of the problems of today's world and the question of solutions to those problems. As we read in chapters Four and Five, that heritage has produced 'pathfinders'—Mahavira, the Buddha, Guru Nanak, and others who showed how we might live peacefully, and 'builders' such as Vivekananda, Gandhi, and Tagore who further added to that development of righteous living with their addition of such crucial concepts as non violence to the earlier lessons. India also produced rulers such as Ashoka, (for whom Dharma became a state policy), Akbar, and Nehru, who at least reflected those ideals, recognised their validity, and generally tried to implement them in society.

Seeking to explore these ideals further the author visited places in Kerala, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Assam, "to bring out how the common people in India retain the essence of harmonious living

and manage crises and conflicts...in their everyday life....” (p.195). He found that amidst great cultural change religious culture survives, and that where—as in Naxalite Jharkhand—communication and dialogue has broken down, conflict follows. At the other end of the spectrum in places such as Hajo—and one thinks also of Rewalsar in Himachal—religious distinctions break down, and social harmony is enhanced. Thus might *Bahudhā* be seen, as Part Three is entitled, as “an Instrument of Public Policy for Harmony.” One thinks of this pluralist ethos in the closely related context of Bhutan’s concern with Gross National Happiness. In a land neighbouring India this is a genuine enquiry into alternatives to what often seems the world’s primary concern with violent enforcement of ideological goals.

After considering the rise of the secular West, shaped by the philosophies of Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and so on, the author advances the concept of *Bahudhā* as a means of conflict resolution through which there can be “persevering and attempting to solve problems according to the principles of peace,” (p.240), and then discusses what needs to be done to achieve this. The dangers of fundamentalism are ever present. In India, for example, there has been the recent stain of events in Gujarat, but as stated here, much of this tendency can be eliminated through education for all. It is through knowing other paths that they can be respected, and the wider idea of one truth and many paths be understood. Prejudice flourishes best among the uneducated.

In discussing the “International Political Architecture” (Chapter 11), the author points out the agreement between *Bahudhā* and the core philosophy of the United Nations as well as the fundamental principles of democracy. Can, he asks, we turn these ideals into reality and make *Bahudhā* a global creative venture—a cornerstone of the plural society and liberal democracy? Such questions need to be constantly asked, and it should be no surprise if the best solutions tend to be age-old, because people of goodwill have asked them throughout history.

If the solutions are to be applied, education is indeed a key, and this work would make an excellent textbook for schools. It is a scholarly and humane work, eminently readable and drawing on a wide range of sources and experiences. It represents the voice of reason that must be heard if our species and its world are to long survive.

