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## **The Cure for the Ostrich Syndrome**

By Siddhartha

Gandhi believed in truth force. He was guided by what could be called 'relative' truth since 'absolute' truth could not be attained by any human being. The quest for truthful reflection and action was central to his philosophy, unlike the ostrich-syndrome that we are witnessing today, where we bury our head in the sand to avoid seeing the truth.

In many parts of the world the ostrich-syndrome is evident in our page three media culture, which is all about film stars, cricket, shopping, eating out and celebrities. Instead of focusing attentively on the problems before us we are ready to embrace distraction. The ostrich-syndrome leads to a de-politicization of daily life, where we do not take responsibility for what is happening around us, where we are unable to become engaged citizens. This is happening to large numbers of the middle classes who seem largely unconnected with the major problems that their societies are facing.

Of course there is the well meaning minority of people who feel that we have gone too far down the road to perdition to reverse the trend of ecological catastrophe and social chaos. There are others who believe they have to oppose the present form of globalization, and in small ways they are creating an awareness of issues, even if they have not thrown up a sufficient range of workable alternatives. Yet, it is the latter who matter, for as the crisis deepens the alternatives they are grappling with will come under sympathetic scrutiny and serve as the cornerstones for new directions in our social, political and economic life.

But let us dwell a little more on the ostrich-syndrome and the culture of indifference that it spawns.

### **Mutation of Human consciousness**

A few days after the twin towers of the World Trade Centre was demolished President Bush famously said: "We can't let the terrorists stop us from shopping." Nine-eleven was a great human tragedy, but remorse could not be allowed to deter people from shopping for too long. The system depended on shopping. So, grief had to be put aside to return to the shopping mall.

Shopping is a form of amnesia where the practice of citizenship is consumed by the consumer. One no longer has to take one's social and political responsibilities seriously. In India, for example, most of the middle classes do not even go and vote. Consumerism has deformed human consciousness; some might argue that a mutation has already taken place. If this is the case the ostrich is not even capable of knowing that it has buried its head in the sand, and that it has a distorted view of reality.

Consumerism is not about fulfilling human wants, but the attempt to satisfy 'created' needs. New desires are invented and a feeling of inadequacy haunts a person unless he or she tries to gratify these desires. Individual material satisfaction overtakes social responsibility and political action. Everything may be going wrong in the world from a social and ecological perspective, but the consumer is cocooned in his world of fantasy and material gratification.

For the middle and upper classes particularly, the shopping mall has become the new temple. This might sound like a cliché, but its underlying truth is being secured day by day.

Most types of modern employment end up being alienating. Consumerism steps in to create a world of fantasy and lessen the alienation. But it cannot lessen one's alienation since it is based on the creation of inadequacies. The moment a person buys something he or she feels it is insufficient and the feeling of

inadequacy returns. Not only does consumer society produce human needs, it produces the consumer itself. We experience our identity as consumers over and above all other forms of identities.

The possibility of personal choice is offered so that the individual is better integrated in the system. You may buy a particular brand of cell phone, thus personalizing your purchase. But in the end, objects and beliefs are personalized so that you may get better dazzled and hooked.

Commodification has desacralised the world. Nothing is sacred anymore. We are free to destroy forests if we find minerals there. We will pollute earth, sea and air because consumerism cannot do otherwise. We do not read much poetry anymore, not because we do not have time, but because dwelling on intimate feelings and sensibilities that do not contribute to the consumer weltanschauung can threaten the ostrich syndrome within which we are so comfortable.

One reaction to this wasteland of the soul is the emergence of religious fundamentalism. Another is joining charismatic religious movements which can compensate for the appearance of meaninglessness through the forgetfulness that chanting, singing, dancing and spiritual euphoria brings. For some, particularly in the west, drugs like ecstasy help tide through the drudgery of social life.

### **The experience of community as an anti-dote**

But insights from the different religious and spiritual traditions may help us break out of the ostrich-syndrome. Socrates was right when he said: "Learning consists of remembering knowledge that has lived in the soul of human beings for many generations." And religions and spiritualities, properly interpreted and understood, are an ongoing learning process. Experiencing a sense of community is integral to this remembering and learning.

It is only through deepening our sense of community that we can open the springs of compassion. The horizontal dimension of spiritual fulfillment through our inter-relationship with each other is the only way forward. Indigenous societies refer to the inter-connectedness of all things. We are connected with water, mountains, animals and each other. In a somewhat similar vein Buddhism talks about dependent-origination. Nothing is autonomous in itself. All things are dependent on each other. The story of Indra's net bears witness to this: There is a net where each of the knots is a sparkling diamond. A superficial observance may conclude that the thousands of diamonds in the net are showing off their individual dazzle. But on closer examination we realize that each diamond represents the reflection of all the other diamonds in the net. The individual origin of the glitter was only an illusion. Hinduism talks about love of the personal God overflowing into love for all human beings. 'All the world is one human family', is an ancient Indian expression that emphasizes the unity of humankind.

Mahatma Gandhi spoke of this inter-connectedness when he said, "I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity. My countrymen are my nearest neighbors. They have become so helpless, so resourceless, so inert that I must concentrate on serving them. If I could persuade myself that I should find Him in a Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity."

Today the shopping mall has become the Himalayan cave that Gandhi did not want to escape into. Only a return to the experience of community, in one form or another, can cure this malaise and help us see the social and ecological precipices we are poised on.

Forms of horizontal spirituality, such as the one Gandhi practiced, may be of vital importance to deal with the ostrich-syndrome that we discussed. Horizontal implies that we are connected with each other in community. God , or whatever else we wish to name the experience by, can only be meaningfully discovered through our relations with other human beings. We need to develop a consciousness and vision that is different from what consumer society offers us. As long as the ostrich-syndrome persists the 'malling of the world' will continue with its dreadful social and ecological consequences.

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