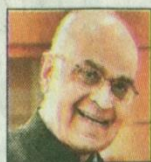


How To Be Vishwa Guru

India must stop squandering its strengths and help solve today's global problems

Bhanu Dhamija



Making Bharat a Vishwa Guru – a reformer and teacher to the entire world – is a grand endeavour. The BJP-RSS combine adopted this courageous mission more than a decade ago. But the chances are they will fail. Their quest is rooted in India's past, not her present, and it lacks a practical approach. Instead of utilising the tremendous strengths offered the country by its glorious past, their tactics are squandering them. This is not helping the world solve its problems of the day.

Being a Vishwa Guru would make all Indians proud. We all yearn for the glory of those days when our people reached the pinnacle of thought, achieved great understanding of the divine, and invented excellent ways of living.

However, India cannot simply reclaim such a position; it must be earned afresh. Our people will have to do the necessary tapasya once again, with new thinking for modern times. We can be guru only if the global community acknowledges us as such; we cannot thrust our gurudom upon them.

What it takes to be a guru was described by Swami Vivekananda, the man who first gave India this aspiration. In his 1901 essay *My Master* he wrote: "If you wish to be a true reformer, three things are necessary. The first is to feel. Do you really feel for your brothers? ... Are you full of that idea of sympathy? ... You must think next if you have found any remedy. The old ideas may be all superstition, but in and around these masses of superstition are nuggets of gold and truth. Have you discovered means by which to keep that gold alone, without any of the dross? If you have done that ... one more thing is necessary. What is your motive? Are you sure that you are not actuated by greed of gold, by thirst for fame or power? ... Then you are a real reformer, you are a teacher, a Master, a blessing to mankind."



India's claim to world guru status is based upon old thinking: Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, the world is one family. We argue that since we were the first to say so, and the only people who follow the precepts, we are uniquely qualified to be the world's guru. It may well be true, but nobody is buying it. All religions claim moral superiority. And the way BJP and RSS are making the case, we look like all other religions. Consider RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's recent appeal: "Let the entire world regain its lost balance on the basis of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and walk in the path of righteousness," led by "a Bharat that is capable of restoring the world's balance of Dharma."

Today if India wishes to be viewed as an exceptional country, it must offer new solutions to modern-day problems. The problems of diversity, religious extremism, inequality and authoritarianism are desperately seeking new answers.

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Indologists would of course argue that their solution is hidden in the Vedas and Mahabharat. Christians and Muslims say the same about their holy books.

This is not to say India doesn't have unique strengths. In fact it has the rare combination of a universal philosophy, inherently tolerant religion, good size country, young population, democracy,

and diversity that no other nation can match. The key is to put these strengths to good use instead of squandering them. Here are some suggestions.

First, India must invent a new system of government that shows the world a way forward in dealing with diverse populations. This can be done by providing a combination of local autonomy and national supremacy. It can be a model for other countries to manage their 'unity-in-diversity'. Instead, India has been busy denying local controls and forcing strong central governments.

Second, India can become a global role model in controlling religious fanaticism. Religious minorities cannot be wished away or governed by force forever. India must find a way to give her minorities a fair share in power, so that they become true partners in rebuilding our nation. But the BJP-RSS are earning a name for imposing Hinduism on all.

Those who think, like Subramanian Swamy, that Hindu unity and hegemony are essential for the short term do not realise the long term harm being done to Hinduism's prestige worldwide and practice at home. A religion of inquiry is being turned into a religion of fanaticism.

Third, India can also find a balance of capitalism and socialism that the world could follow. It can do so by limiting the role of government while keeping the best practices of a welfare state. Instead, in its search for power, BJP is adopting the old ways of vote-grabbing socialism.

Fourth, people across the globe are suffering under autocratic governments. India can show a way forward. It has one of the world's most entrenched democracies, but our people's participation is limited to voting. India can build a strong model of participatory democracy by decentralising its institutions. Instead, it is doubling down on the Nehruvian model of centralisation of power.

Of course, these problems are immense. Becoming a Vishwa Guru, after all, is no easy feat.

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