

# ***THE MILLENNIUM WORLD PEACE SUMMIT OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LEADERS***

## **The Reduction of Human and Societal Tensions through the Elimination of Poverty**

New York, USA, August 2000

Proposal of

### **BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY**

*“When our true hearts are presented in front of God, He will definitely work through us  
and all will be accomplished.”*

*B. K. Janki*

All of our great faith traditions speak of a time when we lived in harmony with each other and with nature and there was plenty for all. They speak of a time of virtue and richness in which every human being had everything in abundance. We are accustomed to taking such descriptions as a glimpse into a better and happier past but perhaps we should also see them as a vision of the future. It is a vision that we must embrace to inspire us and give focus to our efforts for the goal of the elimination of poverty.

We need to hold on to such a vision since, as we all know too well, we live today in a world where grinding poverty is the norm for many members of our human family. However, we must not accept or tolerate such a situation just because it is familiar – it is an affront to the dignity of the human person and we need a vision such as this that sets the standard that we should strive for and spurs us to action. The vision challenges our faith, will and ingenuity too. Simply to alleviate poverty is a daunting task in itself and so the aim of eliminating it is a still higher hurdle. Nevertheless, we must not allow ourselves to give up hope and faith in our vision and that it can, and will, be achieved.

The various consequences of poverty are numerous and familiar to us but we can easily forget that they are often the causes of poverty as well, so creating a vicious cycle that can hold generations in its relentless grip. Thus disease, inadequate education, over-population, disempowerment of communities, an unproductive or barren environment, injustice, prejudice, discrimination, anti-social and violent behaviour, are all part of the overall self-perpetuating tragic equation, the sum of which almost invariably comes out to be total misery. Given the multi-faceted nature of this Gordian knot, how can we break free of its ties and regain that lost age of harmony and plenty? In this regard, it will be useful to consider various aspects of poverty with a deeper, more spiritual perspective before attempting to craft an approach for its long-term elimination.

The above social ills, and others, that contribute to creating and sustaining poverty are easy to see all over the world. Looking more deeply behind these various causes, one can see that almost invariably they are ultimately just symptoms of a deeper social affliction: a crisis of moral and spiritual values and principles. For example, behind the poverty engendered by an environment in which farmers may not grow crops often lies lack of respect for nature. Behind the inability of some people, including residents of rich countries, to obtain and keep gainful employment often lies discrimination and prejudice based on racial, religious, caste or gender grounds. Likewise, greed, dishonesty, selfishness and corruption among those in positions of power or authority can prevent manual workers, families or virtually an entire community from escaping from exploitation or modern-day slavery. So also, the lack of educational and training opportunities that deprives many of the chance to acquire literacy and other skills that they could use to earn a proper income can in many cases be traced back to

the aggressiveness and arrogance that leads to national education budgets being spent on arms and indulgent follies.

While looking beyond the superficial causes of poverty it is also interesting to take a deeper look at poverty and wealth themselves. First appearances can be deceptive. In the present scenario of round-the-clock markets and the so-called new economy, much money has gone into the hands of some people – and often done so very quickly too. Yet in many cases, however, fortunes that were acquired virtually overnight evaporated just as quickly. Riches that appeared with relatively little effort transpired to be the product of a bubble economy that suddenly burst, shrinking the new “wealth” as it did so. The foundation on which the wealth was built was weak, and its true nature misunderstood, much of it being based on sentiment, often greed and blind hope, rather than any fundamental substance. In an age of unlimited information, and when loss-making companies can be “worth” billions, we have forgotten wisdom, the true meaning of value and measure of wealth.

So also, there are many instances of people who live in desperate physical conditions and yet maintain an inner treasure of honour and dignity of far greater value than anything possessed by others who have bulging bank accounts but hollow hearts and bankrupt souls

The deeper and more significant look on life afforded by spirituality can be of enormous help in trying to make sense of all this. It enables us to see that the true cause of poverty is a poverty of values; it is the dishonesty and injustice, greed and over-indulgence, materialistic selfishness and possessiveness that have made us poor. This loss of values first robs us of our honour and dignity and ultimately leads to poverty on a physical level too. Those who are honest and steeped in integrity, who respect and generously share with others, seeking to give rather than take, are the ones who have true wealth. They have internal riches now and, in due course if not now, external riches too.

The foremost value in this regard is honesty. Honesty is the foundation of trusteeship, which, requiring proper use to be made of assets, is thus a major building block for the elimination of poverty in society. An honest person appreciates the interconnectedness of the natural world and does not misuse, abuse or waste the wealth of resources provided for the well being of humanity, including his or her own mind, body, wealth, time, talents or knowledge. Honesty is required in those who hold positions of responsibility and leadership as well as those who are in need. Honesty in governance, in the sharing of information, in financial dealing, in providing goods and services, would create conditions where resources can be used for the good of all, not just the exaggerated benefit of the few. Honesty requires of us a complete purity of motive where gain for the self is not sought out of balance to the good of the whole. The production of goods and services that are a risk to health, encourage consumerism or exploit the weak is not an expression of honesty.

A life anchored in such higher values will help generate lasting abundance and continue to provide oil to keep the lamp of prosperity burning. Several guiding principles also need to be borne in mind. The first and most fundamental of these principles is that we only receive to the extent that we give – taking without having first given or earned is no more than borrowing that will need to be repaid. This is an illustration of a still broader principle: that whatever actions we perform constitute a cause that will produce a corresponding effect. Our past has thus created our present but our present will create our future. The choices we make and actions we take now are the seeds for what we will reap in the future. Our dishonesty and greed will only come back to haunt us while our generosity and sharing with others will lead to this being expressed towards us and will create abundance.

The second principle is that all human beings together make up one family. We share a common identity, are all interconnected and interdependent, and as such have common rights and responsibilities in relation to each other as brothers and sisters. As an expression of this, while I may lay claim to material circumstances consistent with the inherent worth and sacredness of the human being and spirit, I must recognise that others too have this right and it is my responsibility to respect this. For example, while carrying out a business transaction, I may seek a profit or to obtain good value

for money I am paying – and I have the right to do so. But I must also respect the right of my counterparty to find the transaction to his advantage or profit and not seek to assert my rights in a way that denies the worth and rights of the other. I might do so by forcing the price that the other is charging so far down that the transaction is not profitable for him or by taking from him vastly more than I know the product or service I am offering is worth. This is not the way to build a society of justice and plenty for all.

The third principle is that ultimately we are only stewards or managers, not owners, of the earth's bountiful but finite physical resources; we must hold these resources carefully on trust to provide for human needs and not to indulge in greed or useless waste. When we forget this, and take more than we need and is our allotted share, we not only deprive others of that which is rightfully theirs but also end up being owned or controlled by the very objects that we think we own. Matter then owns the mind. The resulting poverty of spirit and self-sovereignty sets off a spiral of materialism that brings about deprivation for others and, as we continue to take without giving in return, ultimately ourselves too. To remember this principle is to make careful and honest use of whatever comes to us, through which we will be able to create and preserve lasting wealth that will give happiness. Wealth that is built on others' poverty or our own dishonesty will never have inner fulfilment, peace of mind and joy as its companions.

The task involved in living by such values and principles, and helping others to do so too, is enormous. It involves a radical change in thinking, values, attitudes and behaviour and as such can only be expected to take time. But if the process involved is long-term so will be the duration of the solution that it brings about. Only by removing the roots of poverty – which lie deep within our thinking and personality – and laying down new healthy roots, can we eliminate poverty. If we simply suppress the symptoms and remove only the visible superstructure poverty will sprout up again later on.

We must resist the temptation to settle only for the quick-fix that postpones the day when real treatment is required. This is not to say that short-term measures are inappropriate since for sure something must be done and done quickly to help take away the pain and ease the cries of those of our brothers and sisters who are in desperate need of such basics as food, water and shelter. However, emergency relief must be accompanied by deeper remedies, even if it will take time before they bear fruit. We must not just alleviate poverty while leaving its cause intact. For example, there has recently been much talk, although much less action, with regard to forgiving the massive debt burden that cripples many poorer countries. The appeal of such an idea is strong, as it carries with it the promise of almost immediate benefits, but, by itself, giving more and more money to a person in need (or forgiving debts) is unlikely to have much impact on the cause of the underlying situation. Thus while a gift of money may help a poor beggar, provided that it is used to buy food for example, such aid will also be perpetuating a situation of need and dependency unless it is accompanied by measures that enable the person to help himself. Similarly, while some debt-service payments exceed the amount that a country is spending on education or welfare, and do justly cry for forgiveness, once the debt has been forgiven care will still need to be taken to ensure that the country's resources are not misapplied, stolen, wasted, exploited by greedy lenders or subjected to excessive restrictions on how they are used and then sold.

While achieving such a dramatic transformation in values, priorities and way of life requires considerable effort, religions and spiritual traditions may feel a special competency to take up this challenge, such is the power of the beliefs, values and practices that they are based on.

Three qualities in particular, with which spiritual and religious practitioners are familiar, will serve us well in our task. The first – faith – has already been alluded to and this can change what might otherwise seem an impossible dream into a promised destiny. Secondly, the inner transformation that is sought for requires self-discipline to keep us on the path through thick and thin, to resist the temptation to paper over underlying social fault-lines with conscience-salving but ineffective measures.

Finally, commitment will also be needed to stay with the task for the long haul ahead and stay true to our vision of abundance for all – we must not allow ourselves to settle for less than this.

In this regard, an interesting phenomenon to note is the growing awareness that all faiths, if not all people, share certain values. All our great traditions teach the importance of the honest, just and generous sharing of resources to create a society of fairness and justice. They continue to re-affirm the vision of a world of abundance for all that respects the inherent worth of the human spirit. Our great traditions show us the wisdom of the golden rule that calls upon us to treat others in the way that we would wish to be treated. They show us the importance of values such as sharing, stewardship, honesty, respect, justice, equality, simplicity and generosity. Removing spiritual poverty, by reviving and re-emphasising such values, and empowering individuals at all levels of society can substantially help address the root causes of physical poverty.

Our particular role as spiritual and religious leaders calls us, if we are to be worthy of such a description, to be examples of these values in practice. The greatest benefit we can bestow on those whom we serve will be through living the spiritual and moral values of our faith tradition in every aspect of our personal lives, and making sure that they are reflected in our organisations and practices.

In summary then, the main thrust of our effort to eliminate poverty and its accompanying causes and consequences must be education that addresses its deepest origins – an education that therefore has spiritual and moral principles at its heart, the resulting expression of them as its aim, and that is conveyed with love and by example.

For its part, the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University offers a variety of educational programmes and courses that help individuals to identify, develop and sustain positive values, attitudes and thoughts. These programmes and courses are conducted in schools, at work places, in prisons, hospitals and other institutions, in family groups and at regular seminars, dialogues and conferences at the University's own premises in the nearly 80 countries around the world in which it operates. The Brahma Kumaris also gladly work with other spiritual or religious organizations in pooling the spiritual treasures that we all have been blessed with so that these may more readily and effectively be shared with others. Such programmes and courses have been shown to help develop an awareness of the inherent worth of the individual, and, on the basis of this, a vision of brotherhood and the consciousness that all humanity is ultimately one family. This constitutes the foundation for a more equitable sharing of the planet's resources, eradicating poverty and ensuring a better quality of life for all people.

---

### Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF. The University was founded in India in 1937 and has some 4,000 branches in about 80 countries worldwide.

<http://www.un.brahmakumaris.org>

Office for the United Nations  
Suite 436  
866, UN Plaza  
New York, NY 10017  
USA  
Tel.: +1-212-688 1335  
Fax.: +1-212-504 2798  
[bk@un.brahmakumaris.org](mailto:bk@un.brahmakumaris.org)

International Coordinating Office  
Global Cooperation House  
65, Pound Lane  
London NW10 2HH  
England  
Tel.: +44-20-8727 3350  
Fax.: +44-20-8727 3351  
[london@brahmakumaris.org](mailto:london@brahmakumaris.org)