

Understanding History and the Future in Terms of Four Crucial Relationships

By [Bharat Dogra](#)

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There are several important perspectives for understanding history and learning from it for the future. One of the more useful of these ways may be to seek an understanding in terms of four crucial relationships—relationships among human beings at several levels, relationship between human beings and nature, relationship between human beings and other forms of life, relationship among the present generation of humanity and the future generations of humanity as well as other forms of life. The last mentioned relationship has become particularly important at a time when a very serious survival crisis threatens our planet's life in terms of the basic life-nurturing conditions being gravely threatened.

Relationships Among Human Beings

It has been a very widespread and enduring practice of human beings to try to dominate others, to get personal benefit at the cost of others, to try to get ahead of others, to impose their own viewpoint. This tendency may be rooted in greed (the urge to get more than others, regardless of one's needs) or in ego (the urge to impose one's own thinking and viewpoints, without giving a patient and fair hearing to the other viewpoint), but its impact is always harmful. This tendency can be seen in the relationships of individuals, groups and entire nations. These relationships of dominance invariably lead to distress and must be replaced by relationships based on cooperation for common welfare.

At a wider level these relationships of dominance are also responsible for the most exploitative economic systems and extremely cruel wars which at their worst have claimed millions of lives.

The relationships of dominance and exploitation of course seriously harm or even destroy the dominated and exploited people. But in addition, and this should be emphasized, *they also slowly but surely destroy the perpetrators of exploitation and domination*. As this writer stated in a small book on this theme titled 'Burning on Both Ends', "The persons who fill their coffers by inflicting injustice and cruelty on others have to live with a guilt complex

that can destroy their peace. To get rid of this guilt they have to lower themselves to such a level of insensitivity that deprives them of simple yet precious joys of life.”

“The suppressing of spiritual values (that is required to be able to commit injustice) creates distortions in the persons (or the communities) due to which they are denied even that happiness which many poor people can experience freely and in plenty.”

In other words a person (or a group or a nation) who inflicts injustice and injury on others, will either live with a guilt complex (if he wants to retain some sensitivity) or else he’ll have to reduce himself to a level of insensitivity that will prevent him from experiencing small but precious joys of everyday life and this in turn is bound to adversely affect his closest relationships including those with his family members. Thus relationships of dominance are not only destructive, these are also self-destructive.

This is revealed clearly in the life of Columbus. The endless greed and cruelties of Columbus are by now quite well known, chopping the hands of someone who could not deliver gold to him was commonplace for him. What is not quite so well-known is the range of psychiatric complications from which Columbus suffered. Sigmundo Feliz, a reputed doctor who attended on him during his last days, has left a detailed note on Columbus. Extracts from this note (made available due to the efforts of historian Kirkpatrick Sale):

“To be without roots, without a sense of home and place, is one of the most serious, though one of the least emphasized, psychological disorders. This patient suffered from this to an unusual degree. From what I have been able to discover, he had so little of that feeling we Spaniards call *querencia* – a love of home and a sense of inner well-being – that he could truly be called a man who never lived anywhere, who simply never had a home.

“...Bending truth to suit unusual circumstances is a normal enough trait, but a persistent habit of equivocation and misrepresentation, while not necessarily pathological, is certainly dysfunctional – in some cases indicative of full-fledged disorders. This patient appears from all my evidence to be someone who found it difficult, even in non-threatening circumstances, to tell the truth, a habit of delusion that at times developed into self-delusion.

“...Finally, I must draw attention to a psychotic trait that can only be described as *phrenitis* – repeated delusions that occur with such intensity that they raise serious questions about how we are to regard his general sanity in the rest of his life.”

It is true that efforts have been made to use high technology in such ways as to create a distance between the perpetrator of injury and the effects of his actions in such a way as to remove the feeling of guilt. Ravi Sundaram writes,

“The emergence of a complex division of labor under modern capitalism has meant that functional specialization generates a necessary remoteness of human agents from the end-product of their social action. In this context, the bureaucrat’s own action becomes an end in itself. Once so isolated from the consequences of action, the bureaucrat, untroubled by moral dilemmas, can pursue his allocated tasks. The architects of the holocaust, the bombers of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the technocrats who designed the Vietnam War, could continue doing so without moral qualms precisely because of the social production of distance in modernity. This aspect is crucial in understanding

the technological evolution of the holocaust. In the early history of the holocaust, the victims were rounded up and machine-gunned at point-blank range. The administrator soon found this both primitive and inefficient – and damaging to soldiers’ morale. Other techniques were sought which would preserve the optical distance between murderers and murdered. The result – the gas chamber, the perfect murdering machine. This reduced the role of the killer to that of the ‘sanitation officer’ who simply pressed the button which released the gas into the chamber filled with the hapless victims.”

However technological solutions to remove guilt and related afflictions have not always worked. Reader’s Digest has described the suffering of a child, Kim Phuc at the time of bombing of Trang Bang (Vietnam) by US planes (R.D. November 1997),

“The bombs, canisters filled with napalm, had smashed into the ground behind Kim and instantly ignited. The jellified gasoline, designed to stick to and incinerate anything it touches, splashed onto Kim’s back. Her flowered cotton shirt and pants—even her sandal—combusted. She was engulfed in a cloud of smoke and fire as napalm peeled away the skin from her back and left arm. Terrified, Kim kept running. At first she could feel nothing. Then she felt as if she had been thrown onto an open fire. In horror she saw the skin drop off her arm like clothes off a doll. As she ran naked down the road that led out of the village, she began screaming, *“Too hot! Too hot! Please help!”*

This magazine also noted the impact of this suffering on the sensitive mind of the pilot who caused this suffering:

“Now he stared at the picture of Kim Phuc, her agony caught for eternity. His own son Louis was about the same age. He could almost smell the child’s burning flesh.

...Later he kept his role in the bombing of Trang Bang secret, locked deep within his soul. It surfaced in the form of a nightmare. First Plummer would see a picture of Kim, with arms outstretched and mouth frozen in a silent scream. Then the image would widen to include Kim’s brother and cousins running alongside her. Finally, he would hear their screams, louder and louder until he felt surrounded by the accusing children. To drown his guilt, Plummer began drinking heavily. In July 1973 he married for the second time, but he still kept his secret. *No one can understand*, he thought. John Plummer’s drinking cost him his marriage in 1979. It was a vicious circle; he drank to put the bombing out of his mind, but the drinking made him more obsessed.”

Very high levels of family abuse have been reported more generally among the soldiers of armies known to have been involved in very cruel actions against weaker forces and even unarmed people. Some cases of such violence are so gory that not many people will be able to stand any detailed descriptions.

If A exploits B, then B suffers more obviously but directly or indirectly, A also suffers. Another frequently seen aspect of relationships of dominance is that instead of confronting A, B in turn tends to exploit C (being someone over whom he can easily exercise his control or vent his frustration). In many traditional societies, gender based oppression by a man (A) against his wife (B) may result in the latter (B) not retaliating against him (A) but instead venting her suppressed fury on other, even more vulnerable women members of the wider family (C). So what may be more visible may be the fights among women B and C, even though the cycle of violence may start at the level of a man (A). At a wider level, gender

based violence and repression, rooted in the strong desire for unquestioned dominance, is one of the biggest causes of human distress.

Relations of dominance increase distress all the time in daily life. A man may experience some distress ten times a day on account of them, a woman or child may experience more. School, home, workplace—no place is free from this baneful impact. This accumulated baggage of millions of persons guided by the impulse and desire for dominance, contributes much to strife and violence at wider levels, ultimately to wars and weapons race. This found expression in colonization and imperialism, slave-trafficking and genocides which destroyed entire nations and killed or ruined tens of millions of people. Earlier persons, groups, nations pursued their dominance instincts with swords, now they have atomic weapons. Some of the most powerful persons of world, who may even take decisions relating to nuclear weapons, act although no one ever told them in their entire life, in their entire education that there is anything wrong with seeking all-round dominance as the ultimate objective in life.

Hence improvement of human relationships at several levels is one of the most essential and significant tasks ahead for reducing human distress, also one of the most neglected so far. It is not easy getting rid of deeply embedded instincts of dominance, rooted in years of living in conditions where these dominance instincts were deepened, or at the very least an impression was created that there was nothing wrong with them. We need to create situations in which people gain wide consciousness of the need for getting rid of relations of dominance and replacing these with relations based on cooperation for realizing common welfare.

Relations Between Humanity and Nature

Relations of dominance are seen not only among human beings but also between humanity and nature. The tendency of looking upon nature as something to be dominated and conquered has been responsible to a great extent for massive ecological ruin. Of course human beings have to meet their various needs, obtain food, clothing and shelter, and in the process they have to make certain demands on nature, they have to obtain water from rivers and food from land. It is certainly possible to do so while maintaining an attitude of respect and co-existence towards nature, preserving the clean and beautiful flow of rivers and protecting the natural fertility of soil and land. There is evidence that in some ancient cultures there was an attitude of reverence towards nature, an attitude which survived till much later times among many indigenous groups. For example, according to one summary of Mayan ethics in *New Internationalist Journal*,

“According to the Guatemalan Mayan vision of the cosmos, every form of life emerges from the same origin or seed. Some seeds become trees, others flowers, others water, others human beings. Thus each creature is inextricably linked to all others and what one does to a tree affects not only the tree but oneself and other creatures. This inter-relatedness calls for profound respect between people and their Creator, between people and nature, and among people themselves. The aim of the Maya is to keep their relationships with the world around them, and also the inner life of each person, in perfect balance according to the rhythms of the cosmos.”

This journal goes on to say that Mayan ideas have much in common with those of other indigenous cultures of the Americas, especially in their holism and respect for the environment.

In 1855, the Indian Chief of Seattle responding to pressures from the United States President to sell the land of what is now Washington State, had this to say,

“How can we buy or sell the sky or the warmth of the land? Such thoughts to us are inconceivable. We are not in possession of the freshness of the air, or the water-bubbles. Every corner of this land is holy to my people – They remain holy in the memory of my people – from the sparkling pine leaves, the sandy beaches and the mist of dark brooding forests, to the songs of insects... We know that white men do not understand our way of life. Land to him is not a brother but an enemy. After conquering a piece he proceeds to the next... Our God is the same God that you worship. His compassion extends equally to white men and Indians. This land is precious to Him and harming it, therefore, would be an insult to our Creator.”

However these views of nature increasingly came in conflict with the tendency which existed even in ancient times, of making excessive demands on nature, inflicting grave damage on land and water sources, and thereby sooner or later also bringing disaster on human beings. As John Bellamy Foster writes, “The history of pre-capitalist and preindustrial societies is full of examples of social collapse brought on by environmental depredations.” Thus while attitude of reverence towards nature certainly existed in ancient and indigenous traditions, they should not be romanticized too much as the conflict with other viewpoints based on excessive expansion and exploitation appeared sooner or later in most places.

In the conflict of these views—one emphasizing conquest of nature and the other emphasizing harmonious co-existence with nature – the former attitude started asserting itself more and more with the passage of time. Technological advancement should have opened our eyes to the dangers of making excessive demands on nature but in reality something entirely different happened. The unraveling of the mysteries of nature appears to have decreased the awe of it, and encouraged the view that as we know its secrets we can conquer and dominate it. Philosopher of science and one-time Lord-Chancellor of England Sir Francis Bacon observed that the conquest of nature constitutes, “the real business and fortune of the human race.” He said nature must be “bound into service” and made a “slave.”

Such a viewpoint cleared the way for and provided the justification for very large-scale disruption of environment in the next few centuries. However as rivers were turned into sewer-lines, the rain became acidic, and even the life-giving sunshine was made hazardous by the depletion of the ozone layer, during the last few decades there has been growing realization of the need for harmonious co-existence with nature instead of striving to dominate it. Domination brings destruction while a protective attitude towards nature also protects the life and livelihood of people.

Engels wrote,

“The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor, and elsewhere destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that they were laying the basis for the present devastated condition of these countries, by removing along with the forest the collecting centers and reservoirs of moisture. When on the southern slopes of the mountains, the Italians of the Alps used up the pine forests so carefully cherished on the northern slopes, they had no inkling that by doing so they were cutting at the roots of the dairy industry in their region; they had still less inkling that they were thereby depriving their mountain springs of water for the greater part of the year, with the

effect that these would be able to pour still more furious flood torrents on the plains during the rainy season... Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature – but that we, with flesh, blood, and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other beings of being able to know and correctly apply its laws.”

Relationship of Humanity and Other Forms of Life

Unfortunately as this oft repeated lesson of history has been ignored even more frequently, one of its most unjust manifestation has been to usurp more to more of the resources of the planet for human beings leaving less and less for other forms of life. According to J.B. Foster writing in ‘The Vulnerable Planet’ “Human beings now use (take or transform) an estimated 25 percent of the net photosynthetic product (NPP)-i.e., the plant mass fixed by photosynthesis – over the entire earth (land and sea), and 40 per cent on land.” As human beings take more of the primary productivity of the earth for themselves, less is left over for other species. According to Meadows and Randers, the authors of a path breaking study titled ‘Beyond the Limits’ : “Somewhere along the path of NPP usurpation, there lie limits. Long before the ultimate limits are reached, the human race becomes economically, scientifically, aesthetically, and morally impoverished.

Whether we look at mammals or birds or aquatic life or reptiles or insects, the statistics relating to extinct, near-extinct and threatened animals are alarming. Whether via deforestation or hunting or overfishing, increasingly devastating technologies have been used by humanity for decimating their co-habitants of planet. At the level of industrially organized farms, those birds or animals that are supposed to feed humanity are kept in the most painful conditions till their life comes to a hasty end.

Such a one-sided attitude of dominance cannot be compensated by merely showering affection on pets (with this too sometimes taken to other extremes), and a more basic change towards harmonious co-existence is needed.

Relation of This and Future Generations

Last but not the least, the relationship between the present generation of humanity and future generations of humanity as well as other forms of life is of course very important, particularly in view of the fast emerging reality that the world is already moving rapidly towards a very serious survival or existential crisis. In such a situation it would be much more ethically and morally objectionable and in fact unacceptable for the present generation to go ahead with present patterns of economy and daily life without bothering about the extreme risks this will bring for future generations of humanity as well as other forms of life. Nevertheless due to self-centered and short-term thinking, and domination of present-day comfort over future safety, what is observed is not just the continuation of harmful patterns but often even shifting to more harmful life patterns or more luxurious, resource –exhausting life-styles than before.

Clearly, in terms of taking the most urgent steps towards resolving the survival crisis and in other ways, humanity today should be much, much more considerate of the concerns of future generations of humanity as well as other life-forms.

A big lesson of history has been that when these relationships move from dominance

towards co-operation, distress is reduced and welfare is enhanced. This would be true of future too, and in addition changing these relations from dominance to cooperation will also be of the greatest help to humanity in terms of resolving the survival crisis before it is too late.

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Bharat Dogra is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include Planet in Peril, Protecting Earth for Children, Earth without Borders and Man over Machine—A Path to Peace. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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