

Editorial

IDENTITIES MATTER: Personally and Socially

My/your and our/their personal and social identities, constructed and imagined, are inextricably intertwined and they matter in the way we live, move and have our being. Identities of self and others are plural by nature and the different strands that make up identities include but not limited to sex, colour, race, ethnicity, ancestry, class, (socioeconomic educational and professional status), nationality, etc. We learn about our own identity and the identity of others through interactions with family, peers, organizations, institutions, media and other connections we make in our everyday life, and they play significant roles in determining how we understand and experience the world, as well as shaping the types of opportunities and challenges we face. By the given and assumed identities we belong to corresponding communities, which are also interlinked. That we belong to a community also excludes us from other communities. Seeing similarities and differences of my/your and our/their identities unfortunately contribute to create hierarchies and discriminations, rather than leading to the realisation that we are part of each other and the identities of self and other are inextricably intertwined. The plurality of images of identity and alterity brought by the developments of global transportation and information technology, political, religious and economic immigration and emigration, and the search for safety and investment opportunities have great impacts upon the power relations among individuals, ethnic and religious communities, institutions, governments, etc. nationally, regionally and globally.

Human beings organize and collectively define themselves in terms of similarities and differences, as they are perceived and projected. Group identities, membership and belongingness are essential for human survival and well being and though we have a natural tendency to find similarities and differences and categories ourselves to groups, identities, definitions,

boundaries, and meanings of the social groups are the product of complex collective and social processes to the advantage of oneself and one's group, often against the other. Though identities are fluid and socially constructed, once established, the influential people of our lives – family members, teachers and leaders of the society might present them consciously or unconsciously as 'natural', and/or even divinely sanctioned. All aspects of our personal and social lives - what we eat, how we dress, whom to marry, what to do, who would rule, etc. – are influenced and governed by these given and assumed identities. These social identities and the shared meanings and the consequent power positions influence our perceptions and relations with members of the groups, mine and yours.

Images of personal and social identities and alterities, are at the source and centre of most local, regional, national and global conflicts like racism, immigration, sectarian violence, territorial disputes and military conflicts. Human beings have a tendency to identify with whom they are grouped together and to judge members of their own group as superior, no matter how arbitrary or even silly the group boundaries may be. Hostility toward the unfamiliar or unknown is quite common in personal and social relationships, even the smallest perceived differences may generate intergroup conflicts. We have all likely experienced personally the discomfort of being in some place or with people where we did not feel that we belong. Violence against and expulsion of the Muslim ethnic minority Rohingyas from the ethnically Burmese Buddhist majority and in Myanmar in 2012, military attack on Kurds in southern Turkey in 2015, the crisis of Armenian Christians living in Nagorno-Karabakh, a region in south-western Azerbaijan, a predominantly Muslim country in 2016 and recent terrorist attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016) are examples of socio-political and national and regional nature. Armenians and Kurds are fighting for a country of their own while attacks in Paris and Brussels are traced back to lack of cultural and geographic integration of ethnic and racial immigrant groups.

It is important that we investigate critically and creatively the difference that these real and fabricated differences make. Of course the conflicts cannot be naively reduced to religious, ethnic and national identities, but they often contribute to the gravity and extent of conflicts resulting in discriminatory and exploitative positions of power and resources in the society. Appealing to nativism, racism, and xenophobia are often among electoral and ruling strategy in many democratic and totalitarian regimes. Apparent and real differences among different individuals and groups are used to stoke anxiety, resentment, and fear of the other. Activating and fostering latent prejudices they induce fear and convert it into political force to their advantage. The power hungry have always appealed to group-based identities to promote social hierarchies and to advance their power and discriminatory and exploitative programmes. Only if we care for the alterity beyond the otherness of our own identity, can we bracket the claims of our personal and social identity for the well-being of others. Our common identity – human being – is more important than all other divisive identities and alterity. We need a vision of society that is inclusive and plural, which sees the other as partner, constructs structures of inclusion and dialogue, and expands the circle of human concern with the conviction that together we can contribute to the well-being of all.

The image of myself, the way how I view others and how they view me, profoundly influence each other. Their interaction is an essential basis for mutual respect. Thomas Kesselring in his paper "Self-Awareness, Self-Esteem, and Respect for Others: The Genetic Perspective (In Memoriam Jean Piaget, 1896-1980)" investigates their genesis from the perspective of Developmental Psychology, because it gives an overview over the intellectual and emotional prerequisites for social understanding and an insight into the underlying development principles. The analysis is based on the work of Jean Piaget, a 20th century giant in Developmental Psychology. Special emphasis is given to his considerations on *egocentrism* and its dissolution – *decentration*. It will be shown how and why

between birth and adulthood the images of self and others undergo profound changes. What initially was a “me” becomes a person and then a personality.

“Corrective Surgeries on Persons Born with Intersex-Variations in India” by Sourav Mandal attempts to understand the methods deployed by the medical practices in constructing the socio-legal category of ‘sex’ only in terms of male/female. This evaluation is based on a critical analysis of five academic papers wherein, they discuss a total of 561 cases of corrective-surgeries operated on persons born with intersex variations between 1989 and 2007. The Register of Births, a statutory register maintained to record all births in India under the Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969 classifies all births under the binary of male and female. The paper raises ethical and policy concerns over the continued pathologisation of the persons born with intersex variations that categorise them as a disorder. Based upon its critical analysis, the paper challenges the Indian socio-legal understanding of ‘sex’ and argues a case for completely dismantling the existing identities that define ‘sex’ as male/female.

The performance of queer sexuality and gender identity is contested in Kerala where transgenders are forced to displace themselves from their homeland in search of identity and solace. However the religious space in Kottankulangara temple in Kerala offers the transient realm of transvestism. The cross-dressed males here commemorate the annual chamaya-vilakku festival, which is considered as an offering to the Goddess Bhagavati. Those gender non-conforming people who live as men due to social pressures get the chance to flaunt their gender identities at this occasion. In this sense, transgenders, “the other” who take their legitimization from various religious myths, achieve a temporary space of acceptance in the public sphere. “Subversive Gender Performance in Kottankulangara Temple Festival” by Anu Kuriakose critically analyses the images of the self and the “othering” of the transgender identity in the public sphere of Kerala in the context of gender visibility. It is also noted that besides the normalization of the subversive gender performances,

the religious ritualistic site and the worship system is transformed to a commercial space as the temple premises are filled with make-up stalls, ironically endorsing the gender idealization in terms of the patriarchal binary norms.

While contesting the normative, and existential postulates, which insinuates that self as a process of separating oneself out from the matrices of others, "Deconstructing the 'Self' and Empowering the 'Other': Visionaries in Colonial South India" by Molly Abraham examines the relationality and interdependence of 'self' and the 'other', exploring the complexity and dynamics of missionary 'self' and the Indian 'other'. While tracing the intricacies of the discourse of self through the prism of theoretical and empirical analysis, the study enumerates how missionaries ventured to empower the other by transcending the boundaries of nationality, language, culture and by deconstructing their 'selves'. The paper presents the trajectory of social construction of the missionary 'self' as a fluid, dynamic and ongoing process whereas the Indian 'others' was negotiated itself in a dialectical relationship with the socio-cultural context of their culture of origin and the host culture. It suggests that missionaries, well engaged with communities of different cultural landscapes, by teaching the socially and economically disadvantaged sections, deconstructed the conventional images of their 'selves' as strangers, firangis, foreigners, sojourners and resident aliens. By articulating the marginality and the profoundly ingrained 'otherness' of the underprivileged, they used transformative education as the most potential apparatus to create an inclusive society, which, they perceived, would instil a sense of transnational pastiche and intercultural interactions among the posterity.

Women's stories culled from the memoirs of Holocaust survivors and the lessons to be learned from them have had no significant place in theological circles. This absence or obliteration has practically caused further oppression, suffering, and death to women victims of the Holocaust by depriving them of voice and placing them as subordinate 'other' to the heroic, prophesying, and valiant Jewish male victims and survivors. The absence of

feminine representation matters as the female voice would have brought a different ring to the male theologians' consistent harping on God's retreat, absence, or hiddenness in the Jewish Holocaust tragedy. "*Shekhinah: A Feminist Perspective in the Light of Holocaust*" by Rica delos Reyes Ancheta attempts to offer a broader understanding of: 1) how feminist theologizing differs from masculine theologizing, 2) how documentary evidences of women stories underpin a different kind of theorizing, and 3) how theology may take shape and appear from the points of view of women victims of the Holocaust, steering a theological discussion on Shekinah.

During the latest political campaign in Kenya, both political blocks used religious metaphors to explain their aims and attract political support. Legislators know that they cannot do without religious support. They also make conscious decisions to use religious themes to their advantage. Politicians readily identify with biblical characters and event, knowing that these have a strong appeal on people. In his research paper "Going to Canaan: Biblical Identification in Kenya Political Discourse" Giuseppe Caramazza takes the position that religious leaders should clarify their position. They are not called to support one or the other side, but they can intervene and explain the real meaning of biblical images and the hazard in using sacred iconology out of context. Moreover, they could take the initiative and support political choices that move away from political gains and focus the nation on the choices needed for real development and a social transformation that interests all the citizens.

This issue of the *Journal of Dharma* on "Images of Self and Others: Social Implications," thus, explores the physical, cultural and political identities and how they are inextricably intertwined with personal and social implications. With sentiments of gratitude to all the collaborators may I have the privilege of presenting to the readers this issue of the *Journal of Dharma*.

Jose Nandhikkara, Editor-in-Chief