

functionality, well-being, and justice. We know from history that a society encourages and exhorts using its code of moral rules, whereas it forces and compels using its code of legal rules. But a society is not formed or known by its laws, but rather by its morals.²⁷⁶ For a living and functional society, a moral ethic is essential and cannot be replaced by even an abundance of books and universities, let alone an abundance of laws.

A free and functional society has to be one that is able to exhort without an undue reliance on compelling or goading through legal ordinances. When, however, a society is completely accustomed to being forced by legal rules, it loses its capacity for exhortation without the law. A people that is subject to the whip of the law (or policies) for their day-to-day living and decision-making cannot possibly be exercising free will, and thus is substantively not free.

Finally, the “lawlessness” in the presence of an overwhelming regime of laws is not limited to a single country; it is a global phenomenon and a feature of the fiat-driven system that controls every aspect of life. To gain a wholesome understanding of subjects such as society, culture, and law, it may be time we paid attention to our scriptures and the message we have had in our possession for millennia. Lao Tzu’s opinion on the subject minces no words:

The more legal affairs are given prominence, the more numerous bandits and thieves.

—*Tao Te Ching* 57:12-13

Cumulative Impact on Our Systems of Living

Some of the current human dilemmas are best understood with examples at local and individual level (see chapters in part 2). While difficult and intricate, the symptoms and perils of the complex conundrums are also clear on various dimensions. A lucid understanding will facilitate the realization and acceptance of our responsibility: individual and collective. Let’s set the stage by evaluating geopolitical commentator Pankaj Mishra’s statement in the *New York Review of Books* (May 22, 2018). This analysis will

bring together various forces in action and then show how religious identity is abused in the process of conditioning and exploitation.

Attributing the process of dehumanization in various parts of the world to “organized disgust for the religious/ethnic/civilizational ‘alien’,” Mishra comments on the deeper drivers of this condition and warns us that our faith in our institutions is misplaced: “Liberal detractors of Trump, Modi, and other elected demagogues set great store by democracy’s impersonal institutions, and their checks and balances. But political and culture wars among groups sequestered in their hate have reached a new peak of ferocity, and faith in the rules, norms, and laws of liberal democracy seems too complacent.”²⁷⁷

Referring then to the rape of an eight-year-old girl in India, and its politicization on sectarian and religious grounds, Mishra goes on to say:

Faith in humanity is unlikely to survive contact with the politicians,²⁷⁸ police officials, and lawyers who ideologically justify the rape of a child; and reason and logic will seem the slave of vile passions when manifested in the whataboutism, driven by fake news, of social media ‘influencers,’ who include a pioneering feminist publisher and an information technology tycoon.²⁷⁹

Mishra’s excerpts highlight the corruption and degeneration of various socio-political structures at a global level working against our collective well-being. The dynamic forces in motion here are institutional, technological, commercial, political, ideological, and psychological. We can immediately see the tyrannies of identity and victory in action. Fear (of the “other”) is inserted into such situations. We can also see the role of media and communication channels engaging in hateful propaganda. The structures of power and economic interests are fully involved too. All this is wrapped up in the Hobbesian “religion” of adversariness (“war of everyone against everyone”). Culture, obviously, is too delicate a thing to survive the forces unleashed by the power play of international and local politics.

RADICAL REVOLUTION OF VALUES

Edmund Burke was an eighteenth-century Irish philosopher who is known as the founder of modern conservatism. In the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke wrote, “the most important of all revolutions ... [is] a revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions.”²⁸⁰ Here, Burke is pointing to the French Revolution’s negative impact on the psychology, education, and culture of society. That concern would be equally applicable today in the evident evolution our socio-political systems are going through globally. We should be equally watchful of the evolution underway in the “sentiments, manners, and moral opinions” of human societies—the evolution that has been caused by the global structures protecting their economic and political power. We should also be cognizant that the consequences of evolution are much more durable than those of a revolution.

When the very scale of values is turned upside down by societal institution, the concerns expressed by Burke and Mishra become palpable and imminent. The “faith in humanity” Mishra refers to can only be restored when we humans have relearned how to detach ourselves from our narrow material interests and have realized the fundamental weaknesses of human nature; and when we have dismantled our blind faith in institutions we have ourselves created. The work to repair would best commence once the root cause of the problem has been identified.