

YOU CANNOT SHAKE HANDS
WITH A CLENCHED FIST

The year was 1947, India had just got independent and the future of princely states was yet to be decided. Meanwhile, Maharaja Hari Singh of Kashmir was extensively examining his options. He faced the threat of invasion from Pakistani forces and longed for India's support. But it was not before he signed the infamous Instrument of Accession with India, that the Indian forces took command and drove the Pakistani forces away, resulting in Kashmir becoming an integral part of India.

The above incident is a perfect illustration of the age old saying, "You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist".

In this essay, we will see how shake hands have happened across space and time. Next we will see cases where clenched fists need prior reassurance to open up. Finally we will examine how the world is moving from an era of shake hands to fist bumps.

SHAKE HANDS : ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

Indian national movement is probably a great example of a golden shake hand. Till the Britishers made half hearted offers to the nationalists, in the form of Drummond's statement, Wanemell Plan and Cripps Mission, the nationalists did not accept their offers. It was only when the Britishers opened up their clenched fist and offered full-fledged freedom that we accepted it.

In the economic sphere too, we see that during the initial five-year plans the government adopted a big-brotherly attitude towards the private sector which led to limited participation of the latter. It was only after the 1991 reforms when the economy was liberalised in true sense that private sector participation raised and India experienced high growth.

International go-politics is the most glaring example of how clended fists have prevented much needed shake hands. Massive resistance from the west over IPR matters on COVID vaccine prevented mass manufacture of vaccines, threatening the global health ecosystem.

Double standards displayed by the west in terms of different reactions towards nuclear programme of Israel and North Korea has

presented global shake hands on nuclear disarmament.

Humanity has also adopted a clenched fist when it comes to environment. While we desire the nature to shake hands with us and provide us food, shelter and resources, we ~~adopt~~ do not want to give up our habits of blind consumerism, deforestation and waste generation.

In Indian culture too we see the importance of loosening the fist. From Indo-Greeks, Kushanas, Parthians, Iranians to Mughals, all of them contributed to and themselves got mixed in the Indian culture, thus creating one of the most diverse region in the world in terms of language, religion, race and clothing. This was possible due to the welcoming attitude of the locals.

Indian politics has been replete with examples of coalition governments. These coalitions are based on give and take. When a party clenches its fist and refuses to adhere to demands of the other, the coalition breaks down and the party loses power.

In personal life too, one requires to adjust to other's expectations, but at the times one needs to assert their demands too. This is the basis of relationships. A healthy relationship is based on balance, which can certainly not be achieved by clenched fists.

Thus, we have seen how shake hands cannot happen with clenched fists. But it is important to note that when

the parties to the shake hand are unequal in size and influence, the bigger party must re-assure the smaller party and remove the latter's fears before reaching a shake hand.

Indian government's response towards north-east insurgents is a case in point. While the methods adopted by the insurgents like guerrilla warfare and radicalisation are wrong, some of their demands for equal treatment, employment opportunities and protection of tribal culture are valid. In the recently concluded Bodo Peace Accord and Karbi Anglong Peace Accord, the government has adopted a fatherly approach and assured greater autonomy and special development packages to these regions to placate them.

The treatment IMF meets out to the weak economies who reach it for help is also a case in point. IMF imposes strict conditionalities of fiscal consolidation and exchange rate liberalisation which ends up hurting the small weak countries. In such cases, the hand shake proves to be disadvantageous for them. IMF, being a bigger party, must adopt a liberal outlook and adhere to the specific needs of the nations, rather than adopting a one-size fits all approach.

In environmental summits like UNFCCC, Glasgow Summit, etc also, the developed countries must first adhere to their commitment on \$100 billion per year climate finance, before pushing the developing countries to loosen their fist and cut emissions.

China must also adopt a liberal approach to its smaller dissenting groups at Taiwan and Hong Kong to placate them and reach a peaceful shake hand.

FROM SHAKE HANDS TO FIST BUMPS

The modern world is moving towards a balanced approach, where one has multiple fist-bumps with diverse groups, rather than shake hands with a few.

Today, a person having socialist views, might use his Apple i-phone to write blogs on socialism on Facebook. Apple and Facebook being the biggest ^{manifestations} ~~illustrations~~ of capitalism the world has today.

Similarly, a modern Indian family might have given up

inhibitions over eating non-veg food and drinking alcohol, but might not agree to the idea of their daughter marrying someone from a lower caste.

While the western countries come across as flag-bearers of capitalism, UK's public healthcare points towards a fist bump with socialism.

India has always followed a Non-Aligned Movement, avoiding shake hands with any of the poles. Even today, it continues the same approach - being a member of QUAD and BRICS at the same time.

The world is moving towards Issue-based fist-bumps. While Turkey opposes West's support to

Israel, it is also a member of NATO for security interests. While

US is a member of QUAD, it also surprised the world with AUKUS.

While Japan and Australia support US in the realm of geo-politics, they are also part of RCEP with China for economic interests -

To sum up, we can say that while it is true that if clenched fists can't lead to hand shakes, they can certainly lead to first bumps. This is in line with the balanced approach propagated by Buddha in the infamous "Madhyam marga".

WEALTH IS WHAT YOU DON'T SEE

Case 1: Rammayya is a 35 year old farmer from Kerala. He wakes up at 5 every morning, splashes water from the backwaters onto himself and sets towards his farm. After hard physical work of the day, he returns back to his hut, where his two kids greet him with water. He has kichdi for dinner and then goes to the local tea shop for chit chat with his friends. Content with what god has blessed him with, he finally goes to sleep.

Case 2: Tanmay is the CEO of a multi-national investment bank, based in Mumbai. He reaches office around 2 pm daily, most of his clients being foreigners from overseas. His wife also works at

an investment consultancy firm and is currently posted at Singapore. He eats food at the nearby food square and is a chain smoker too. He suffers from high blood pressure and diabetes. He usually gets back home around 2 a.m. His relation with his wife are turning sour and they are considering a divorce. Tired of all this, he has recently consulted a mental health professional who has diagnosed him with borderline & multiple-personality disorder.

The above two cases bring a series of questions to one's mind. What is wealth? Is it money, fame and power? Or is it peace and happiness? Can wealth be visible? Are there some invisible aspects of wealth? Can the definition of wealth change across space and time? This essay aims to delve into these questions.

WEALTH: THE VISIBLE ASPECTS

According to Oxfam's report Inequality Kills, 50% of Indians own a wealth of mere 6%. This wide economic inequality is clearly visible in multiple dimensions of ones life. While the rich send their kids to International Boards, the poor have to face teacher absenteeism and lack of toilets at public schools. While the poor faces adulterated PDS ration, the rich has gourmet food. While India stands 101 at Global Hunger Index, there is huge wastage of food at lavish parties.

While the upper castes have accumulated wealth and social capital over hundreds of years, the lower castes have lived in deprivation. This difference in accumulated wealth is reflected in low literacy rates of STs (56%) compared to

the national average (74%) and high poverty rate among STs (50%) compared to national average (20%),

At the International level too, we see that western countries with a higher per capita income also fare better in standard of living, health and education standards. This is reflected in most of R & D activities being concentrated in them, while lower end tasks of the global value chains have been delegated to the east.

Thus, we have seen that difference in wealth is indeed manifested in visible differences in other spheres too. But we must not forget that there are some invisible aspects of wealth also, that are often ignored in the modern world.

WEALTH: THE INVISIBLE ASPECTS

The recent suicide case of the famous actor Sushant Singh Rajput shows that everything that glitters is not gold. While the world sees the money and fame that actors earn, little do we notice the mental health pressures they go through. In fact, internal peace and well-being is the biggest wealth a person can crave for. This is reflected by the traction Yoga is gaining in the western world.

Till 1990, the world followed the Washington Consensus which laid emphasis on the trickle down theory and GDP. But when it was seen that despite high GDP, poverty & inequality did not reduce the world over, Human Development Index by professor Mahbub-ul-Haq was adopted as the

new measure of economic progress. This shows that while GDP captures the visible aspect of wealth, it fails to capture the other invisible aspects.

India's foreign relations also shows that wealth is not just about trade and monetary gains. While ~~Ind~~ China is among the top three Import and export destinations of India, it has adopted opposite views on a range of issues like India's membership to Nuclear Suppliers Group, Permanent membership at UNSC and questions over blacklisting of terrorists. On the ~~has~~ other hand, Russia - with which India has strong trade, has proved an all weather friend and supported India over Kashmir issue, UNSC membership and cryogenic space technology. This friendship is India's invisible wealth.

The dichotomy between visible & invisible aspects of wealth is perhaps most clear when we look at West Asia. In spite of drawing huge oil revenues, it remains a theatre of global warfare, with no sight of peace & harmony.

On the other hand, Butan, a small nation is contemplating withdrawing from the BBIN - Vehicle Agreement to secure its pristine environment. It is willing to sacrifice economic benefits of higher connectivity and trade for happiness of its citizens, something it finds more wealthy of for preservation. Indeed!

Having seen that wealth can be both visible and invisible, we must not forget that the definition of wealth can itself change over time & space.

WEALTH: AN EVOLVING CONCEPT

We are familiar with stories of our grandparents burying pots of gold coins in the nearby forest to save for future calamities. From gold, we have now moved towards other forms of wealth like shares, mutual funds and bitcoins.

While a few decades back, one living in the city was respected as a 'sheheri babu', now the urban elites are moving towards suburbs for a cleaner and peaceful life. This shows change in value system and ~~higher importance~~ ~~being given to health~~ consideration of "health as wealth".

While earlier diabetes was considered a disease of the rich and packaged food - a mark of modern life, now the upper class is moving towards organic food.

At the international scene, the West may find consumerism valuable, while the East values simplcity & heritage. So a US-teenager might find happiness in eating a Mac burger, while an Indian villager might ~~be~~ find bliss in milking his cow.

COVID pandemic has also shown the difference in conceptions of wealth between the countries of the world. While the rich countries indulged in vaccine nationalism, India offered free vaccines to its neighbours. This is because India's wealth is contained in maintaining healthy relations with the world, as expressed by 'Vasudair kutumbakam'.

While the citizens of the western countries dissented over governments' imposition of compulsory masks during COVID, seri hankans

are fighting for restoration of democracy in their country. This is because, in the west people have already attained a high standard of living and democracy, now their wealth is contained in freedom of speech, liberty and individual autonomy, while for the shilankans, the basic wealth of democracy is a distant dream at the moment.

To sum up, wealth has both visible and invisible manifestations, with the difference between the two blurring over time. Placing more importance to the visible aspects may lead to unequal sharing of wealth, while placing more importance to the invisible aspects may lead to equal sharing of deprivation. What is needed is a holistic approach, placing importance on both the aspects, for a sustainable and happy life of a person, nation and the world.