

## • LET US TRY TO STOP OUR SLIDING TOWARDS SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ISOLATION

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We village based Surti Sunni Vohras have been affected in multiple ways by the social, economic, political and educational changes taking place in our surroundings. These changes have played significant roles in distancing us from members of non-Muslims communities. We Vohras had economic and social relationships with members of different Hindu castes, sub-castes and members of land owning and landless tribal groups and with those who were outside the Hindu caste system. Most of these relationships have over recent years weakened or in some cases ceased to exist.

We feel we Vohras failed to move with the changes taking place around us. As landowners and land cultivators we failed to change our farming methods to help us keep up with the changes in farming methods and we failed to diversify our economic activities which could had given us a foothold in the economic expansion taking place across India and we failed to acquire secular education to help us secure employment, engage in professional work or participate in activities that required some levels of education. We feel we did not pay much attention to helping ourselves keep up with other Indian citizens.

Our lack of basic education also kept us away from the others who with their educational attainments were able to express themselves much better which the majority of our Vohras could not do. We feel most of us over the years relied on 'WHAT WE WERE' rather than accept the fact that we have been left behind. Some years ago, we Vohras could talk to our Hindu neighbours or acquaintances using a commonly understood language and a commonly understood subject. Whilst most of us stood still with what we were given by our forefathers the others moved on. With their

education they talk about economics, politics, science and other subjects whilst we Vohras continue to talk about what crops we planted or the possibility of migrating to other countries.

In what follows here we shall mention in brief to draw our readers' attention as well as raise awareness to how the Vohra's old established relationships with non-Muslims came to be weakened or ceased to exist. We feel we Vohras were not able to face the challenges brought about by the social, economic, political and educational changes that started taking place around us. These changes left us stranded.

Our relationship with members of Hindu castes, sub-castes, landowning and landless tribal groups and those outside the Hindu caste system as well as with Government departments and the police started weakening roughly from around the 1950's. Prior to this most Vohra villages had Vohras who served as PATELS. This position gave the Vohras contacts with officers from various Government departments. The system of appointing Patels was replaced by the appointment of SARPANCHS. Initially many Vohra villages were able to have Vohra Sarpanchs but later the position of Sarpanch came to be reserved for the economically and socially disadvantaged members of land owning and landless tribal groups. This move ended our direct contacts with staff of Government and Police departments.

The encouragement given by the Government to members of landless tribal groups to send their children to school helped put an end our love for domestic animals like bullocks and milk giving she buffaloes. We Vohras were always proud of owning domestic animals. To take our bullocks and milk giving she-buffaloes for grazing we depended on young boys and girls from the landless tribal communities. Once these children started attending school, we had no one to take our

animals for grazing as well as look after them and care for them.

Our owning of domestic animals helped us meet many Hindus from our neighbouring villages who wished to purchase a bullock or milk giving she buffalo. We Vohras too would visit our neighbouring villages to purchase domestic animals. The purchasing of domestic animals simply did not end with purchasing and selling of animals but in many cases helped bring about good relationships between the sellers and the buyers.

We also depended on women from the landless tribal groups to clean our animal stables. We Vohras stopped employing these women as we got rid of our animals. Before our Vohra villages started getting water works supplying our water needs, we employed women from the landless groups to fetch water for us from wells. The availability of piped water supplies brought these women's water carrying roles to an end. Some better off Vohra families still employ women from the landless tribal groups as domestic workers but the old historical roles they had is no longer to be seen.

We Vohras were forced to switch from labour intensive paddy cultivation to planting sugar cane and mango trees. This change was brought about mainly by the scarcity of labourers to help plant and harvest the paddy crop. Labour shortages came about as many more types of manual work became available for unskilled workers with increase in industrialisation and urbanisation. Many of those who regularly worked on the land for Vohras and other land owning/farming communities sought and found work with transport providers, as truck and tractor drivers, with stone quarrying firms and as labourers on building sites and as unskilled factory workers.

We also had relationships with agricultural produce buyers. When our people switched from paddy cultivation to planting sugar cane and mango trees the

roles of produce buyers ceased. Sugar cane was bought by sugar mills which arranged the cutting and transporting of the produce to the sugar mills. Mango buyers often came from other States who bought the mangos and paid for what they bought and went away. With the sugar mills and with the mango buyers the contact was short and did not lead to any form of continued relationship.

We had good relationships with blacksmiths and carpenters. We Vohras needed the services of blacksmiths for repairing the wheels of our carts and making and repairing our farming equipment. The carpenters repaired and built new carts for us and repaired and made new ploughs. The village shoemaker/cobbler made new footwear as well as repaired our footwear. The animal skinner who skinned dead animals and tanned their hides supplied Vohra villagers with harnessing equipment for their carts and ploughs. With the changes in our crop cultivation and the changes in our farming methods the relationship with these service providers came to an end.

Some of our readers may not agree with what we have tried to convey about our Vohras to our fellow-Vohras but we feel we Vohras, except those who have some contacts with members of non-Muslim communities, most of our Vohras have no contacts. We may know some members of non-Muslim communities and we may invite some to our weddings or we may get invited to their weddings we feel these invitations do not help establish any form of closeness between our Vohras and others. We feel the closeness that existed some years ago between our Vohras and the others is no longer with any of us.

We feel our contacts with those who are not Muslims must not only be for economic reasons. There is a need, a very pressing need to look beyond economic issues to have contacts and good relationships with everyone irrespective of their beliefs. We feel closer contacts with others will not harm our beliefs or their beliefs. Let us become more positive and try to develop good relationships with all those we live with, work with and travel with. ■