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**TO BE A CITIZEN
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY**



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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Institute.

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TO BE A CITIZEN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

India became independent in 1947, Israel in 1948. So in one sense they are new states barely one generation old. But historically they are among the most ancient civilizations in the world, with languages and cultural roots going back thousands of years, and acutely meaningful to this day. Tragically, when India became independent through dividing one country into two, a fanatic murdered Mahatma Gandhi, who led your struggle to independence. And tragically, when our government decided that peace with our Palestinian neighbours can be attained only through dividing the one country we share, a fanatic murdered Yitzhak Rabin, the man who had devoted his entire life to the independence and defence of Israel. Many millions of Indians mourned Gandhi and millions of Israelis mourned Rabin. Yet in Israel, coupled with the widespread deep mourning, was a deep sense of cleavage; between those who utterly condemned the act of murder and who drew their faith from the ancient Jewish injunction, "thou shalt not murder," and those who condoned the murder on the basis of what most of us regard as a distortion of ancient religious edicts. The implicit question is, do we all recognize and respect the supremacy of the law? Not divine law, nor law decreed by a supreme ruler or by the religious authorities; but law as legislated through democratic procedure, in the Knesset, our parliament. For some, a small minority, there are other laws which transcend the laws enacted by parliament, and which permit them to exercise violence against those with whom they disagree, be they political leaders, or members of another group with which they are in conflict.

This tension between different perceptions and practices regarding the supremacy of law -- is only one dimension of the kind of dissensions which beset many countries in the world. In our country it is also a tension between certain religious groups -- though not all of them -- and secular groups, though not all of them; between members of different ethnic groups -- Jewish groups which proclaim the supremacy of Israel as a state of the Jewish people, and Israeli Arab citizens who question this supremacy. It is a tension between members of groups who originate in different culture -- local Israeli culture, Middle Eastern culture, Western culture, East European culture. Despite all these tensions, Israel is a country where, so far, within the pre-1967 frontiers, civil peace has largely prevailed -- between religious and secular people, between Jewish and Arab citizens, between Israelis of different cultural origins. Yet the murder of Yitzhak Rabin has focused for us the painful question: Will civil peace endure into the 21st century? Or paradoxically, shall we, with the advent of peace between Israel and her Arab neighbours, experience growing threats to the civil peace we have enjoyed so far?

In India too you are beset with such painful contradictions: civil peace in many parts of your immense country, and recurrent violence between different groups in other parts of the country; peaceful coexistence between different faiths in many places, and harsh conflict in other places. One should be wary of drawing the parallel between our two countries too far; the human context is different -- historically, culturally, politically. Yet as we enter the 21st century, India, in all its immensity, and Israel, small as it is, do share this same concern: what will hold people belonging to different groups together, in each of our countries, in a way which will assure the prevalence of civil peace? And what will prevent the deterioration of civil peace into civil strife, such as has undermined other countries in the world? Indeed, this is not an issue of concern to India and Israel alone. It is a critical issue in many countries in the world,

perhaps in most of them. For few are the countries where a single national culture is shared by almost all the population, thus facilitating the prevalence of civil peace. Japan is a rare instance. Perhaps some of the Scandinavian countries. But think of Britain, with at least three separate identities - - English, Scotch and Welsh, to which you may add about one million immigrants from Commonwealth countries. Or the United States, with a deep fissure between blacks and whites, made all apparent through the O.J. Simpson trial and the huge black demonstration in Washington. Or France, where the Corsicans claim a separate identity and where four million Moslems are not quite an integral part of French society. Or Spain with the Basques. Or the republics which seceded from the former Soviet Union, each now with a large minority of Russians. Or China with sizeable districts populated by people who are not Chinese. Or many of the South American republics, where there still endures a deep divide between people originating in Europe and descendants of the people who have lived there since long before the Spanish and Portuguese occupation.

Or think of many countries in Africa, for example Sudan and Ruanda. where people of different tribal or religious allegiance have been locked for years in a violent struggle of extermination. Or countries like Lebanon, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Bosnia, where civil peace had altogether collapsed and was replaced by civil war.

The intensity of these tensions varies from country to country to country; from countries which have so far successfully coped with these internal dissonances and occasional outbreaks of violence, to countries where the state as an accepted and effective framework of law and order has altogether collapsed. In 1979, Vice President Narayan, then Vice Chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University wrote an article entitled "Some Reflections on Indian Unity," and in it he says: "...it is no consolation to be told that the resurgence of primordial and traditional feelings and attachments in society is part of the modernization phenomenon. Unless civil politics is able to tame and control these primitive forces, social explosions will be inevitable, especially in a country like India."

What we all share is that all of us are citizens

The critical questions for many countries, in the coming century, are therefore: What will be the shared fabric which will keep our societies together? And will that fabric be strong enough to withstand the diverse tensions which threaten to pull it apart?

The essential basis for such a fabric is that members of all groups that make up a society are all citizens, and that the identity "I am a citizen" is what they all share. Men and women, young and old, poor and rich, religious and secular, members of all classes, castes, and ethnic groups, and secular, members of all classes, ,castes, and ethnic groups, whatever their language, faith, history—each of them is a citizen, and all of them are citizens. Whatever the difference between them, in a democratic country all citizens are equal as citizens; that is, equal in the civil rights and civic duties which empower them as citizens. Here we face a painful contradiction: that being a citizen is a rich empowerment, and that most citizens, in most countries, are barely aware of what it means to be a citizen.

It is surely not a mere coincidence that the issue of how to cope with this contradiction has risen in the past few years simultaneously in several countries. Let

me quote only one of many reports on this subject, a report published in 1990 by the Commission on Citizenship, set up by the Speaker of the House of Commons in Britain. In its first page, the report says:

“An immediate difficulty facing us is that in our society the term ‘citizenship’ is an unfamiliar notion. Asked about it, young people almost invariably found themselves in a moment or more of embarrassed silence... the fact that the word ‘citizenship’ is not in common use was frequently commented upon.”

In my own personal experience, I discovered an almost identical response, when I asked young people I encountered in the United States: “What does it mean to you to be a citizen” Almost invariably the response was a shrug, a puzzled smile, and a rather embarrassed reply: “Not much.” If such is the response in countries which are supposed to be models of civil society, we can assume that in most other countries, including India and Israel, the condition of citizenship is no better, and probably even more fragile.

Let me illustrate this by one more example from a neighbour of ours, Egypt. A research published by the Centre of Behaviour Research in Cairo revealed that in three election campaigns to the Egyptian parliament over the past 15 years, less than 50 percent of the Egyptians with voting rights did participate. One of the Explanations was that “bread and employment” interested people who were interviewed more than the elections. And the gloomy conclusion by an Egyptian author: “We have failed to convince people of the importance of politics, of the right to vote, and the capacity which the public holds for effecting a change.”

On being a citizen: Three critical questions

As we approach the 21st century, we face three critical questions regarding the future of citizenship. These are questions with which each society must grapple within its own context, and yet, because they concern so many societies in the world, they also constitute a universal problem. These three are the critical questions which we must all face:

One: What are the main components of being a citizen? And what does it mean to be a citizen?

Two: How do we enhance an individual person’s identity as a citizen?

and **Three** : How do we enhance being citizens as the identity which we all share, regardless of what differentiates each of us from citizens belonging to other groups?

Let me try and answer each of these questions.

Two different sources of citizenship

What are the main components of being a citizen? There is certainly no single reply to this question. The answers vary from country to country, and within each country. The general impression is that citizenship, or being a citizen, is a dynamic entity, undergoing constant change. The International Bureau of Education of UNESCO, in

Geneva, published in March 1995 an article on Education for Citizenship where it sums up this complex question in the following words:

“Two different sources of citizenship blend together throughout history in a variety of ways and appear today to be inspiring citizenship approaches in most countries. The first source finds its roots in citizenship practices in the classical republics of Greece and Rome. This notion of *republican citizenship* -- which is very much alive, although with different accents, in the world today -- stresses the character of individuals as members of a political society in relation to some main principles: the *sense of belonging to a political community*, where citizenship appears as the sharing of a common civic life; *loyalty towards the homeland*, which frequently supposes loyalty to the legal foundations of a society (for instance, towards the constitution or sometimes towards the powers that be); the *predominance of civic duties* over individual interests, which supposes that individual rights are subordinated to the fulfillment of social duties.

The second source of citizenship, much more recent than the former, is the *liberal tradition*, which finds its origins in the early thinking of Locke or Jefferson, and which focuses on the freedoms and rights of the individual: it is this tradition that has given rise to the notion of human rights and to the ensuing international instruments. The central idea is that all individuals are equal and are -- independently of any duty or circumstance -- the depositories of inalienable rights that cannot be revoked by any social institution, and in particular by the State.

From this standpoint; three major sets of rights derive -- *civil, political and socio-economic* -- which are considered today of universal value, as well as indivisible, in the sense that they all enjoy the same moral rank. They constitute the essence of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the subsequent covenants on civic and political rights, and on socioeconomic and cultural rights.

...In a synthetic statement summing up both approaches to citizenship, it could be said that the liberal tradition stresses the rights of individuals and their protection from the arbitrary use of power, while the republican tradition enforces the notion of collective belonging and duty.”

To be an effective citizen

Beyond this apt summing up let me present what I consider should be some of the main components of being a citizen in a democratic society. What I present is based on the Israeli experience, in which universal values and locally developed values intermingle. The essential idea is that being an effective citizen consists of an active combination of civic values, civic knowledge and civic skills. Thus, a value by itself, for example, freedom of speech, remains in the void, if a person is unaware of it, and does not possess the basic knowledge relating to it. Even so, knowing about a civic value does not in itself mean that a citizen has the skill to implement that value effectively.

Let me now, by way of example, present several of these essential civic values and skills.

Human dignity: The key civic value

In the view of many of us, the crucial civic value is the respect of human dignity. While many people in Israel do respect the human dignity of others, there are yet, regrettably, too many cases where human dignity is ignored or even abused. This is so, in many instances, between men and women, adults and children, religious people and secular people, Arabs and Jews, public officials and citizens who need their services.

What we need is to clarify and promote human dignity as a shared value and behaviour for all people and as an essential basis for citizenship. That each of us is a human being and that each of us is a citizen are the two elements that most people within all groups in our society would almost certainly agree on, irrespective of their differences in other matters.

The crucial question is whether and how respect for human beings as human beings, and for citizens as citizens, can be enhanced in all the day-by-day relationships that exist in our country. The first condition for progress in this field is recognition of human dignity as a deep need of each individual.

Every person has a profound need to be respected. This does not mean respect only in the formal or ritual sense of being polite; but primarily through a serious response to the uniqueness of the individual; of one's being a human being, even if one differs from others in gender, appearance, language, creed, opinions, customs, behavior, and the group to which one belongs. The profound need to be respected as a human being is common to members of most societies, men and women, young and old, religious and secular, Jews and Arabs, and people working in all fields. It is no coincidence that in Hebrew the words for respect (*kavod*) and weight (*koved*) have the same root, and their opposites -- to lighten (*lehakel*) and to curse (*lekallel*) -- also share one root. The same contrast also applies to the words *nikhbad* ("respected") and *nikleh* ("degraded"). In Arabic too there is a contrast between respecting the other (*karama* meaning literally to be generous) and belittling the other (*ihana*). In English too the word dignity derives from the Latin "dignus," worthy. Hence, to respect the other is to accord weight to him or to her as individuals; to respond to them as worthy human beings.

For most people, the need for respect is not a quest for self-aggrandizement but a need for positive feedback: Am I being recognized and taken seriously as a human being? Or do others ignore my uniqueness as a human being and belittle my humanity?

Although this is a profound daily need, many people are almost certainly unaware of it, or reject and suppress it in relation to themselves and to others. This is so because the social environment in which they grew up and in which they live has accustomed them to ignore this need or to be selective in responding to it. In other words, their world is one in which human dignity is diminished. For this reason, many people have never asked themselves such questions as:

--Do I deserve respect as a human being? And do others deserve respect?

--What in myself would I like others to respect? And what should I respect in others?

--How do others respect me? And how do I respect other human beings?

Presumably, persons who are unaware of every person's intrinsic need to be respected thereby harm themselves and harm others. Their world is largely devoid of respect. Alternatively, it may be a hierarchical authoritarian world, in which the person at the top (of the family, clan, caste, group, or establishment) is accorded exaggerated, formal respect, while the dignity of the others is belittled.

Every human being is unique in a complex way. For example, every person feels, thinks, and acts, but each does so in his or her own way. Thus all persons have a deep need for respect from others for their feelings, thoughts, and actions. In other words, they expect others to relate seriously to their experiences and not belittle them or ignore them altogether. Each individual also belongs to several groups -- family, community, ethnic group, faith, profession -- and the need to be respected is also a need to be respected as a member of these groups, which are groups of human beings.

Thus, the practice of human dignity in daily behavior by each person is as complex as human beings themselves. Problems arise when we bestow it on some people and withhold it from others, or when we despise a person because of one element in his or her identity (for example, the ethnic group to which he or she belongs) and disregard all other elements; or when we respect a person for one element of his or her identity (a rank, for instance) and ignore other elements. Of course not every aspect of a person and his or her behavior is necessarily worthy of respect; some aspects should be criticized or even actively resisted. For example, we would have difficulty respecting a person who treats others violently and arbitrarily, or who denies others respect because they belong to a particular group. In many such cases we might even confront such persons actively about their attitudes and behavior.

On the legal level, a significant advance was made in Israel in 1992 with the new Basic Law: Human Dignity and Freedom (1992), the stated aim of which is "to protect human dignity and freedom." The law stipulates, inter alia: "One may not harm the life, body, or dignity of a human being, as a human being," and "Every human being is entitled to protection of his/her life, body, and dignity." In an article, Supreme Court Justice, Aharon Barak, interprets this new law as a cornerstone of the evolving Israeli Constitution. However, Legislation alone does not necessarily alter values and behaviour. Most Israelis are yet unaware of what the new law implies in terms of daily behavior. Nor does the law itself interpret what human dignity means in terms of actual behavior. The key question for us, as we approach the 21st century, is how to make as many citizens as possible aware that human dignity is a key civic value, that they should know what it means and that they should be able to exercise it effectively, even in regard to persons who belong to other groups.

Essential components of being a citizen

Having dwelt at length with what many regard as the first essential component of being a citizen, let us proceed to some other components, which may perhaps be more familiar to you, and therefore can be mentioned briefly.

A person is a citizen of a state, India, Israel, the United Kingdom, or any other state. Being a citizen of a state means being familiar with the basic tenets of that state and respecting them, especially those tenets concerning the effective working as a democracy: the separation of powers, the supremacy of the law, the democratic procedure for electing a government and for legislating, and for reviewing government activities.

Another essential component of being a citizen is the rich cluster of *individual civic rights and civic duties*. In Israel, the association in which I work, Sikkuy, is now developing a Citizen's Guide, which we hope will eventually be available in every home in Israel. The Guide consists of the basic information on rights and duties a citizen should know, in four areas: (1) *Basic rights* -- the right to life and to bodily integrity; the right to privacy; freedom of movement, of thought and expression, of religion; freedom of organization; the right to property; the right to elect and to be elected; the right to fair justice; (2) *Rights of existence and welfare* in the following fields: education, health, housing, employment, welfare services; (3) *Rights in the cycle of life*: rights of pregnancy and birth, rights of children, rights of marriage and divorce, rights of the elderly; (4) *Civic duties*: the duty of respecting the law, the duty of paying taxes, the duties of public servants to the citizen.

Among the many civic rights and civic duties I choose to emphasize two:

--First, the freedom of opinion and criticism, with its implicit requirement to respect and tolerate dissident views;

--Secondly, respect for decisions accepted by the majority, while at the same time respecting the civic rights of the minority.

Yet another key civic value -- which must evolve as a civic skill -- is *civic responsibility and civic initiative*. This means that the citizen carries a civic responsibility for what happens in his or her community and in his or her country. A citizen is autonomous to initiate activities, whether as an individual, or in a group; activities which respond to community needs or to country-wide needs. These initiatives can take place in many fields, such as politics, civil rights, economic enterprise, education and culture; such initiatives are expressed in Israel, especially in the past decade, through the immense growth of NGOs, voluntary nongovernmental organizations, which proliferate in a wide range of areas. In a sense, the implicit message of such organizations is: in a civil society not everything depends on government, but citizens can assume a great deal of initiative for change, independently of government, or in cooperation with it.

Being a citizen is an empowerment

These, then, are some of the essential elements of being a citizen. The list of certainly not exhaustive; yet it does express the notion that citizenship is not merely a formal title, but a rich empowerment. There is a vast difference between this approach to citizenship, and the approach of Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, who asked: What is citizenship? and answered: just to have a passport. But then, for Ben-Gurion the highest priority was to establish an effective state; possibly parallel to the aspirations of Nehru, when India became independent. Civic identity was certainly

not a high priority on Ben-Gurion's mind, and it has evolved only in the past few decades. I may add on a personal note that during nearly thirty years of public service, in the army and in the civil service, I hardly ever thought about what it means to be a citizen. My own self education in this field began only fifteen years ago, when I started being involved in questions concerning the relations between the Jewish citizens, who are the majority in Israel, some 82 percent; and the Arab citizens, who are the minority, some 18 percent. And the key answer became that what we all share, Arabs and Jews in Israel, is that we are all citizens, and that as citizens we are all equal, in both rights and duties.

Learning to be a citizen

Having dwelt on the first key question -- what does it mean to be a citizen -- let us move to the second one: How do we enhance an individual person's identity as a citizen? In a way, we can liken being a citizen to driving a car. To drive a car, there are some basic principles you should know, and on which you are examined. But you can pass the theoretical test with high marks and yet be an ineffective and even dangerous driver, because you have never practiced driving. The same is true of being a citizen, with one additional drawback, in all countries; you are a citizen without having to pass any test in citizenship. This reflects of course the idea what civic rights and civic duties are not conferred upon you by some benevolent bureaucracy; but are an integral part of your being an autonomous citizen, regardless of your other identities, and regardless of whether you are aware of this rich empowerment. So back we are with our initial dilemma: How do we enhance an individual's citizenship as an empowerment.

One prevalent answer is that like other social skills, you acquire the skills of being a citizen from your social environment. For example, when you grow up in a society where freedom of speech is practised and tolerated, you acquire this civic value even if you have never learned about it formally. In this sense you are like the man in a play by Moliere who asked what is prose, and when he answered said: So I have been speaking prose all my life and never knew it!

But is this enough? Should we rely on processes of socialization as the main agent of preparing one to be an effective citizen? From the answer of young people I quoted earlier it becomes evident that while some of them, or many of them, may be practicing some civil virtues, they are largely unaware of what it means to be a citizen. So how do we enhance an individual's being a citizen as an empowerment requiring effective civic skills?

In many countries the answer is that schools should teach civics. But the traditional approach is that you teach civics through a textbook on civics. Textbooks may be useful in making you aware of what your civic rights and civic duties are. But without actual practice, the worth of textbooks alone is marginal. To give an example: a textbook tells you that freedom of speech and of criticism is an essential civic value, but the school climate is authoritarian, and does not tolerate plurality of views. What will prevail then is your daily experience in school and not the one page in the textbook which informs you about freedom of speech.

In Israel, civics has been a subject on which students are examined for their matriculation examination, at the end of the grade. This is based on a textbook, which the class learns for some twenty to thirty hours. Students hold the subject in low esteem, compared, for example, with mathematics or history. One of the reasons is that the textbook is not geared to the student as a citizen, and deals mostly with the state and its procedures. At our initiative, the Minister of Education has recently set a committee to redesign civic education completely. The major change we plan is that civic education will no longer be conceived solely through a textbook, but mainly as a long-term process from kindergarten to the grade. In this process, the school climate will play a major role, with key questions such as: does the school enhance freedom of speech? Does the school enhance democratic procedures? Does it enhance civic responsibility and civic initiative in regard to community issues, or even nation-wide issues?

We are thus at the onset of a long process of change in civic education. It is an immensely difficult and complex process, and the optimists among us say it will require at least one decade to become effective in many schools. Certainly, it will be a key subject on our educational agenda in the 21st century. I may add here that we are not the only country grappling anew with this issue. To cite a few examples, in Britain, the Speaker's Commission on Citizenship dealt with it in 1990. In Australia, the Prime Minister appointed a committee on Encouraging Citizenship, which presented its report in 1994. In France, civic education underwent a major change in 1993, when they decided that textbooks alone were not enough. And UNESCO's Bureau of Education in Geneva is now conducting a multi-national comparative study of civic education.

Schools can play a certain role in civic education, but many educators are sceptical about the expectations we can hold in this regard. Their scepticism has two main sources. One, they doubt the capacity, or indeed even the willingness, of school principals and teachers to introduce a genuine transformation in school climate, and to turn it to civil climate. Two, they point out that school alone does not shape the future generation, and that we should be modest in our expectations from schools in the respect. In their view, there exist other, far more powerful influences on the development of an individual as a citizen: the family, the community, and the media. I remember once visiting one of the most progressive schools in terms of civic education. I asked the principal: how do you evaluate the long-term effects of your school climate upon the students? He said: why ask me? ask the students, and he invited several students into the room. I asked one of them, a seventeen-year-old young woman, the same question. She answered immediately: If the climate at home is supportive of what we learn and practice at school, then certainly we do benefit from what we learn here. But if the home climate is antagonistic to civic values, nothing that happens at schools will be of any avail.

We thus reach a somewhat perplexing, if not paradoxical, answer that if you wish to enhance the development of civic identity, you must attempt to do it holistically: that is, simultaneously through as many social organizations as possible, and not only through schools. This is exactly what some totalitarian governments sought to achieve, and as we know from the experience of the former Soviet Union, what they ultimately achieved was an almost total collapse of the system. So let us beware of any totalitarian approach which seeks to impose civic identity from above, rather than

try to enhance its growth from below. Let us adopt a more modest piecemeal strategy. What this approach means is that it is futile to aspire to enhance civic identity in all members of a society even within one generation. Instead, progress can be facilitated where there is genuine interest in its enhancement: whether by political leaders, by community leaders, by school principals, by civil servants, by media people, or indeed by any other kind of persons willing to become leaders in this field, leaders who are also civil teachers. Their key message is: You are all citizens, equal citizens, and each of you can become an effective citizen.

Will being a citizen become an identity we all share?

This leads us to our third and last question: How can we enhance the status, or prestige, of civic identity, as the identity shared by all people in a country, regardless of other group identity with which they align themselves? The trouble with civic identity in most countries is that it is held in lower esteem than other identities. Thus, for example, in Israel, the identities "I am an Arab," "I am religious" are far more strongly felt than the identity "I am a citizen. We can also understand why. National identities and religious identities have behind them long histories, rich with symbols and events, and an intense feeling of kinship. On the other hand being a citizen is a rather recent notion. Even in the countries where it first emerged -- the United States and France -- it is barely two hundred years old; whereas in most of the newly independent countries -- such as India and Israel -- being a citizen is an identity only one generation old, and just emerging. Moreover, being a citizen means sharing this identity with people who are not our kin, who differ from us 'in gender, in religion, in language and ethnic identity, and in other dimensions. So how on earth should we feel that we have a shared identity with such people? And not merely shared, but shared on the basis of equality? To give one example: public opinion surveys reveal that for many Jews in Israel it is still difficult to relate to Arab citizens in Israel as their equals in citizenship. I can guess that in India there may be a similar problem between citizens who belong to different groups, castes, or classes.

In such a context, how can we aspire to enhance citizenship as the shared identity of all of us, in one country -- men and women, religious and secular, members of all different groups? We mentioned already one crucial element -- leadership. Being citizens will become a shared identity only if there are leaders who repeatedly lead their people in realizing that this is the identity they all share. But telling people by itself will not suffice. To be meaningful emotionally, citizenship must have its heroes -- and its enemies. In the United States, Abraham Lincoln is such a hero; for he led his country in a civil war, and kept the union intact on the basis of equal citizenship for all and the abolition of slavery. Yet let us not delude ourselves that the abolition of slavery by itself brought about a sense of shared and equal citizenship between all black and white citizens of the United States. One hundred years after the civil war, the United States had once again undergone an intensive struggle on civil rights -- with notable achievements -- with yet another assassination -- Martin Luther King. Even so, thirty years later, in the mid-nineties, there still is a large class of Americans, mostly black, who do not feel they are effectively part of the American civil society.

In Israel, after the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, Arab citizens mourned him as genuinely as did Jewish citizens. Yet does this already mean that members of both groups do

share the identity “I am a citizen, and share this citizenship with Jews and Arabs?” For many Jews and for many Arabs in Israel this is not so, yet.

The major obstacle: Human misery

If there is a lesson to be learned here, it is that without effective leaders, a shared citizenship is not very likely to develop, and that even with effective leaders, this is likely to be a process requiring at least several generations, and most of us are still at the beginning of this long road. Possibly in an age where a world network of communications links us all, this process may be somewhat facilitated, but the obstacles are still enormous. Certainly the most painful among them is human misery. For people who are hungry and homeless, being a citizen, and sharing in citizenship, are empty phrases. So a society which wishes to evolve as a civil society must effectively facilitate a way for these people out of their misery. Already in 1931 Jawaharlal Nehru perceived this painful dilemma, when he wrote in a letter (7.1.1931): “We want independence, of course. But we want something more. We must sweep away the dirt and the poverty and the misery from our country.”

Is it futile then to speak of shared citizenship in countries where such misery still prevails, on a large scale? The former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee, expressed the opinion that democracy could become an effective way of government only in societies which had evolved a large and stable middle class. But we may adopt a different view. Closing social and economic gaps cannot be conceived only in terms of government responsibility. Such a view smacks of a patronistic approach: “There are people up there who can extricate the poor out of their misery, and we the poor must passively wait for their goodwill.” The preferred view is that closing social and economic gaps must be a shared effort of government and of the deprived communities. This is the approach which we in Sikkim have adopted concerning the closing of gaps between the Jewish and Arab communities in Israel. We say to Arab mayors and community leaders: of course government bears a considerable responsibility for closing these gaps; but municipal leaders bear an equal responsibility for initiating future-oriented programs which will facilitate the closing of gaps. In 1925 Mahatma Gandhi wrote that “swaraj, self rule, is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.” He did not use the term citizens, but his implicit message is that citizens at large should not play a passive role about their own future.

So back we are with our initial questions: how do we facilitate the growth of civic identity as an empowerment of the individual, and as an identity equally shared by all citizens? There are no facile answers, and they vary from country to country. They vary also in the immensity of the obstacles which the growth of shared citizenship must overcome. But looking ahead into the 21st century we can say at least two things. One, that the most imminent danger to many countries is not external but internal; not wars between states, but the dissolution of civil peace inside states. And two that the only certain thing about the future is that it will be full of surprises. The pace of development of civic identity may become one of these surprises. Whatever the difficulties and the immense frustrations, we have no alternative. The question how to be a citizen in the 21st century should be high on the national agenda of all countries. It is a question of deep concern to us, each in his or her own country; and yet it is also a question of shared concern to all of us universally.

Possibly, a world-wide network can emerge, of civic leaders committed to the evolution of citizen identity in their country, and committed also to share their gathering experience with civic leaders in other countries. Because this is a long road, and because it is so immensely difficult, let us share this human endeavour as we advance together into the next millennium.