"ON CLAMP-DOWN ON THE HANDCLASP!!!
Short paper (22nd April 2020)

Image of 'Namaste' from an ancient temple complex.

"If I offer my hand to another and he takes it, do I not also have his hand? We are stronger together, but only if the bond of friendship travels from both hands." R. A. Salvatore

Introduction
A video-clip of the German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer instantly retracting his hand to the outstretched hand of Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel for a handshake went viral just a few days ago. It was like a flash but both were in high spirits within seconds. At least some viewers thought that the Interior Minister, although absolutely polite, could have responded differently, the other party being a 'mother-like' figure and the beloved leader of the country, and the whole episode in front of the cameras. The alarming spread of coronavirus, however, vindicates the spontaneous act of the Interior Minister since it recognizes neither authority nor status.

The Covid-19 threat has blown whistle on the globally recognized practice of 'hand-clasp', and the world too has been temporarily shut down as a precautionary measure. A handshake has emerged so common among many global communities that they do not know how to casually say hello anymore without that gesture. It has been satirically commented by some that a handshake has almost become a sort of 'free-for-alls' in social circles. Many feel that a greeting without handshake is limp and lifeless. The gesture has influenced human lives to the extent that embarrassing moments such as the one mentioned above, could always happen unless people are on the alert. We do not know whether this taboo on handshake will outlive this interim phase of illness and disease transmission because it is not the first time that humanity has been forced to remain in limbo. It is likely that dialogues to contemplate a viable and convincing alternative gesture to handshake will surface again on global platforms.
If we retrieve the data of Spanish flu or the like in the past when people were mandated to refrain from physical contact and handshakes, we will realize that such were interim periods, before life in all its fullness returned with a bang. Certainly there were alternatives in the offing but nothing to match a warm handclasp. As a common gesture or as a social norm to greet, handshake is several thousand years old. It has stood the test of time. A stance in favour of the handclasp is in no way to challenge the world of knowledge that has repeatedly warned humanity of probable health hazards in a handclasp but only to recognize and affirm how deep-seated the practice is in the hearts and minds of millions across the globe.

**Alternatives to Handclasp in the Offing**

The archives furnish us with alternate forms of greeting, experimented and nurtured in parts of the world for various reasons. During the early part of this decade the ‘fist bump’ appeared to emerge as a viable alternative and the media published pictures of President Obama practising it. A ‘fist bump’ had strong advocates on the ground that it reduced the germ infection to almost ninety percent compared to a customary handshake. This reminds us of the ancient Medians who kissed only the back of the hand for analogous reasons.

The ‘elbow bump’, projected as a viable alternative to handclasp at some point of time, was rejected outright by many as an awkward greeting posture. The Thais and the Cambodians greet nodding with their hands held in a prayer-like posture. ‘Smile’ or ‘thumps up’ too appeared as possible replacement and did the rounds for some time but were never considered on a par with a handshake. The recently introduced contactless high fives to the foot-based ‘Wuhan shake’ is still up in the air but it is premature to comment either on its suitability or acceptability. The Japanese bow to greet one another but the gesture continues to be confined to a small geographical domain of the world, nevertheless that being the case also with some of the other gestures. It is said that the native Maoris population of New Zealand tap noses and foreheads together. The Tibetans greet by sticking their tongues out at each other. One could certainly enlarge this list with many more greeting postures as etiquette adopted in every nook and cranny. No doubt they are copious and colourful too.

**‘Namaste’ as Alternative to the handclasp**

I choose to deal with this customary Hindu greeting separately, primarily for two reasons. First of all, being home to one seventh of world’s population, ‘namaste’ is a familiar form of greeting to the more than 1.38 billion Indians. The gesture is supposed to cut across religio-cultural entities and social barriers. Secondly, as a popular gesture in personal salutations and divine worships the namaste posture has been in practice in the region for thousands of years as attested by numerous temple-paintings and sculptures erected on ancient temple premises. The greeting finds its first manifestation in the Vedas, the oldest sacred texts, spanning roughly the mid second to the mid first millennium BCE, or the late Bronze Age and the Iron Age.

Overwhelmed by the warm welcome extended to him and his family and by the large audience gathered in the stadium to cheer him up at the ‘Namaste Trump Rally’ in Gujarat on 24th February 2020, President Donald Trump lauded the Indian way of saying hello with a ‘namaste, and tried to practise it.’ He indicated the readiness of the global community to toe the Indian line of namaste as an alternative to the hand-clasp.

Apart from common occasions of greeting, namaste is also a respectful gesture during times of arrival and departure (welcome and farewell). Namaste, as a gesture of obeisance or homage, is also a common sight in the Indian Hindu-Buddhist worship contexts. This commonality (its use both in common life situations and in divine worships) finds adequate expression in the famous mantra of the Tittiriya Upanishad: *atithidevo Bhava* (the guest is god). In the Indian Hindu-Buddhist philosophy a guest is to be revered with the same respect as god since no one could envisage or comprehend the forms gods could
adapt. The manifold avatars in Hinduism are divine persona in human form with specific purposes and dedicated tasks. The Upanishads (a sub-category of the Vedas) are a collection of Hindu religious texts written between c 800 and c 500 BCE during which the Indian society started questioning the traditional Vedic religious order. The upanishadic mantra *atithidevo bhava or atithi devo bhava* also reminds us of occasional biblical references where the Divine takes human form. Identical narratives are not strange to Islam too.

The trilateral Sanskrit verbal stem *namah* (pronounced as namaha) takes the sandhi (conjunctive) form *namas* before the sound *te* (from *tvam*), an enclitic second person singular, either genitive or dative pronoun, meaning ‘you’. A literal rendering of ‘namaste’ would be “I bow to you”. Namaste is usually spoken with a slight bow, with hands pressed together, the palms touching at an upward angle in front of the chest, fingers pointing upwards and thumbs close to the chest. Namaste gesture reflects the feeling of spiritual oneness of the heart and mind, and union of both hemispheres of the human cerebrum, the seat of the intellect on the one side and the seat emotions on the other. It affirms the hinduistic belief that the divine and the self are the same in the one who extends the homage and the other who embraces it. In other words it is bowing to the divine in the other person. In principle namaste as a common gesture of obeisance seems to transcend even the divine-human divide. However, a reality check raises a big question mark to this claim since the dominant Indian communities still do obeisance to the caste system (the age-old practice untouchability, discrimination). Whether ‘namaste’ directly or indirectly contributes to the upholding and nurturing of social distancing (purity-impurity divide) rather than integrating people is a challenging question. Placed in a pressing situation of a pandemic such as the one the humanity is at the moment in, a social distancing and a touchless greeting might look like an ideal etiquette and a permanent solution to address the issue of future transmission of diseases through touch. But the pertinent question is what exactly the namaste gesture would bid to communities that are still at the level of formation and are disadvantaged through social divides and untouchability.

**Seeking Alternatives in the Judeo-Christian World**

From ages past people had turned to the wisdom of the sages and the experiences of the ancient faith communities to resolve situations that caught them off guard. Being in one such, we explore the Holy Scriptures to be replenished with valuable insights. Perusing the norms in practice during the rabbinic times, it appears that prostration was deemed the most reverential form of greeting. The Rabbis also kissed on the forehead as a sign of welcome. A greeting by kissing on the mouth or cheeks was not approved. Kissing a female in public was not appropriate.

If we turn our focus on the creation story in the book of Genesis, we gather that it was the Lord God, who first sensed the isolation of the first human beings and their innate desire to be in mutual company despite the company of the Divine. Neither the enchanting presence of a host of living species around them nor the delighting lush of the Garden of Eden could turn out to be a substitute for mutual companionship. Much to our regret the narrative is not elaborate enough to unfold the mysteries of the first ever human encounter in divine presence, leaving our minds to flutter about its nature. The solace is that the Bible has other cases in point illustrating human encounters (at times also with angelic beings) in verbal expressions as well as in physical gestures even as we recognize that different modes or forms of greetings were in practice, depending upon the relationship of the persons involved. We do not delve into the rhetoric part of the greetings but rather dwell upon the physical manifestation of the encounters.

Laban’s embrace and kiss to welcome Jacob, his sister’s son (Gen. 29, 13); Jacob’s bow to the ground seven times while approached his brother Esau, and Esau throwing his arms around the neck of Jacob and kissing him (Gen. 33, 3-4); David and Jonathan doing triple obeisance and exchanging kisses (I Sam. 20, 41); and the depiction of the kiss of the hand, a kiss of homage in Job 31, 27 are perhaps
some prototypes of welcome gestures in the Bible. To these one could add the meeting together of love and faithfulness and the kissing each other of righteousness and peace depicted in Psalm 85, 10, a meeting and a greeting that could yield incredible and abundant harvest.

To the Psalm 85 we append an exciting but familiar prophetic narrative, namely Micah 4. In Micah 4, 3 there is the ringing melody of a new world order where swords are transformed into ploughshares and spheres into pruning hooks. This, indeed, is a radical vision for transformation in a positive direction. In other words, the mighty hands that held weapons (swords and spheres) of destruction so far, will not train war anymore but will hold tools that could produce nourishing food, signalling a positive encounter of love and faithfulness, union of righteousness and peace as envisaged in Psalm 85. The outcome is a plentiful yield. Besides, the people of God will peacefully sit under their own vine and fig tree with no life-negating forces around them to threaten and devour.

Recent Expositions on the Handclasp
The two recently published and mutually complementing online articles of Monica Buchanan Pitrelli ("Your guide to new, ‘touchless’ greetings", March 5, 2020) and Evan Andrews ("The History of Handshakes", March 16, 2020) on handshake are very much enlightening. Right on cue when we hear cries for ‘handshake free zones,’ ensuing the idea of ‘smoke-free zones’, the history and meaning of the handclasp as a popular greeting-gesture has been effectively dealt with by Pitrelli and Andrews. Catching a glimpse of the history of the handclasp, we gather that the practice perhaps dates back to as early as the 9th century BC, based on a depiction in which the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III shakes hands with his counterpart the Babylonian ruler, in order to seal an alliance. Mention is also made of the references to the gesture by the poet Homer in his "Iliad" and "Odyssey" in the contexts of pledges and displays of trust.

In ancient Greece a handclasp conveyed peaceful intentions of good will as manifested in the display of empty right hands. A strong up and down motion during firm handshakes could naturally dislodge knives and daggers in case hidden inside the sleeves or dress. In ancient Greece when people clasped hands in the context of sacred bonds (oath or promises), it testified that their word was a sacred bond in good faith.

It has also been pointed out that a handshake was a frequent theme in the Greek funerary art during the fourth and fifth century BC as evidenced in the gravestone ‘handshake’ depictions. The depiction of the deceased shaking hands with the members of the family in the context of a final farewell could also signify the eternal bond between the living and the dead. Pairs of clasped hands traced in the ancient Roman coins have been interpreted as sign of friendship and loyalty. That being the case, however, the handclasp as part of everyday greeting cannot be earlier than the 17th century. (Monica Buchanan Pitrelli, "Your guide to new, ‘touchless’ greetings", March 5, 2020; Evan Andrews, “The History of Handshakes”, March 16, 2020).

Conclusion
Envisioning handclasp as a symbolic act facilitates a real perception of corresponding biblical images in perspective. On the larger canvas are people yearning for the touch or clasp of a sage, a prophet or priest, to be guided or blessed. In the New Testament the very sight of Jesus or the apostles reared hopes of instant deliverance. People looked forward to a new social order where the sick were healed, the hungry were fed, the hurt were consoled and the downtrodden uplifted. It all began with the symbolic gesture of God forming the humans with his own hands from the dust of the ground. Perhaps God’s utterance "let there be" could have accomplished in fullness whatever was envisaged. God’s voice possessed the power to bring to existence, to alter and to fine-tune and that happened in the case of other creation. But God chose otherwise, if we take the example of the creation of human beings in the
Genesis account. God set God’s hands on the task. We come across familiar biblical occurrences where a movement of the hand itself made a world of difference.

The origin of a minority Christian community in India could be traced back to the missionary movement in India, leaving aside the claim of a Christian presence in the country through Apostle Thomas. The task of the missionaries was not at all easy as they were caught in between the ruling lot and the dominant communities, who fought tooth and nail against any attempt to change the existing order prevailed in the society. The missionary interventions turned out to be healing touches (handclasps) in most cases, without denying that some of them succumbed to pressure or became ineffective. We have two exceptional cases in point whereby the German missionaries the Revd. Dr. Hermann Gundert (in Kerala state) and the Revd. Ferdinand Kittel (in Karnataka state) redefined their missionary roles and became pioneers in a movement of enlightenment. These two role models ventured into the realm of literature and education that was very much monopolized by dominant castes. The dedication, commitment and sacrifices of these missionaries brought forth literary contributions in the form of many books, the first standard dictionaries and grammar books to the respective vernacular languages. The touch of their pens turned out to be lovely handclasps, through which the educationally deprived in the society were admitted to the world of knowledge, an eye-opener.

There was also another Australian missionary, Dr. Graham Staines, a medical doctor who came to north India and rendered his services among the leprosy patients but was brutally murdered on suspicion that he was agent of religious conversion. Mother Teresa was yet another foreign missionary who clasped the hands of the poor and homeless in the metro city of Kolkata and also picked with her hands infants thrown on the streets in the wee hours of the night. There are more to this list of missionaries that would include William Carey who founded the first theological University in Serampore offering divinity degrees, and also campaigned to end the practice of sati (burning alive of widows) and others who vigorously fought to put an end to child marriages. A handclasp would means a lot in a society flooded with unending woes, governed by superstitions and downtrodden by fellow human beings. We earnestly hope that the moratorium on handclasp give way to a new dawn where people hold hands and embrace each other in confidence and trust.

“One smile begins a friendship,
one handclasp lifts a soul.
One star can guide a ship at sea,
one word can frame the goal.
One hope will raise our spirits,
one touch can show you care.
One candle wipes out darkness,
one laugh will conquer gloom.” M. Berkins

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