CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION
The term “dignity” comes from the Latin *dignitas* as well as from the French *dignité* which denote respect and status. The term is used to suggest that a person has an innate right to respect and ethical treatment. Dignity is generally understood in the precautionary sense that someone is not receiving a proper degree of respect. It also implies that someone is not treating himself or herself with proper self-respect. In politics, the term is used to critique the treatment of the oppressed groups of people. In recent times the term has been employed to signify that several groups like women, children, animals and plants have an inherent and inalienable right for a respectful treatment.

A person is one who is not only conscious of his or her inalienable dignity but also aware of others being so. Unlike the one who is merely an individual, a person is an enlightened being
who is mature and responsible. An individual is one who is genetically a limited entity and confined to one’s own likes and dislikes, desires and ambitions. But a person is one who is able to relate himself or herself with others. Personality is richer than individuality. Individuals are like billiard balls which collide with other billiard balls. They cannot cooperate with other individuals but get into conflict with them. But once the individual becomes a person, he or she develops the capacity to spontaneously relate with others. The person enters the hearts of others and invites them enter his or her heart. That is, the person regards others as having equal worth and dignity as human beings. Personality gives a person the sense of individual worth and dignity. The individuals have to be elevated to the level of being persons. The organic individuals have to transcend themselves into the persons through spiritual transformation and socio-political participation.

The subject of the dignity of the human person has been the predominant theme of human inquiry since the dawn of philosophical thinking. Philosophers all through the ages have centered their inquiries around understanding and preserving the inherent worth of the human being. Thinkers from Socrates to Sartre in the West and from the Buddha to Krishnamurti in the East have made serious attempts at unraveling the true nature of man. They have made significant contributions to the discovery of the truth that man is essentially a being of dignity and freedom.
They have considered human being to be the most intelligent and valuable of all the species. The real person is one who is endowed with a 'substantial' being and intrinsic worth. Human personality is such that it is unique both in being and value. Man is not only a rational but also a moral and spiritual being. He is not only a political but also a socio-cultural being. He is a linguistic animal capable of scaling the intellectual, ethical and metaphysical heights.

Human being has the potential of revealing the highest truths in all the spheres of existence. It is said that it is through man that all truths including the truth of the universe get revealed. It is also held that understanding the truth of the human being amounts to understanding the truth of the universe. Human being is the universe in miniature. The being of man is the microcosm of the universe which is the macrocosm of the being of man. An absolute and an unconditioned state of being is the truth of the human reality. Freedom and perfection constitute the true being of man. Man is not merely one among the many species of animals but a homosapien who is distinct from them. Man's prowess is far superior to that of all other species. Man is the crown of the universe and the acme of the natural, social and spiritual evolution.

Human being is the epitome of the divinity encompassing the entire universe. He or she is the embodiment of humanity
pregnant with love, compassion and sensitivity. Besides the apparent socio-cultural identities, man has the unique identity of being an integral part of the universal self. Man alone has the privilege of being and knowing the infinite self. As the representative of the universal self, man is essentially a being of infinitude and eternity which are the hallmark of divinity. It is as the being of humanity coupled with divinity that the human being acquires worth and dignity. Therefore it is the duty of the human beings to recognize themselves as the beings of intrinsic value and treat each other not only as the means but also as the ends in themselves.

But the history of humanity is a witness to an unrelenting suppression of human dignity and freedom. Oppression of the weak by the strong, the poor by the rich, the uneducated by the educated, the women by the men, and the subjects by the rulers has been the common phenomenon. Human beings have been discriminating, exploiting and torturing one another in various ways. Caste, class, religion and race have been detrimental to the recognition of the inherent worth of the human being. Sectarian and exclusivist attitudes have been the source of strife and hostility among people. Human relations are governed by commercial, utilitarian and consumeristic principles of treating the other as merely a means of achieving one's own ends. They mirror the callousness, humiliation and degradation that people mete out to
each other. The institution of slavery in the past and the existing practice of untouchability and the apartheid are a testimony to people's demeaning treatment of their fellow beings. The Nazi holocaust of the Jews and the Gypsies is another instance of utter hatred that humans can extend against one another.

The constant events of assault, violence and massacre that some have been perpetrating on others are a proof of the scant regard that people can have for their fellow beings. The innumerable wars and the consequent genocide that history has witnessed speak volumes about our attitude towards our brethren. It also speaks of the attempts of humiliation and destruction that people can deliberately cause against one another. The organized killing of people in the name of beliefs, ideas and symbols speaks of man's insanity of sacrificing the real for the illusory, the true for the false. The chronic problems of hunger, poverty, malnutrition on the one hand and the manufacturing and piling up of the weapons of mass destruction on the other, are an evidence of the persistent degeneration and degradation of humanity. It seems humanity has been heading towards self-destruction, despite the marvelous achievements in the realm of science and technology. The grim situation is entirely due to man's failure to recognize and respect the dignity and worth inherent in oneself and in others.

At the same time there have been constant efforts to control the suppression of man by man. Political and legal measures have
been adopted for the protection of the dignity and freedom of the people. Civil and political wars also have been fought to liberate the oppressed from the oppressor. Several kinds of liberation movements and organizations have sprung up all over the world to defend the exploited against the exploiter. Nations have incorporated a number of provisions in their Constitutions for the preservation of the inherent worth of the person. Governments have also enacted a variety of laws to save the intrinsic value of the human being. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an important document adopted by the UNO on December 10, 1948 for the propagation and legal protection of the dignity and worth of the people all over the world. The Preamble of the Declaration says that every human being has an inherent dignity and worth and is entitled for equal and inalienable rights and freedoms. It also observes that disregard for human dignity and worth has resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of humankind. People all over the world should have faith in the dignity and worth of the person. Freedom, justice and peace in the world can be established only when the natural and fundamental rights of all are recognized by all the countries. The Preamble further says that the rights and freedoms of the people have to be protected by the rule of law. They have to be disseminated through education and implemented effectively nationally and internationally.
The thirty Articles contained in the Declaration say that all people are born free and endowed with reason and conscience. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security. No one shall be held in captivity, slavery, servitude or subjected to torture, cruelty or inhuman treatment or punishment. Nobody should discriminate the other or interfere with his or her privacy or reputation. Everybody should act towards the other in a spirit of brotherhood. All people must have an equal access to public places and services and to social security. Every one is entitled to economic, political and cultural rights that are indispensable for a free development of his or her personality. The Articles further declare that the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Declaration should be extended to all without any discrimination such as race, colour, sex, religion or language. The Declaration seeks to enforce them by the rule of law and treats their violation as a serious offence against human dignity and worth.

Yet there has been a serious threat to human dignity despite the enforcement of human rights by the law. There have been cases of aggression of man by man all over the world. There has been a rampant infringement of human rights and an unabated violation of the laws meant for their protection. Not only the individual and groups of people, even the governments have been indulging in the acts of degrading human beings. There have been several cases of people being marginalized, suppressed and
tortured. Laws are inadequate to stem the tide of domination and oppression of man by man. Laws per se are ineffective to enable human beings to perceive and respect the dignity inherent in each other. Laws are so arbitrary that what is enforced by them may also be taken away by them. Laws are circumstantial and have their own limitations. They involve the vicious circle of amending the existing ones and the enactment of newer and stronger ones. Laws may be necessary but not sufficient for the recognition and protection of human dignity. They treat human dignity as a legal entity only and consider the rights to dignity as what they define them to be.

But the phenomenon of human dignity has a higher value than what is given by the law. It has an intrinsic value transcending the instrumental and utilitarian values. Its significance transcends the socio-political dimension of the human being. It has its source in the metaphysical being of man, namely, the absolute Spirit. The absolute Spirit is the universal and the infinite Self which is common to all people. It is the 'substantial' and the undivided self underlying the apparent being. It is only when the individual realizes the metaphysical self of oneself and that of the other that one can recognize the dignity inherent in oneself and in the other. It is only when one perceives the real self that is common to all that one can treat the other as one desires to be treated by others.
Identification of oneself with one's own true self enables one to truly identify oneself with the other. Spiritual identification means spirit-to-spirit relationship between people. Person-to-person relationships have to be anchored in the spirit-to-spirit relationship. Personal relationships have to be founded on the spiritual reality of the person. The socio-political dimension of human existence has to be grounded in the spiritual dimension of the human being. Dignity and the worth of the person can be safeguarded only when the individuals realize their metaphysical dimension of divinity. It is only on the background of the metaphysical self of the human being that we can conceive of a society devoid of discrimination and degradation of humanity. Philosophers all through the ages have emphasized the relevance of the metaphysical reality of the human being for the social well-being of humanity. They have maintained that people can live in dignity only when there is a spiritual relationship among them. Relationality between people cannot be divorced from the transcendental reality. It is obligatory on the part of people to relate with each other by relating themselves with the Transcendent. Relating oneself with the other with love and compassion is possible only when they relate themselves with the metaphysical self which is the same for all and identifies one with all.

Socrates says that the knowledge of the eternal soul is the necessary condition for treating the other with equal respect. The
soul is the universal entity in which all human beings partake. Self-knowledge is knowing oneself as an integral part of the universal self. The knowledge of the self brings about virtue which is excellence in behaviour. Only the virtuous person can recognize the other as the manifestation of the same soul. Such a person alone can treat the other with the same kind of dignity as he expects others to treat himself. Immanuel Kant argues that the moral behaviour of treating each other with equal dignity and autonomy is possible only when one's behaviour is rooted in the metaphysical realm of the Noumena. One has to realize the moral law 'within' and wonder at the starry heavens above for recognizing the humanity in oneself and in others. It is immoral to degrade the sacred humanity inherent in each and everybody. One should restrain oneself from the acts of degrading oneself and others in any manner. Kant therefore condemns the acts of suicide and murder as the worst ways of destroying the dignity and humanity in oneself and in others. Martin Buber holds that one cannot treat the other with due respect unless the relationship is founded on the metaphysical level of the 'I' and 'Thou'. Relating oneself on the phenomenal level of the 'I' and 'It' means treating the other as an object. Treating the other as the subject of dignity is possible only when one regards the other as the Thou which is endowed with the same kind of humanity.
The Upanishadic seers have proclaimed that there is absolutely no basis for any kind of discrimination among human beings, since all are the manifestation of one Spirit which is absolute, infinite and universal. The apparent differences are unreal and adventitious. The self is one and that alone is real. When one realizes the undivided self one cannot treat the other as being different from oneself. One sees the same self in all people and respects them with equal dignity. One regards others as having the same value as one has. Thus the metaphysical self forms the foundation for harmonious relationships among people. The Buddha sought to preserve the dignity of the human person by advocating the principle of mutual dependence. Everything exists in relation with several other things and arises in dependence on several causes and conditions. Nothing can exist on its own and independently. So also everybody exists in relation with others and on the background of socio-linguistic context. Nobody can survive in isolation. Relational self is the matrix of our existence. So one's well-being consists in the well-being of others. Degrading the other implies degrading oneself. There is absolutely no scope for infringing the dignity of the other without infringing the dignity of oneself. It is therefore inevitable that we always relate with others in recognition of their dignity and worth. Mahatma Gandhi says that human beings are a superior kind of species since they are capable of realizing the transcendental spirit which he calls Truth
or God. All are the children of the Almighty and endowed with the same kind of dignity and worth. There is no scope for hostility among people when the self-same spirit is uniting them. It is due to the ignorance of the higher reality that we indulge in the systematized acts of cruelty and terror. The soul of the Orient can surely form a firm foundation for human beings to treat each other with equal dignity. As the children of the one Creator human beings are bound by the laws of truth and non-violence. We are capable of treating each other with love and non-violence.

Swami Vivekananda is one of the prominent contemporary Indian thinkers who has sacrificed his life for the establishment of a new world order founded on the spirituality advocated by the Vedanta. He says that people can treat each other with dignity only when they realize that they are the embodiment of what Vedanta calls the Atman. The rich and the poor, the noble and the ignoble, the high and the low, and the man and the women are the manifestation of the one Soul. Spiritually all are identical and equal. No one is superior or inferior to the other. The idea that one is privileged over the other is wrong. The advantages a few enjoy in terms of wealth, knowledge, caste and religion will vanish once they realize that they are of the nature of the self. It is necessary that everyone whether a lawyer, a teacher, a worker or a fisherman should think that he or she is the spirit in reality. Vivekananda says that regarding oneself and others as the
transcendental self establishes relationships of equality among people. It also enables people to perform their duties efficiently and with honesty and concern for others.

Vivekananda contends that the realization of the universal self in oneself and in others gives them the dignity and freedom which transcend all the barriers including the barrier of caste. The system of caste cannot create differences among people since the spirit that dwells in all is one and the same. Caste is a natural order of people forming into groups depending upon the duties they perform ranging from mending shoes to governing a nation. Each one excels in his or her particular profession given by caste because of long commitment to it. The shoe-mender performs his duty better than the ruler. The ruler rules a nation better than the shoe-mender. One cannot perform well the duty of another. So there is no scope for any sense of superiority or inferiority among the people. One who rules need not feel that he is greater than the mender. Those who can recite the Vedas, should not think that they can exploit and put the unlettered to indignities. So also there is no ground for privileges for a few and problems to others. It is unjust to ignore some and punish others for the same kind of an offence committed by them.

Vivekananda thus advocates the possibility of people treating each other with dignity despite the system of caste. It is the ignorance of the truth that everyone, irrespective of one's
profession, is of the nature of the supreme spirit. Everyone is spiritually divine and entitled to treatment with equal dignity. Vivekananda maintains that caste is good in so far as it is a natural way of sharing different duties by different people. Caste in this sense will remain for ever. But it is possible to remove the scourge of discrimination perpetrated against some in the name of caste. It is also possible to reject the privileges enjoyed by some claiming superiority in terms of caste. Vivekananda says that the truths of the Vedanta have to be taught to all and practiced by all. They should not be limited to the so-called privileged few. They should not also be confined to the hermits dwelling in forests and caves. The Vedantic teachings should spread all over the world and work in our daily lives. Only then people of all walks of life can live with inalienable dignity and worth. This is the message of Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta, otherwise known as Neo-Vedanta. This thesis will deal in great detail with this aspect of Vivekananda's Philosophy.