

The East-West Dialogue And Cultural fusion

About two decades ago in 1993 Samuel Philips Huntington in his article “Clash of Civilizations” made an ominous forecast that in future the civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. In this clash the most prominent group is the Islamic fundamentalists’ connection that has emerged to challenge Western interests, values and power and threatened global peace and harmony. It is true that there are ample signs of cultural conflicts between the traditional East and the West as well as among the three Abrahamic traditions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam and hence it has become all the more necessary to respond with renowned efforts to counter the clash of civilizations with a dialogue among civilizations. A central idea of *Orientalism* is that Western knowledge about the East is not generated from facts or reality, but from preconceived archetypes that envision all “Eastern” societies as fundamentally similar to one another, and fundamentally dissimilar to “Western” societies. This discourse establishes “the East” as antithetical to “the West”. Such Eastern knowledge is constructed with literary texts and historical records that often are of limited understanding of the facts of life in the East. A true perception of the East and also of the West by the East is the first prerequisite in our understanding of each other.

While the very idea of a clash of civilizations is wrong, a civilization of clashes is today's reality. That what makes dialogue among cultures and peoples an urgent matter of international politics and global ethics. Dialogue can be meaningful in a 1) spirit of reciprocity; 2) mutual recognition and 3) solidarity. Dialogue has to be infused with 4) cultural broadness. Dialogue is a form of hermeneutical quest for inter-civilizational reflection on the modes of global existence.

One of the important aspects of dialogue is to know each other, each other's culture and also their creativity and meditative thought.

Dia in Greek means to shed light into things through the spoken word, *logos* in Greek. In other words bringing forth that which is hidden, is the ground or foundation of all cultures, all civilizations. (1) In order to enter into a meaningful dialogue aimed at better understanding of the Eastern and the Western civilization, every individual has to be prepared to exercise i) tolerance towards people who base their daily lives on values and experiences other than our own. Let us remember the well known quote by Einstein that, "a person starts to live when he can live outside himself", and hence tolerance alone is not enough. Equally important is the notion of ii) responsibility for other cultures as well as for one's own culture. While tolerance means not to interfere with other's ways of living or thinking responsibility actually suggests responsiveness to the

“otherness” of the other. Besides tolerance and responsibility there is another term iii) ethics used by two distinguished philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida to explain the self and the other relationship. Levinas says that the foundation of ethics consists in the obligation to respond to the other. In being for the other only the sense of responsibility (goodness, mercy, charity) calls forth. For Derrida, the foundation of ethics is hospitality, the readiness and the inclination to welcome the other into one’s home.

Levinas’s and Derrida’s theories of Hospitality and ethics hold out the possibility of an acceptance of the other as different but of equal standing. This is a broad view of particularism as evinced in the cosmopolitan concept of Diogenes of Sinope, (2) who said, “ Asked where he came from, he answered: ‘ I am a citizen of the world’ but it does not in any way prove one’s identity as a member of a family (*vasudhaiva kutumbukam*). India goes even a step further as said in the Upanishads that one who perceives all the beings in his own self and own self in all the beings does not hate any one anymore. (3) This notion of complete identity is not to be found in the West. This realization depends upon one’s deep understanding of the existence of the one Supreme Reality and that the Self is identified with that Reality. This is Vedantic oneness.

The consequence of Advaitic Philosophy is that if you harm another being, man, woman, animal or insect, you are harming

yourself. i) pacifism and ii) humanitarianism are the necessary corollaries of this very doctrine.

The Taittiriya Upanishad explains that when one sees difference even to the smallest degree, there arises fear in mind. With fear you cannot have a dialogue. So long as there is another there is finitude, the condition of being finite which creates fear. When the notion of difference is transcended by the vision of underlying unity there is fearlessness. But in facing a position where the other is completely obliterated no dialogue is possible in that kind of a state of transcendentalism.

India's role, it is said, in the intellectual encounter has been passive. It looks at least apparently true but it is not true. India believes that there is such a thing as higher learning and this kind of learning, one learns best about others by learning about one self.

This kind of learning about others does not analyze, compare and judge all the time but it accepts them as they are. This method gives a benign, a compassionate knowledge of others. In fact in this kind of knowledge, there are no others. India has never tried to find Europe, but discovered it when she was herself discovered and started responding to it while being discovered, subdued and objectified by it. Otherwise also Hindus never showed any curiosity or interest in others. Otherwise also there is complete lack of interest among the Hindus, either silence or evasiveness towards other cultures. Hindus were constantly beleaguered by the *yavanas* (Greeks) and *mlechhas* (Muslims and Christians) but it survived the

continuous and violent incursions of foreigners and remained immune to them even if failed to resist their physical or political domination.

We all know about the legendary biography of Alexander, became well known in large part of Asia but was completely disregarded by Hindu India.

We can know all that we need to know about the Hindus and their ancient customs from the Greek and Chinese travelers or later from the chronicles of Muslim historians but there is hardly any account available to us about what the Hindu natives thought of their ‘guests’ from abroad. Nor do we find any account of philosophical or religious debates with Ulemas in traditional Hindu literature.

Buddhism, however, posed a challenge to Hinduism which was quite different from other traditions both in its origins and its philosophical content.

It was both the other and at the same time not the other.

If Hindu scholars and seers felt compelled to engage in passionate intellectual discussions within their Buddhist counterparts, it is precisely because, Buddhism while being the other, at the same time shared with Hinduism some of the most fundamental concepts of common reference; the questions of *moksha* i.e. liberation and *nirvana* of self and nothingness.

No doubt India accepted *sambad* or dialogue as an effort towards understanding the genuineness of the issues posed. The dialogue with others with a view to conquering one and all absolutely does not fit in the thought frames of Indians. Debates

creates suicidal ego. Only service to people alone can fill one's heart with love. More than that Hindus believed in a meaningful factual and self analyzing dialogue – *atmanam viddhi*. Though external dialogues were practiced yet mostly among themselves not with others.

No man, however great his learning and scholarship, will be considered a philosopher in the Indian culture unless he is free from egoism, greed and pettiness and has the positive virtue of a noble disposition and hence scope for external dialogue was limited which tend to make a man develop a fat ego.

The second profound reason for this lack of curiosity for the other is that the other was never a source of reference necessary to define their own identity as it was for the Europeans. The self was always accepted as self referential, the other was never a threat to their identity, nor a source of confirmation of their uniqueness.

This was very different from the European notion of the other, an inalienable entity external to one self, which were both a source of terror and an object of desire. Sartre's famous statement 'hell is the other', carries a strong echo of Hegel, who always defined one's identity as 'identity against the other', either to be appropriated or to be destroyed.

By defining the identity of the self in this manner, however, a European finds himself entrapped in his own contradiction. If he succeeds in completely, subjugating the 'other' the identity of his own self becomes dubious. He wants to become whole by destroying the other but without the other, he becomes nothing.

Even in present time characterized by the globalization of culture there remains a big gap in the West's understanding of the East. Though globalization tends to go for one homogenized culture by appropriation and co-option even then a fierce debate is continuing for the last 30 years to speak in favour of particularism and exceptionalism. Amartya Sen by quoting Tagore says that Tagore's everlasting credit is that his great cosmopolitan vision never sacrificed the richest possible sense of tradition. His actual words are,

“The main point of cosmopolitanism, which is taken to be world-citizenship claim, need not militate against valuing elements in one's own tradition. It is particular cultural traditions that can provide the bases for understanding and morally relating to others and ultimately a vision of universality is developed.”

Let me here, by endorsing the view mentioned just now reject a well entrenched view about Tagore that his main contention was to bring a synthesis between the West and the East for a true resurgence of India and a well meaning message of spirituality to the West.

On the contrary his theory was (by borrowing from G.L.Mehta) that there is no other way open to us in the East, but to go along with Europeanization and to go through it. Only through this voyage into the foreign and strange can we win back of our own selfhood. Going through does not mean acceptance but understanding it. In 'Home and the World' Tagore further justifies this view:

‘I do not think that it is the spirit of India to reject anything, reject any race, and reject any culture. The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity....Now, when in the present time of political unrest the children of the same great India cry for rejection of the West I feel hurt... We must discover the most profound unity the spiritual unity between the different races.

We must go deeper down to the spirit of races , other human individuals, and realize that his work is to bring man and find out the great bond of unity, which is to be found in all human races....Man is not to fight with other human races , other human individuals but he has to bring about reconciliation and peace and restore the bonds of friendship and love.’

But in the West one can still realize a persistent reluctance to accept that the West could have borrowed anything of significance from the East, or to see the place of eastern thought within the western tradition. One glaring example of this attitude is that the European literary historiography uses the paradigm of a single dominant literary tradition. Occasional debates about particular preferences of styles and periods do take place such as T.S. Eliot’s preference for the metaphysical over the romantics. But at no stage it allows the inclusion of a non-British writer in the British canon even when some very good works were produced in the language of the British Isles outside.

On the other hand India believes in multiple parallel literary traditions, use of many languages together and accepts the writers of the foreign origin as their own:

- 1) Here loka or folk or popular and shastra or classical are not two separate traditions but two pillars of the same literary and cultural tradition, two pillars of the same continuum.
- 2) Besides two versions of the same story of Shakuntala of two different traditions- epical reality and dramatic imagination-existing together. Panini talking of two discourses together, one by common people and other which is grammatically correct. Similarly Bharata speaking of two types of theatre together, one is catering to public and the other which is based on dramatic conventions.
- 3) Aswaghosha, a famous Sanskrit poet is of Greek ancestry. Sister Nivedita of Irish nationality and Ibn Battuta of Arabic tradition are accepted as Indian writers.
- 4) Rajshekhar wrote plays in Maharashtri and Sanskrit. Jaydeva of 12th Century used Bengali and Sanskrit to write though his famous narrative poem Gita Govinda is in Sanskrit. Hemchandra wrote in Gujrati and Sanskrit and Prakrit. Namdev in Hindi and Punjabi. Tyagraj in Telegu in metre of Gujrati poetry. Tagore in English, Abahatta and English.

All these indicate India's amazing capacity to assimilate alien culture, code-mixing of languages and intertwining different literary traditions. The acceptance of the Vedantic oneness has always paved the way in obliterating the difference between *swa* and *para*, self and the other. The popular is discussed in India as insider not as self or the other. The vision of the one in and behind the many (Vivekananda) is the secret of India's cultural

foundation of human unity. It is said in Bhagwad Gita (7.7) that God is the central thread of Being like the thread that unites all pearls into a garland:

mai sarvamidam protam suttre mani gana eva

India built up a universal humanistic tradition on the bases of this vision from the time of the Vedas. The notion of human unity (*amritasya putrah*; Veda), the importance of man (*na manushad srestrataram hi kinchit*; Mahabharata) and the notion of universal humanity; Tagore (*Hey more chhitta punyatirtha jagore dhere ai mahamanaber sagar teere*). All these notions proclaim the unity of human beings in midst of their diversities. But still one finds certain aberrations in the society like the caste system and hence one may deduce that some kind of moral ideal is a precondition of all social life. There are five principals which can tie up human beings of different cultures together and can be used as the basis for dialogues; truth (satya), ethics (dharma), peace (shanti), love (prema) and non-violence (ahimsa).

In the late 18th and 19th century because of our association with western knowledge and the impact of 18th century enlightenment (4) India along with its inner dialogue started an external dialogue with the West. The four distinguished Indian individuals who took active part in the dialogue with the West were: Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. There were others also but for the sake of brevity only the above four Indians were selected, who

were the trend setters in the area of India's dialogue with the West.

Raja Rammohjan Roy

Raja Rammohan Roy's book, 'The precepts of Jesus', (1820) avoid any description of 4th Gospel which contains prophecy, doctrines of atonement or the divinity of Christ. He was described by Joshua Marshman as " an intelligent heathen whose mind is as yet opposed to the grand design of the saviour's becoming incarnate.'

In his debate Raja Rammohan Roy objected about the ways of missionaries, their abusive language and support of the Government in their activities. Roy in his debate said that truth and virtue do not belong to wealth and power and then spoke of biblical criticism by Unitarians and free thinkers and hit hard at the doctrine of Trinity (5) and said if miracles are to be accepted then how can native miracles of great saints be rejected.

The dialogue got clouded by racial superiority. In fact it was more an encounter than a dialogue.

Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda started a dialogue between spiritual East and materialistic West and also between spirituality and science and at the same time redefined Hinduism in search for a universal religion and to create a healthy synthesis. His words were," One day, the Western and Eastern man shall combine to support each other's strength, and supply each other's

deficiency. By uniting the materialism of the West and the spiritualism of East I believe much can be accomplished.”

His message at the parliament of Religion of universality and tolerance of Hinduism captivated his audience. Vivekananda was sure that Vedanta and non-duality, which were at the heart of India’s religious tradition and would be the basis for a universal religion and that would take mankind to a new fulfillment.

The Parliament of religion was not in fact to start a dialogue among people of different religions but to prove the superiority of the Christian religion over other forms of faith but the philosophic religion of Hinduism was able to maintain its position notwithstanding. The Parliament helped on the tide of Vedanta which flooded the world— proclaimed that the Lord is every religion. He said,” Buddhas and Christs are mere waves in the infinite ocean of existence that I am” or “ I do not want to Hinduize the world or to Christianize it but I want to My-ize the world, that’s all.”

Rabindranath Tagore

With Tagore dialogue between the East and the West turned cultural. He believed in the energy and discipline of the West and had a vision of West and East meeting in cooperation and also caught in the contradiction of this vision. He elaborated his vision in a Bengali essay *Bangalir asha and nairashya* well before his visit to England:

“The European idea in which freedom predominates and the Indian idea in which welfare predominates; the profound thought of the Eastern countries and the active thought of the Western countries; European acquisitiveness and Indian conservatism; the imagination of the Eastern countries and the practical intelligence of the West – what a full character will be formed from a synthesis between these two.”(5)

Tagore was aware of a cultural chasm in western understanding of his own work and of India in general. For Tagore East was spiritual and non-violent and west materialistic and aggressive. Sylvain Levy thought that Tagore was criticizing the western perception of East as some shadowy, threatening other with which the West is in sharp conflict and essentializing East and West into two simple and contrastive categories. He wrote in 1923 to Tagore,

“But you will answer me that (it is) no matter , if millions of men have to live as slave, if some hundreds can reach moksha, and here is the deep difference between West and India.

Brahman India is built on an aristocracy, Buddhist India, which tried to build up a democracy, has been defeated and annihilated.

And West is more and more democratic; we believe in the ‘rights of Man’, who ever be the man... But let us try come to a fair understanding of each other.”

Tagore's opinion was clear that first try to understand what is good in others and that would help in regaining one's selfhood and hence in his lecture '*purba o paschim*' he said,

“At every turn - in her laws and customs, in her religions and social institutions – India today deceives and insults herself. Meeting of East and West on our soils will succeed when there will be inner harmony between the two is achieved.

“In Indian history, the meeting of the Muslem and the Hindu produced Akbar, the object of whose dream was the unification of hearts and ideals.” And it is a wrong perception that he discarded West because of its crash materialism. On the contrary he believed in the energy and discipline of the West.

When Tagore said through Europeanization one will be able to discover one's self hood, he was in fact, creating a space where one could talk to another tradition, feel it, touch it and then realize one's power, own self. And so could end his essay 'East and West' with a rebuttal of the imperialist notions of incompatibility voiced by Rudyard Kipling that

‘It is true that they (East and West) are not showing any real sign of meeting. But the reason is because the West has not sent out its humanity (which allows to develop inner harmony) to meet the man in the East but only its machine. Therefore the poet's line has to be changed into something like this, “Man is man, machine is machine and never the twain shall wed.”

It is to regain one's selfhood by a process of decolonization of the self, which no outside agency but only one's own tradition could have set in motion, Tagore offered to us not the choice of

either materialism or spirituality, or either modernism or tradition, but the choice of both versus the forced acceptance of one. However, Tagore was totally against western imperialism and its resultant violence but at the same time he was for India's all-embracing age old vision of human unity. This is what he said in 1922 in Pune in a lecture on 'Indian Renaissance',

“A man who is alone or one is meaningless, because there is no unity in one. The one with many is truly one because in that one, one can see the unity and this unity gives the message of truth.”

This idea of unity is very vividly described in his dream about which he wrote to his son, Rathindranath on 11th Oct. 1918,

“I want to make Shantiniketan the connecting thread between India and the World. The days of petty nationalism are numbered – let the first step towards universal union occur in the fields of Bolpur. I want to make that place somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography.”

It was a dream and not turned into a reality.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

Gandhi initiated a dialogue with the West on the relationship of spiritual life and public activity. Romain Rolland says that in a globalized world where there is global interdependence and the consciousness of the one world but also comparative interaction of different world views and distinct communities highlighting the virtues of particularism are bound to produce new cultural conflicts.

Closely linked to the process of globalization is the problem of interaction between cultural or religious communities holding different views of world order. Tolerance and cultural-broadmindedness and mutual understanding are the hallmarks of Gandhian view of religion and politics and with the help of this perception the issue of dialogue between the East and the West can be faced.

The major portion of Gandhi's life was spent in dialogue between East and West, between the East of his native India and the West of the colonizers. His dialogue was not merely with words or ideas or theory as we generally all do, as we see mostly in interfaith dialogues but his was a lived dialogue springing for his love for truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*). He once said, "In order to transfer others you have to first transform yourself." The heart of Gandhi's message is to first look within one self, change oneself and when the world sees a different you, then it automatically change itself.

At a more fundamental level Gandhi speaking out of his own interpretation of Hinduism, could not see nations – or individual people – as isolated entities, one of which might be chosen by God among all others to play a special role in history. Therefore Gandhi rarely spoke in terms of linear world history.

1. His goal for every culture (including his own) was the same as his goal for every individual to find truth.
2. For Gandhi *himsa* — a selfish desire to control others' behaviours — inevitably prevented us from direct immediate awareness of truth.

3. At a more philosophical level in Gandhi's view every culture can and should learn from others. "Prservation of one's own culture does not mean contempt for that of others, but require assimilation of the best that there may be in all the other cultures."

Such a dialogical attitude conducted at the deepest level and in a spirit of genuine reciprocity and solidarity was not for Gandhi just a moral requirement, but also a political necessity.

Gandhi's conception of "enlarged pluralism" takes on the task of fostering togetherness and solidarity among cultures and traditions in the interest of democratizing modernity and bringing about a just global order.

His dialogical engagements proceeded from a ruthless internal interrogation of his own tradition of thought and encouraged inter – religious dialogue so that individuals could see their faith in the critical reflections of another. Example of his cultural pluralism are to be found in his inter- faith prayer meetings.

Gandi's achievement lay in embracing an 'incusivist' vision and a philosophy devoid of a polarization of "us" and "them".

Gandhi was not without his sense of the other, but he had too much respect for persons and cultures to render them into dangerous other. His understanding of religious plurality and cultural diversity went hand in hand with reaction to a cultural conformity. As he once said, I do not want my house to be walled in on sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

When Gandhi identifies *ahimsa* with love, as he does so often, he is actually underlying the concept of empathy as a dialogical response to the presence of other. Empathy in Gandhi's terms means understand other with respect but critically. It is religious pluralism as he said in 'Indian Opinion' in 1907:

“If the people of different religions grasp the real significance of their own religion they will never hate the people of any religion other than their own.”

Gandhian intercultural dialogue is an important step in being able to understand not only other cultures together but also to find a common path towards the future.

Cultural Fusion

There is always the risk that in the name of cultural fusion any kind of assimilation and absorption can become an American melting pot or in other words can turn cultures into an amalgamation of diverse identities. Tagore never believed in a monolithic structure of one culture or an alchemical unity of cultures. On the contrary he believed that the correct path is in the confluence of cultures and human unity for better understanding of human beings so that an edifice of human unity could be established without devaluing any culture. Tagore's seminal statement in this respect is, “Perfection of unity is not in uniformity but in harmony.”

Cultures and all historical religions are very closely interrelated with each other and in cultural fusion religion has to play its dominant part. One should realize what actually religion is.

All creative forms of religious life are moving towards an ideal of unity. This movement towards universality transcends all historical boundaries and particularities of culture. It is, therefore, non dogmatic and non humanistic. It is Tagore's religious universalism which is to establish a comprehensive link between the old religions of mankind. "We do not want a new religion but we need a new enlarged understanding of the old religions." It is the view of all great thinkers of modern India including Tagore, Gandhi and even a great Indian philosopher Dr S. Radhakrishnan. One is to be truly religious to serve mankind. Therefore, Gandhi realized that the inter-faith dialogue is a necessary outcome of the cultural border-crossing. It follows that India saw the Religion of the Spirit as the ultimate faith of mankind. In the religion of the spirit a special place is offered to the two concepts of universality and tolerance. It is a fact that the barriers of dogmatic religions are sterilizing men's efforts to coordinate their forces to shape the future. The reply is not the western approach to secularism but India's approach to secularism which is love for all religions, peaceful coexistence and fraternity which leads to fusion of our understanding of culture, religion and thought. In any kind of cultural fusion coexistence is the first step and fraternity is the goal. No theology is larger than reality. There is no separation between the outer Man and the inner Man, because "the realm of spirit is not cut off from the realm of life...The two orders of reality, the transcendent and the empirical, are closely related" (Radhakrishnan). Tagore's philosophy is also that of defending

the idea of a whole Man as a multidimensional being. Many of Tagore's observations on this matter are related to his understanding of the religious experience as the experience of the Universal. All religions of the world have a universal spirit and that such a spirit can become a vital element for bringing world peace through better understanding of each other's culture, religion and keeping the path open for dialogue. In his address in 1923 Tagore said, "I can hear, from over the seas, the cry for peace. We must give them the message of our great forefathers: Peace is where the Good is; the Good is where there is Unity."

"Shantam, Shivam, Advaitam.

Unity is peace; for Unity is the Good.

Tagore said, " May the message of our Rishis reach every where and the message is, " There can be no blindness and sorrow, where all beings are known as ooneself and the Unity is realized."

Notes and References

1. According to Will Durant civilization is social order promoting cultural creation. Four elements constitute it: i) economic provision; ii) political organization; iii) moral traditions and iv) the pursuit of knowledge and arts.
2. Diogenes the cynic was a Greek philosopher also known as Diogenes of Sinope founder of Cynic philosophy in 412 or 404 BCE. He carried a lamp in the daytime, claiming to be looking for an honest man.
3. Yastu sarvani bhutani atmaneyavanupashyatil

Sarvabhutashu chatmanam tatona vijugupsute, Ishopanishad.

4. What is enlightenment? is the title of a December 1784 essay by Immanuel Kant published in Berlin monthly edited by Gedike and Biester. Kant replied to the question posed a year earlier by Reverend Zollner also an official in the Prussian Govt. Zollner raised the question with reference to an essay written by Biester in which he proposed that clergy should not be engaged any longer when marriages are conducted (April 1783).

In reply to this proposal Kant created the notion of enlightenment and what he said in the opening paragraph, much cited definition of a lack of enlightenment, as people's inability to think for themselves due to their lack of intellect, and also lack of courage and proposed:

a) Church and State paternalism be abolished; b) People to give the freedom to use their own intellect; c) Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self incurred immaturity; d) Motto of enlightenment – Dare to be wise; Man should be autonomous not heteronymous (dependent) and f) Use of reasoning.

5. Trinity – God as three divine persons staying as equal:

Father (God), Son (Jesus) and Holy Spirit (raised Jesus from the dead)