

A NEW COSMOPOLITANISM

Toward a dialogue of Asian civilizations

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Asia is a geographical, not cultural entity. Though many Asians have defined their continent culturally during the last 150 years, that definition can be read as an artefact of Asian reactions to Western colonialism rather than as an autonomous search for larger cultural similarities. In this respect, the Asia of anti-imperialist intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore is much like the Africa of the likes of Leopold Senghor. The difference is that while cultural definitions of Asia have been mainly a psychological defence against the internalized imperial fantasy of the continent as a location of ancient civilizations that had once been great and were now decadent, decrepit and senile, the idea of Africa as a cultural area has been mainly a defence against the internalized fantasy of the continent as an abode of the primitive and the infantile. Both definitions have been shaped by the imperial metaphor of the body, built on European folk imageries of stages of life as taken over and remodelled by nineteenth-century biology and social evolutionism.

However, there has been, outside the realm of these definitions and self-definitions, an Asia which does not probably even see itself as Asia. That Asia has known the West for about two millennia and interacted with it seriously for over six hundred years. But it began to have a third kind of close encounter with the West starting from the eighteenth century, when the Industrial Revolution and the discovery and colonization of the Americas gave the West a new self confidence *vis-à-vis* Asia. By the end of that century, for the West, Asia was no longer a depository of ancient riches – philosophies, sciences or religions that had crucially shaped European civilization, including its two core constituents: Christianity and science. Nor did Asia remain solely a depository of the exotic and the esoteric – rare spices, perfumes, silks and particularly potent mystics and shamans. It was now redefined as another arena where the fates of the competing nation-states of Europe were going to be decided. The two centuries of Europe's world domination had begun.

It is at the fag end of that phase of domination that we stand today, ready to pick up the fragments of our lives and cultures that survive European hegemony

and intrusion. For while some Asians have become rich and others powerful during the phase, none has emerged from the experience culturally unscathed (Chinweizu, 1980).

No culture ever responded to Europe's colonial encroachment passively, though many Asian nationalists of earlier generations felt that that was exactly what their cultures had done.¹ They felt ashamed about that imagined record of passivity and sought to correct that historical failure.² While that sentiment survives among Asia's ruling elite and young Asians charged with nationalist fervour, it is now pretty obvious that Asian civilizations, whatever else they did, certainly were not idle spectators of their own humiliation and subjugation. They coped with the West in diverse ways – sometimes aggressively resisting its intrusiveness, sometimes neutralizing it by giving it local meanings, sometimes even incorporating the West as an insulated module within their traditional cultural selves (Nandy, 1983). Even when they seemed to collaborate, that collaboration had a strong strategic component.

However, all Asian cultures have gradually found out during the last two hundred years that – whatever might have been the limits of cultural tolerance in European Christendom or the traditional West – the modern West finds it particularly difficult to co-exist with other cultures. It may have a well-developed language of co-existence and tolerance and well-honed tools for conversing with other civilizations. It may even have the cognitive riches to study, understand or decode the non-West. But, culturally, it has an exceedingly poor capacity to live with strangers. It has to try to either overwhelm or proselytize them. Is this a gift of the urban-industrial vision and global capitalism which, unsatiated even after winning over every major country in the world, have to penetrate the smallest of villages and the most intimate areas of personal lives? Is it a contribution of the ideologues of development, who after all their grand successes, feel defeated if some remote community does not fall in line or some stray critics or scattered activists attack them? There are no easy answers, but I do not find that even most of the Western scholars and activists who have identified with the colonized societies and fought for their cause, sometimes at immense personal cost, have usually supported the 'right' causes without any empathy with native categories, language or theories of dissent, without even a semblance of respect for the indigenous modes of resistance, particularly if such modes also claim a philosophical status that does not derive from the known world of knowledge. It will not be uncharitable to say that these well-meaning dissenters, too, have struggled to retain the capital of dissent in the West and to remain the spokespersons of the oppressed of the world – whether the oppressed be the proverbial proletariat or the not-so-proverbial women, working children or victims of environmental depredations. Even decolonization demands Western texts and Western academic leadership, they believe. And many Asians, especially the expatriate Asians in the first world, enthusiastically agree.

When the West was partly internalized during the colonial period, its cultural

stratarchy and arrogance, too, was internalized by important sections of the colonised societies and by societies not colonized but, like Korea, Japan and Thailand, living with deep, though often unacknowledged, fears of being colonized. Like Africa and South America, Asia too learnt to live with this internalized West – the feared intimate enemy, simultaneously a target of love and hate – as I have elsewhere described it. Psychoanalysis should be happy to identify the process as a copybook instance of the ego defence called ‘identification with the aggressor’. Today, this adored enemy is a silent spectator in even our most private moments and the uninvited guest at our most culturally typical events and behavior. For even our religions and festivities, our birth, marriage and death rituals, our food and clothing, gods and goddesses, our concepts of traditional learning and wisdom have been deeply affected by the modern West. Even return to traditions in Asia often means a return to traditions as they have been redefined under Western hegemony. Even our pasts do not belong to us entirely.

This is not an unmitigated disaster. It is possible to argue that Asia, Africa, and South America are the only cultural regions that are truly multi-civilizational today. Because in these parts of the world, living simultaneously in two cultures – the modern Western and the vernacular – is no longer a matter of cognitive choice, but a matter of day-to-day survival for the humble, the unexposed and the ill-educated. Compared to that multicultural sensitivity, the fashionable contemporary ideologies of multiculturalism and postcoloniality often look shallow and provincial.

One of the most damaging legacies of colonialism, however, lies in a domain that attracts little attention. The West’s centrality in any cultural dialogue in our times has been ensured by its dominance over the language in which dialogue among the non-Western cultures takes place. Even when we talk to our neighbors, it is mediated by Western assumptions and Western frameworks. We have learnt to talk to even our closest neighbors through the West, and we are afraid that when we discuss the possibilities of a culturally autonomous dialogue outside the West, that discussion is not unencumbered by a series of friendly neighborhood demons. These demons look like attenuated, domesticated versions of the West, but are actually parts of our exiled selves waiting to take over and guide us into a trajectory of closed or monolithic futures presided over by alien gods.

These inner demons have subverted most forms of attempted dialogue among the non-Western cultures. All such dialogues today are mediated by the West as an unrecognized third participant. For each culture in Asia today, while trying to talk to another Asia culture, uses as its reference point not merely the West outside, but also its own version of an ahistorical, internalized West, which may not have anything to do with the empirical or the geographical West. One can no longer converse with one’s neighbor without conversing with its alienated self, its internalized West, and without the sanction of this internalized West.

Is another model of cultural exchange – I almost said multiculturalism –

possible? I neither can hope to give a complete answer to this question nor fully defend any tentative answer that I give. But, as a part-answer, I shall offer you a few propositions, hoping that at least some of them you will find sensible.

First, all dialogues of civilizations and cultures today constitute a new politics of knowledge and of cultures. For, whether we recognize it or not, there is a major, powerful, ongoing, official dialogue of cultures in the world. The format of that dialogue has been standardized, incorporated within the dominant global structure of awareness, and institutionalized through powerful international organizations. It can be even seen as a format that has been refined and enshrined as part of commonsense in the global mass culture. In this dialogue, the key player naturally is the modern West, but it also has a series of translators in the form of persons and institutions whose main job is to either interpret the modern West for the benefit of other cultures or interpret other cultures for the benefit of the modern West, both under the auspices of the West. The dominant dialogue is woven around these twin sets of translations.

Consequently, all proposals for alternative formats of dialogue are both a defiance of the dominant mode of dialogue and an attempt to question its hegemony, legitimacy or principles of organization. Even a symposium or scholarly volume on the possibilities of such a dialogue can be read as a form of dissent and as an intervention in the politics of dialogue.

Second, the presently dominant mode of dialogue is hierarchical, unequal and oppressive, because it disowns or negates the configurative principles of the self-definitions of all cultures except the modern West. It is designed mainly to specially protect the popularized versions of Western self-definition in global mass culture. The mode ensures that, in the global citadels of knowledge, only those parts of self or other cultures are considered valuable or noteworthy which conform to the ideals of Western modernity and the values of the European Enlightenment. (As if the Enlightenment in seventeenth-century Europe said the last word on all problems of humanity for all time to come and subsequent generations had been left with only the right to work out local editions of the Enlightenment vision!) The other parts of non-Western selves are seen as disposable, dysfunctional encumbrances. The European Enlightenment’s concept of history has been complicit with this process (Nandy, 1995: 44–66). That history has as its goal nothing less than the decomposition of all uncomfortable pasts either into sanitized texts meant for academic historians and archeologists or into a set of tamed trivia or ethnic *chic* meant for fastidious tourists. It is not unlikely that in countries like China, Japan and India, the coming generations will know their pasts only as a set of processes or stages of history that have led to the modernization of their societies. The rest of their pasts will look like scholastic esoterica meant for the practitioners of disciplines such as anthropology, history of religions, fine arts or literature. The process is analogous to the way the pharmaceutical industry systematically scans the ingredients of traditional healing systems for the natural agents they use, so that their active principles can be extracted and disembedded from their earlier context

and incorporated into commercially rewarding elements of the modern knowledge system.

The argument is that, however apparently open and non-hierarchical the existing, official mode of dialogue, its very organization ensures that, within its format, all other cultures are set up to lose. They cannot – and dare not – bring to the dialogue their entire selves. They have to hide parts of themselves not only from others but also from their own Westernized or modernized selves. These clandestine or repressed part-selves have increasingly become recessive and many cultures are now defined not by the voices or lifestyles of a majority of those living in the cultures but by the authoritative voices of the anthropologists, cultural historians and other area specialists speaking about these cultures in global fora³. These hidden or disowned selves can now usually re-enter the public domain only in pathological forms – as ultra-nationalism, fundamentalism and defensive ethnic chauvinism. They have become the nucleus of a new kind of paradigmatic contradiction in our public life – between democratic participation and democratic values. Democratic participation is valued but not the conventions, world-images and philosophies of life the participants bring into public life.

Third, the dominant official mode of dialogue also excludes the disowned or repressed West. Over the last four hundred years, in their mad rush for total modernization and total development, some of the developed societies have lost track of important parts of their own pre-modern or non-modern traditions, at least as far as public affairs are concerned. These lost traditions are now often seen as cultural liabilities that provide a handle to romantic visionaries from the environmental and the peace movements in the North and the South. Attempts to re-empower such traditions have had a short shelf life in this century. Mainstream Europe and North America would rather define themselves as monocultures of hyper-consumption and mega-technology, which have nothing to learn from the rest of the world, than as culturally plural or splintered entities nurturing contesting visions of the future.

Fortunately, the disowned West, however small, is not dead, perhaps not even powerless. It senses the damage the West's cultural dominance is doing to the West itself. It senses that the dominance, apart from the devastation it has brought to other parts of the world, has increasingly reduced the Western imperium to a provincial, culturally impoverished existence. Europe and North America have increasingly lost their cosmopolitanism, paradoxically because of a concept of cosmopolitanism that considers Western culture to be definitionally universal and therefore automatically cosmopolitan. Believe it or not, there is a cost of dominance, and that cost can sometimes be heavy.

Any alternative form of dialogue between cultures cannot but attempt to rediscover the subjugated West and make it an ally. The attempt to do so could be an important marker of the new cosmopolitanism that would use as its base the experience of suffering in Asia, Africa and South America during the last two hundred years. These parts of the world can claim today that they have

learnt to live with two sets of truly internalized cultural codes – their own and, for the sake of sheer survival, that of the West. From colonialism and large-scale deculturation they may have learnt something about what is authentic dissent even in the West and what is merely a well-intentioned but narcissistic effort to ensure that the worldview of the modern West does not collapse. The first identifier of a post-colonial consciousness cannot but be an attempt to develop a language of dissent which would not make sense – and will not try to make any sense – in the capitals of the global knowledge industry. Such a language cannot be fitted in the available molds of dissent as an Asian, African or South American subsidiary of a grand, multinational venture in radical dissent.

A dialogue of civilizations in the coming century will demand adherence to at least four cardinal methodological principles. First, it will demand for the participating cultures equal rights to interpretation. If elaborate hermeneutic strategies are brought to bear upon the writings of Thomas Jefferson on democracy and Karl Marx on equality – to suggest that Jefferson's ownership of slaves did not really contaminate his commitment to human freedom or that Marx's blatantly Eurocentric, often racist interpretations of Africa and Asia were all meant for the benefit of the oppressed of the world – the least one can do is to grant some consideration to Afro-Asian thinkers and social activists who were as much shaped by the loves and hates of their times. We do not have to gulp down their prejudices and stereotypes, but we can certainly show them the consideration we show to Plato when we discuss his thought independently of his comments on the beauties of homosexuality.

Second, the new dialogue we envision will insist that we jettison the nineteenth-century evangelist legacy of comparative studies which offsets the practices of one civilization against the philosophical or normative concerns of another. Colonial literature is full of comparisons between the obscenities of the caste system *in practice* in South Asia and the superior humanistic values of Europe articulated in the Biblical texts or, for that matter, even in the rules of cricket. In reaction, many defensive Indians compared the moral universe of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* with the violence, greed and ruthless statecraft practiced by the Europeans in the Southern world, to establish the moral bankruptcy of the West. The time has come to take a less reactive position, one that will allow us to enrich ourselves through a cultural conversation of equals. Cultures, we know, do not usually learn from each other directly; they own up to new insights as only a reprioritization of their own selves, revaluation of some cultural elements and devaluation of others. Every such conversation is also an invitation to self-confrontation. It allows us to arrive at new insights into social pathologies to which we have become culturally inured.

Thus, an authentic conversation of cultures presumes that the participants have inner resources to own up the pathologies of their cultures and the willingness to bear witness to direct experiences of victimhood, whether it be located within one's own culture or without. Such a frame of dialogue cannot but reject any explanation of such pathologies as the handiwork of marginal

persons and groups misusing their own cultures. A dialogue is no guarantee against future aberrations, but it at least ensures self-reflexivity and self-criticism. It keeps open the possibility of resistance. This is particularly important in our times, when entire communities, states or cultures have sometimes gone rabid. If Europe has produced Nazism and Stalinism in our times, Asia has also produced much militarism and blood-thirsty sadism in the name of revolution, nationalism, and now, development. Not long ago, Cambodia lost one-third of its people, killed by their own leaders, who believed that only thus could they ensure prosperity, freedom, and justice to the remaining two-thirds. The birth of India and Pakistan was accompanied by the murder of a million people and the displacement of another sixteen million. Such traumas remain to be confronted and, if I may borrow a term from clinical psychology, worked through.

Finally, a conversation of cultures subverts itself when its goal becomes a culturally integrated world, not a pluricultural universe where each culture can hope to live in dignity with its own distinctiveness. The nineteenth-century dream of one world and global governance has made this century the most violent in human experience and the coming century is likely to be very skeptical towards all ideas of cultural co-existence and tolerance that seek to cope with mutual hostilities and intolerance by further homogenizing an increasingly uniform world and within the format of nineteenth-century theories of progress or social evolutionism.

The idea of Asia carries an ambivalent load in our times. It was for two centuries converted artificially into a backyard of Europe, where the fate of the world's first super-powers were determined. It is for our generation to negotiate the responsibility of redefining Asia where some of the greatest cultural experiments of the coming century may take place. For by chance or by default, Asia now has a place even for the West. Asia once held in trusteeship even Hellenic philosophy and for a few hundred years European scholars went to the Arab world to study Plato and Aristotle. We might even be holding as part of a cultural gene bank aspects of traditional Western concepts of nature (as in St Francis of Assisi or William Blake) and social relationships (as in Ralph Emerson and Henry Thoreau) to which the West itself might some day have to return through Asia.

Notes

- 1 On the technology of resistance to such hegemony, see for instance Scott, J. (1989) *Weapons of the Weak*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press; also Erikson, E. H. (1969) *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence*, New York: Norton.
- 2 Many of the ultra-nationalist movements in contemporary Asia derive their strength from that reading of history. The Hindu nationalist movement in India is a reasonably neat example.
- 3 Clandestine or secret selves are different from repressed selves. The former are accessible to the person but hidden from public life or from segments of public life to which the person himself or herself owes allegiance. See for example Nandy, A. (1995) 'The savage Freud: The first non-Western psychoanalyst and politics of

secret selves in colonial India', *The Savage Freud and Other Essays in Possible and Retrievable Selves*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, and Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. pp. 81-144; and 'The other within: The strange case of Radhabinod Pal's judgment on culpability', *Ibid.*, pp. 53-80.

References

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 — (1995) 'History's Forgotten Doubles', *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 34: World Historians and Their Critics, pp. 44-66.