

INTER-PLAY OF CULTURAL CONTACTS
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INDIA

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Inter-play of cultural contacts may arise :

I) from contacts between two or more equally developed cultures, as for example, the Eastern culture and the Western culture, or taking a narrower view, (I mean, of course, in its geographical context and for the sake of example), the British culture and the French culture;

II) from contacts between people with a developed culture and those with no culture, or, as I would myself prefer to put it, undeveloped culture. Such a situation arose, for example, when European settlers came in contact with the Red Indians in America; and,

III) from contacts between the more developed and the less developed people with more or less similar origins and ethnic background and living in the same country. A situation like this arose, for example, when on the attainment of our independence, we came in touch with the people of the North East Frontier Agency. I had the privilege of being associated with these folks for over 5 years. In 1947, some of them were only in the process of emerging from the Stone Age. They had been completely isolated in the hills for many, many decades, going through their daily round of activities with hardly any variation from generation to generation.

In the space available to me, it is not possible to deal fully with the inter-play of cultural contacts in all the three situations to which I have just referred. It would be pertinent here to quote Mathew Arnold's definition of culture, which he described, as a study of perfection. It is obvious, however, that such a concept of perfection must be relative, for it is itself determined by a variety of factors prevailing at any given time - historical, geographical and the state of scientific advancement reached.

The division of mankind into nations, (determined by accidents of history and often composed of several distinct groups), and the comparative lack of advancement in the means of travel made it necessary for them to grow in their own surroundings. Individuals belonging to a particular cultural group exhibited in their personalities certain characteristics, which became the sum-total

of their heritage, and which in turn could provide a key to the understanding of the psychological characteristics of that community as a whole. It is said that a people's history represents its attempts to control its environments, its relations with neighbouring peoples and its own unruly tendencies. Such a view could, perhaps, explain how cultural patterns bore the local hall-marks, even in countries such as Scandinavia and Britain, which are cut off only by narrow strips of sea from the continent of Europe. Only a privileged few had the opportunity to go on travel abroad. A code of conduct was evolved, the details of which did not necessarily hold good, the moment one crossed the Baltic sea or the English Channel. His country's comparative isolation was a major factor in conditioning the Englishman's temperament. He would not start a conversation with a fellow passenger in a train with whom he might be spending hours together, until formally introduced. Being shy and an introvert, he would break the ice every morning by remarking only about the state of the weather. Sometimes, these characteristics were regarded as instances of stand-offishness on his part and often invited unjust comments on the part of the Continentals, who are generally freer in their social conduct. Apart from his country's isolation to which I have referred, what makes an Englishman differ from a French or a German neighbour is the degree of emphasis he puts on certain values, human, moral, material and spiritual. In the ultimate analysis, these boil down to a set of DOS and DONTS in the day to day life, which govern the activities of a people and the presence or absence of which in another people sometimes earns for them the attribute of being civilised or otherwise.

The eminent British historian, Professor C.M. Trevelyan writes: "You cannot even understand your own personal notions, prejudices and emotional reactions unless you know what is your heritage and how it has come down to you. Why does an Englishman react one way to a public or a private situation, a German another way, a Frenchman in a third way? History alone can tell you."

If such differences in approach and temperament could be noticed as between the Englishman and the Continental, it is hardly surprising that another English writer, Rudyard Kipling was led to announce: "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet." The East is undoubtedly very different from the West. The Easterner's way of living, his ideas about personal hygiene, outlook towards women and children, relations and strangers are different. The yard-stick of appropriate conduct used by the people in the West or in the East is also sometimes different. Unfortunately, at times, each side tries to see whether the other measures up to its own ideas. If it does not, it runs the risk of being condemned as odd and, perhaps, even uncivilised. This often is, because of one's belief that one's own set of values is superior to the other's. Before World War II, the odds were heavily against the Easterner and the onus lay on him to make a conscious effort to create an impression of being Westernised. What was correct according to Western standards began to be regarded as *the only* correct approach to a problem or a way of living. Such scales of judgment were undoubtedly caused by the admittedly higher material culture attained in the West.

There is a world of difference when one compares Kipling's idea with those expressed by Rabindranath Tagore. Long before World War II, he declared: "East and West are but alternate beats of the same heart", and, "The mind of India should join its forces to the great universal movement of mind, which would lead us directly to the unity of men." His concept of *Viswa Bharati* was to provide a complete meeting ground for East and West in a common fellowship. He pointed out that in order to understand the people living in different lands, it was necessary to interpret their philosophy of life by putting oneself in the other person's shoes. It did not matter if East got temporarily over-powered by the material supremacy of the West. The Poet believed that in its dealings with the East, the West had allowed the spiritual ideals to suffer an eclipse. What was wanted was a living synthesis between the moral and spiritual values of the East and the dynamism, scientific genius and the strength of intellect of the West. Tagore was undoubtedly thinking and talking as a Citizen of the World, emancipated from narrow national considerations. He did not believe that there is any rivalry between Nationalism and Internationalism. He felt that a healthy type of Nationalism is but a stepping-stone to Internationalism. What he was really advocating was a synthesis of various cultures: a unity in diversity. He wanted each community to discover its real self. He fervently hoped that different human races would keep their own personalities and come together not in a uniformity that is dead, but in a uniformity that is living, and is brought about not by imposition but through an inter-play of spontaneous cultural contacts.

It is hardly surprising that Tagore's teachings were not taken very seriously until the impact of World War II brought the down-fall of false gods and conventional shibboleths, which had come to be worshipped during the phase of Western imperialism. Men drawn from different countries of the East and the West, white, black and yellow shared hardships, a common way of life and the risk of death. No wonder, the concept of inequality of races received a rude shock. There were brave men in all countries, Eastern or Western, irrespective of the colour of their skin. The unprecedented scientific advancement which took place under the stress of the deadly combat, amongst other things, revolutionised the concept of travel. Communities which were precluded from outside gaze, were now open to inspection, as it were. It became possible, despite all diversities, to see the all-pervading oneness and essential unity. And, those who believed in "One World" could no longer be regarded as rank visionaries or even fools. Wise men everywhere began to look consciously or unconsciously to what might be described as a multiple-world-culture. If a man ate with chopsticks and not with a fork and a knife, or, if he put on his own national or regional dress, or if he took his daily bath by pouring water over his body from a utensil instead of submerging his body in a tub-full of water, he could not necessarily be regarded as inferior to the other. It was no longer possible to say that because a man put on a tie and a coat, he was necessarily cultured. The test of a cultured man or a nation came to be: What has he or the nation got to contribute to the common weal.

It might, perhaps, be claimed that artificial barriers imposed by man against man to serve his selfish ends are gradually tumbling. The Englishman is coming closer to the Continental, (despite the difficulties Britain is experiencing in entering the Common European Market!), the West is coming closer to the East, the tribesmen on India's North East Frontier, whom I described earlier, are coming closer to the people residing in the rest of the country. This is not to say that everything is rosy in the garden. We must, indeed, be prepared for temporary set-backs. The world is still full of reactionaries and what may be described as small men. Even so, one need no longer think of "One World" as a mere ideal. Indeed, it is possible to think that given the time and the required wisdom, man may at last shape his destiny by weaving together the multitude of races and cultures in a pattern as complex and as beautiful as found in a high quality Turkish rug.

In confirmation of this view, I quote from another eminent British historian, who recently celebrated his 75th birthday: ARNOLD TOYANBEE. He believes that narrow specialisation and parochialism in the affairs of men are becoming obsolete. And, despite the gloomy forebodings one hears from all and sundry, Toyanbee has prophesied that in the 21st Century, human life is going to be a unity in all its varied aspects and activities.

Where does India fit into all this? How is India adjusting to the challenge of modern times since her independence in 1947? It would help in appreciating the changing patterns of behaviour in India, if I digressed a little from my main theme in order to provide a brief historical background. There has, of course, been the powerful role of religion. A majority of Indians are Hindus. Hinduism through the ages has had a tradition of tolerance and receptivity to new ideas. This contagion of tolerance even affected the Islamic rulers, who originally came to India only as invaders and iconoclasts. In the 17th Century, Emperor Akbar, a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth of England, assembled around him prominent leaders of all the prevalent religions of India and held free and frequent discussions, with a view to formulate a world religion, which he called "*Din Ilahi*". Later, his great-grandson DARA took another long step towards tolerance in evolving what has been described as "*Sufism*". One finds a similar approach of "live and let live" in examining the impact of social customs. It is not necessary to go back to the days of the *Ramayana* to see that the Hindu social customs showed a fairly healthy tendency to develop and adjust to changing situations. Unfortunately, these tended to get into a rut in the time when India was under colonial rule. In that period, the hold on the people of the *Mullah* and the priest increased and all kinds of vested interests developed to retard the normal processes of growth and change. These processes may have suited the larger interests of the Empire. The fact, however, remains that at the time of Independence, the Indian society was largely stagnant. It was left to such new factors as the machine, availability of new and more of consumer goods, response to mass media and a process of urbanisation, to evolve new patterns of behaviour and remove cobwebs from the rather stultified clusters of social, economic and psychological commitments.

Taking a closer look at present - day India, it can be said that the path the people have followed is the path, which had been recommended by poet Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. In a sense, these two great men were complementary, for the former provided a philosophical content and the latter indicated the practical approach. Mahatma Gandhi had profound respect for the farmer. He advised the towns-people, and specially the government officials that they should approach the villager with a sense of humility and as one of them. As is well known, he himself was the first to follow his own advice. When he was invited to attend the Round Table Conferences in London, which were the prelude to our independence, he made it clear that as a representative of the Indian masses, who were ill-clad and poor, he could only go there if he dressed like one of them. And, this is how he did go there, despite Mr. Winston Churchill's reference to him as the "half-naked *Fakir*".

It was later left to Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru to don Gandhiji's mantle. Whereas the Mahatma could only recommend, Nehru was in a position to implement, for by then India had become independent. He conveyed much the same thoughts when he declared: "I would not like all my countrymen to grow into a set pattern. India should be like a beautiful garden where different kinds of flowers bloom." To quote Nehru again: "I am alarmed when I see not only in this country but in other great countries too, how anxious some people are to shape others according to their own image or likeness and to impose on them their particular way of living. We are welcome to our way of living but why impose it on others. This applies equally to national and international fields. In fact, there would be more peace in the world if people were to desist from imposing their ways of living on other peoples and countries. I am not at all sure which is the better way of living, the tribal (regarded as comparatively less developed) or our own. In some respects, I am quite certain theirs is better. Therefore, it is grossly presumptuous on our part to approach them with an air of superiority, to tell them how to behave or what to do. There is no point in trying to make of them a second-rate copy of ours."

From what I have said, it must not be inferred that India is against change or that Indians are content to remain a backward people. Quite the contrary. It is fully realised that India must march forward and that the good things of the present day civilisation should be brought within easier reach of the people in an ever increasing measure. The people must also be fully equipped to compete with those of the so-called advanced nations of the world. We do believe, however, that the march of progress must be along the lines of the genius of the people and not through imposition or imitation. We do not want to break with the past; we want rather to build a new house of a better and fuller life on the foundation of all that is good in the old. It would be interesting to note that India is by no means unique in trying to follow such a path. Long ago, the great American thinker, EMERSON, exhorted: "Insist on being yourself; never imitate." This advice is applicable to India of today as it had been to America in the middle of the 19th Century. Even more interesting and to the point is the case of Japan where the process of modernisation has either retained many of the more traditional pat-

terns of social life, such as the dress, or suitably incorporated them into the developing modern framework. And, looking back at what probably has been the first and the most continuous modern country, Britain has shown the importance of retaining various traditional elements in its social and symbolic spheres.

Let me now examine briefly how the actual transformation of national habits, customs and beliefs has come about in my country, in the philosophical context, as discussed in this thesis. Some of the changes on the Indian scene are obvious; many are yet undiscovered in their entirety because they are only half-changes. The motivating factors might well have been the news about the advance of Europe and America; the legend of the Soviet Union whose people had been rumoured to have become prosperous from the poorest beginning, all in 40 years or so. There was also the visible example of the upper classes of India attaining a higher standard of living and there were, of course, the promises of the new government for the creation of a welfare State. Superficially, these demands take the form of hunger for more consumer goods. In its turn, this has led to a desire to increase one's income. The result has been the placing of greater emphasis on material values, which is a significant change from the pre-freedom days when devotion to the national cause, sacrifice and austerity were the ideals of the important sectors of society.

There is also the influence of Western fashions on dress, on attitudes towards love and marriage, derived to some extent from the Western cinema. And, there are then the strong influences, direct or indirect, which have been emanating from the introduction of large scale industry. These have had and are having a most profound effect on the conscience of the people. The machine has brought with it certain equipment, such as the table and the chair, the typewriter, the electrical gadgets, the radio and the motor car. The symbols of the agrarian society, such as the low stool, the "charpoy" bed, the small clerk's desk, the bullock-cart and the horse-carriage are tending to disappear gradually. Cast scruples are dissolved by the necessity to travel in railway trains and provincial boundaries are broken by the public carrier transport. It is my belief, however, that despite the acceptance of new modes of life, the teachings of the prophets of the Indian renaissance advocating a synthesis of European learning with the wisdom of the perennial philosophy of India are not being forgotten. It is possible that the India of the future may well become a vast laboratory for synthesis of different changing cultural and social patterns.

In my view, it is neither desirable nor likely that compatibility of outlook will be achieved by the imposition everywhere of one particular ethos: way of life. The alternative is to preserve the rich diversity of cultural traditions and at the same time to facilitate communication between members of different cultures, by recognising and accepting the complexes, which colour our own outlook *as well as* those of others. In his address to the delegates of the Council of the Balkan Entente in Ankara, the great Atatürk said: "The idea of humanity has now developed to the point where it can purify our conscience and elevate our feelings... The only way to make men happy is to bring them nearer to each other, to make

them love one another, to work with a will to meet their material and spiritual needs."

In his address at the University of California, on March 23, 1962, dismissing the notion "that the American mission is to re-make the world in the American image", the late President Kennedy said that "it is the profound tendencies of history and not the passing excitements, that will shape our future. These profound historic tendencies were moving the world not towards uniformity, but towards diversity-towards a world where within the framework of international cooperation, every country can solve its own problems according to its own traditions and ideals." He also declared that "the way of the future is not the conquest of the world by a single creed or pattern, but the liberation of the diverse energies of free nations and free men." In a subsequent address at American University, Washington, Kennedy said that his hope was to "make the world safe for diversity. The world, as he saw it, had room for a great variety of economic freedoms, political creeds and religious faiths, so long as each respected the right of others to exist."

Our own great leader, Mahatma Gandhi had once said: "Open the windows and the doors and let all the breezes blow in, so long as you do not get swept off your feet." The changing social patterns of India have undoubtedly been affected by the West winds and the East winds. I venture to say, however, that the residuum of the Indian temperament remains firmly rooted in the soil of India. It is now generally appreciated that man does not live by bread alone. It is only through the revival of the culture of the people that their faith in themselves can be strengthened.

Today, there is hardly a country which does not face the kind of problems which I have described. I am, of course, referring generally to the interplay of cultural contacts and more particularly to the problem of advancing the material standards of the people without sacrificing the best that lies in their past. Turkey is no exception. She has the tradition of locating the mosque and the *Madarse* in the same building. Also in the old days, for higher studies, the College only provided lecture rooms and dormitories for students to live in. But, the kitchen was located just outside the College boundaries and the food that was cooked in it was shared by the students of the College with the poor people of the city. It is my belief that a country with such heritage as this would, in course of time, evolve an approach to life which would enable her to advance rapidly and also retain in its fibre the seeds of her past culture and traditions