

**Presentation by S.N. Balagangadhara, October 24th, 2006, Research Centre Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap, Ghent University, Belgium**

What can India offer to the world of today and tomorrow? I will not tackle this problem directly but instead take up one of its sub-questions: to whom is this problem important and why? I believe it is important to both Indians and Europeans but for different reasons. In this talk, let me spell out and reflect upon some of these reasons.

For the first time in the last four to five hundred years, non-white and non-Christian cultures will have a significant impact on the affairs of the humankind. Here, India will be a global player of considerable political and economic impact. As a result, the need to explicate what it means to be an Indian (and what the 'Indianness' of the Indian culture consists of) will soon become the task of the entire intelligentsia in India. In this process, they will confront the challenge of responding to what Europe has so far thought and written about India. A response is required because the theoretical and textual study of the Indian culture has been undertaken mostly by Europe in the last three hundred years. What is more, it will also be a challenge because the study of India has largely occurred within the cultural framework of Europe.

In fulfilling this task, the Indian intelligentsia of tomorrow will have to solve a puzzle: what were the earlier generations of Indian thinkers busy with, in the course of the last two to three thousand years? Let me use a contrast with the European culture to exhibit the nature of this puzzle and its importance to the theme of this evening.

I

What were the European intellectuals busy with, during the last two thousand years? It is almost impossible to answer this question without describing the history of Europe; still, we can say they produced theologies, philosophies, fine arts, natural and social sciences ... The list is so varied, so diverse and so huge that one does not know where to begin or how to end. Despite this, the fact remains: all interesting theories about human beings, their cultures and societies, which we use today, are products of the European intellectuals. So too are the institutions and practices that most of us find desirable: democratic institutions and courts of law, for instance. The sheer size, variety and the quality of the European contributions to humanity is overwhelming.

What were the Indian thinkers doing during the same period? The standard text-book story, which has schooled multiple generations including mine, goes as follows: caste system dominates India, women are discriminated against, the practice of widow-burning exists, corruption is rampant, most people believe in astrology, karma and reincarnation ... If these properties characterize India of today and yesterday, the puzzle about what the earlier generation of Indian thinkers were doing turns into a

very painful realization: the thinkers from yesteryears were busy either instituting or defending atrocious practices. Of course there is our Buddha and our Gandhi but that is apparently all we have: exactly one Buddha and exactly one Gandhi. When the intellectuals of one culture, the European culture, were busy challenging and changing the world, most thinkers from another culture, the Indian in our case, were apparently busy sustaining and defending undesirable and immoral practices. If this portrayal is true, the Indians have but one task, to modernize India, and the Indian culture but one goal: to become like the West as quickly as possible.

However, what if this portrayal is false? What if these basically European descriptions of India are wrong? In that case, the questions about what India has to offer the world and what the Indian thinkers were doing become important to the Europeans. For the first time, their knowledge of India will be subject to a kind of test that has never occurred before. Why 'for the first time'? The answer is obvious: the knowledge of India was generated primarily when India was colonized. Subsequent to the Indian independence, India suffered from poverty and backwardness. In tomorrow's world, the Indian intellectuals will be able to speak back with a newly found confidence and they will challenge the European descriptions of India. That is, for the first time, they will test the European knowledge of India and not just accept it as God's own truth. This has not happened before; it will happen for the first time. Moreover, the results of this test are not of mere scientific interest; they will also have serious social, political and economic repercussions on the European societies. If true, the question now becomes: what kind of European 'knowledge' about India will be tested?

## II

As an example, consider one of the things that Europe 'knows' about India: the Indian caste system. Almost everyone I know has very firm moral opinions on the subject. Many see in it the origin of all kinds of evils in India: from the denial of human rights to oppression; some see in it obstacles to progress and modernization and so on. I suppose we all agree that we need to understand a phenomenon before making moral judgments. With this in mind, if you try and find out what this famous caste system is, and why people either attack or defend it, you discover the following: no ancient book exists that tells us what the principles of the caste system are; no Indian can tell you about its structure or its organization; no scientific theory has been developed that explains how or why it continues to exist. Simply put, nobody understands what it is or how it functions. In that case, how can anyone be pro or contra the caste system? If we focus on how people normally describe this system and understand how easy it is to turn such a description upside down, the absurdity of the situation becomes obvious. While emphasizing that I do not attack and much less defend the caste system in what follows, let us look at the existing descriptions and their consequences.

- (a) Caste is an antiquated social system that arose in the dim past of India. If this is true, it has survived many challenges: the onslaught of Buddhism and the *Bhakti* movements; the Islamic and British colonization, Indian independence, world capitalism, and might even survive 'globalization'. It follows, then, that the caste system is a very stable social organization.
- (b) There exists no centralized authority to enforce the caste system across the length and breadth of India. In that case, it is an autonomous and de-centralized organization.
- (c) All social and political regulations, whether by the British or by the Indians, have not been able to eradicate this system. If true, it means that the caste system is a self-reproducing social structure.
- (d) Caste system exists among the Hindus, the Sikhs, the Jains, the Christians, the Muslims... It has also existed under different environments. This means that this system adapts itself to the environments it finds itself in.
- (e) Because new castes have come and gone over the centuries, this system must also be dynamic.
- (f) Because caste system is present in different political organizations and survives under different political regimes, it is also neutral with respect to political ideologies.

Even though more can be said, this is enough for us. A simple redescription of what we think we know about the caste system tells us that it is an autonomous, decentralized, stable, adaptive, dynamic, self-reproducing social organization. It is also neutral with respect to political, religious and economic doctrines and environments. If indeed such a system ever existed, would it also not have been the most ideal form of social organization one could ever think of?

The question of the immorality of the caste system became immensely important after the British came to India. In that case, there are two interesting possibilities to choose from: one, Indians did not criticize the caste system (before the British came to India) because Indians are immoral; two, the Europeans 'discovered' something that simply does not exist in India, viz. the social organization that the caste system is supposed to be.

There is a reason why I have spent time on this issue. And that is to signal in the direction of a problem, which has very far-reaching consequences. If what Europe knows about India resembles what it claims it knows about the caste system, what exactly does Europe know about India or her culture? Not very much, I am afraid. Precisely at a time when, to survive in a 'globalizing' world, knowledge of other cultures and peoples is a necessity, it appears as though Europe knows very little about either of the two.

Perhaps, the absence of knowledge is felt most acutely by the Europeans who invest in India. Today, they rediscover what people knew: they are not well-equipped to do business in India. They

understand neither the culture nor the role of cultural differences in management structures and organizations. The books and articles on “culture and management” are full only of platitudes; on top of it, the newest trend in anthropology tells us that the notions of “culture” and “cultural differences” are almost of no use in understanding people.

In other words, I am suggesting the following. What the Europeans think they know of India tells us more about Europe than it does about India. This ‘knowledge’ will be tested during this century. In that case, quite obviously, the earlier generations of Indian thinkers were not merely busy instituting and defending immoral practices. What else were they doing then? Now, the puzzle becomes very intriguing: what *were* the Indian thinkers doing in the course of the last two to three thousand years? What did they think and write about? Did they make contributions to human knowledge? If yes, what are they? Answering these and allied questions will become one of the primary preoccupations of the Indian intelligentsia in the course of the twenty-first century. This puzzle is important to the Europeans too. Let me say why by setting the context first.

### III

Let me sketch the context by raising a question: what has the world to learn from Europe? Here are the familiar answers: science and technology; democracy and the legal system; respect for human rights and ecological awareness; becoming modern and cosmopolitan... When such answers are given, one does not mean that the rest of the world has to learn this or that scientific theory, or a solution to this or that mathematical problem from Europe. One means something like this: Indians have to learn a particular way of going-about with the world from the European culture. That is, one believes that this way of going-about is the unique contribution of the European culture, something that is absent in other cultures.

Let us now reverse the question: *what has Europe to learn from India?* In all the thirty years I have spent in Europe and in all the thousands of books I have probably read, I have not come across a satisfactory answer. Most do not even raise the issue; those who do, mumble about ‘learning’ things that Europe once knew but has forgotten since. How to understand this situation?

The first possibility is that there *is nothing* to learn from India. Possible, but implausible. It is possible that, much like the ‘chosen people’ that the Jews believe they are, Europe is the ‘chosen’ culture from all the cultures that populate the planet. However, it is implausible because I have not come across any explanation for this ‘European miracle’. Nevertheless, if there *is nothing* to learn from India, we can all sleep peacefully: the world, as we know it, will not be disturbed. This is the first possibility.

Consider the second possibility now. Europe has ‘something’ to learn from India but many Europeans do not yet know what. Some give the following answers: meditation, yoga, notions of Karma, Vedic astrology... These will not do: not only are there native meditative and astrological traditions in

Europe, but such answers are also inadequate. It is like saying that one has to learn partial differential equations from Europe. So, let me push the question: what is this 'something' Europe has to learn from India?

At this stage, I normally encounter silence because there does not appear to be any answer to give. Surely, this is strange: Europe has been studying India for centuries; it has colonized her territories and people; it tells Indians what is wrong with their society and culture... And yet, no answer is forthcoming. The Indians know what they have to learn from Europe and they have been learning it for centuries on end. Europe, by contrast, apparently has no proper answer to the question.

By virtue of this, the second possibility, viz. Europe has something to learn from India but does not know what, is very disturbing. One culture, the Indian, has been learning for generations and centuries; the other culture, the European, does not know what to learn or even whether there is anything to learn. And these two cultures, for the first time in so many hundred years, will meet each other on the world arena as equals and as competitors. What will the outcome be?

#### IV

Whatever the outcome, the meeting between these two cultures sets the context for the puzzle I spoke of. Let me remind you what that puzzle is: what were the Indian thinkers doing in the course of the last two to three thousand years? What did they think and write about? Did they make contributions to human knowledge? If yes, what are they?

To these questions, we have one set of indirect answers. In course of the last three hundred years or so, the mainstream theories in social sciences and humanities carry on as though Indian thinkers have made no substantial contributions to human knowledge. However, almost without exception, this splendid corpus of writings about human beings embodies assumptions of the western culture. Not only have the western intellectuals created these theories in humanities and social sciences; they also express how this culture has looked at the world so far. Generations of Indian intellectuals have accepted these answers as more or less true as well. The future generations will not be so accommodating though: *they will test these answers for their truth*. I say this with confidence because I find that more and more people in India are gravitating towards this kind of research. These are not of mere academic interest to such people, whose numbers steadily increase. More than most, they realize that answers to these and allied questions have the potential to ignite an intellectual revolution on a world scale.

My own research, and that of many more in India and Asia, is focused on answering the puzzle. In the time that is left to me, I cannot even hope to tell you what the research results are. Therefore, I am forced to take a rain-check. Nevertheless, let me indicate the far-reaching nature of these results.

Even a limited acquaintance with the Indian or Asian culture tells us that their thinkers have also produced multiple 'theories' about human beings. These also express the way the Indian or even Asian culture looks at the world. Yet, these theories are contributions to human knowledge. This knowledge is about many things: the nature of human beings, the nature of ethics and morality, how human beings learn, what happiness is and how to reach it, what we could know about human beings... In short, this is knowledge about us; it is also about what we can know, what we might hope for and what we should be doing. As the Indian and the European cultures differ from each other, so do their views about human beings.

The European intellectuals have elaborated their stories so far. The Indians and the Asians will do the same in the course of this century. These two sets of theories will meet on the world arena too, as equals and as competitors. Today, we think that the European story about human beings constitutes knowledge; that is because there are no competitors to this story as yet. How about tomorrow, when there will be competition in the marketplace of ideas, and Indians and Asians come up with other and different theories?

So, by the end of this century, there will at least be two different sets of stories about human beings, their societies and cultures. One that the West has produced and the other that India and Asia will. Only one of these can be true or both will be false. However, these are issues for tomorrow. Today, let us merely appreciate why the theme of this evening is so important to all of us.

I thank you.