



TOWARDS HARMONY OF CULTURES

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All problems of existence are essentially problems of harmony.

- Sri Aurobindo

There is no unanimity of views regarding the concept of culture. It means different things to different people. A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Klukhohn in their book Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions have mentioned 164 definitions on culture. "Learned behaviour", "ideas in the mind", "a logical construct", "a statistical fiction", "a psychic defense mechanism", are some of the concepts of culture they have cited. They themselves, like other anthropologists, prefer to define culture as "an abstraction from behaviour", I do not propose to examine these concepts and definitions of culture except to say that some of them have a grain of truth. Behaviour, especially learned behaviour, is certainly an ingredient of culture. No doubt there is instinctive behaviour but to control it by reason, by ideas in the mind, and not to continue to conduct oneself in a crude and gross manner is one of the things a cultured man is expected to do. E.B. Tylor in his Primitive Culture wrote: "Culture is that complete whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom or any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." And later in his book Anthropology he spoke of the mental gulf that divides the lowest savage from the highest ape. Culture, whatever concept we may have of it, is something which man alone possesses.

Mathew Arnold defined culture as the pursuit of perfection. The means of the pursuit were "getting to know on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and through this knowledge turning a stream of truth and free thought upon our stock notions and habits which we now follow staunchly but mechanically vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically. ... And the culture we recommend - is above all, an inward operation..." I have made this rather long citation because I shall have occasion to discuss later many of the things Arnold has mentioned here.

Man who alone among all living creatures possesses culture is a mental being. He is capable of reflective thinking, of looking at and examining his ideas and motives, of entertaining ideals and devising ways of realising them. All these are functions of consciousness. It is needless to say that it is not being suggested that all men are equally intelligent, equally sensitive, equally determined. At the same time it can not be denied that it is possible to improve one's understanding, refine one's feelings, make one's will stronger. To actualise possibilities inherent in human nature is culture in its basic sense.

I find the root meaning of the word culture, cultivation, very useful in determining its concept. Culture is not found ready-made, rather it is the result of labour and effort. It is cultivation not of the soil, nor the manipulation of the lower organisms. It is the cultivation of man's faculties, capabilities and hidden qualities. For most people culture means as in Tylor's definition quoted above, knowledge, arts and customs, habits, etc. which is true enough, civility, urbanity, good manners are parts of culture too. But it should be noted that some people are naturally civil and courteous, many are not only <sup>not</sup> so but are gross and uncouth in their conduct and speech. Yes, but it is open to them to "cultivate" civility etc.

"A cultivated man" is a significant phrase. But such a man is not only one who has good manners, refined speech and civil conduct. Cultivation of human existence and life must dig deeper to deserve the name of culture. Good manners etc. are the outward expressions of culture, not its soul. To my mind consciousness is the key to the understanding of everything that pertains to and concerns man. In Vedanta, the acme of Indian spiritual thought, cit (chit), Consciousness is the ultimate and fundamental Reality. It is not responding to stimulus from outside nor merely interpreting physical and mental events and functions. It is a self-existent, self-aware Reality immobile and infinitely spread out and the basis and source of human personality of everything in the world. It is well known that personality changes, improves or becomes worse or to make matters more complicated, progresses in certain respects and regresses in others. This happens because the consciousness of man changes which is reflected in the differences in personality.

I am however for the purpose of this essay taking consciousness as we find it on the human level and not as a or the metaphysical reality, Human consciousness is multi-level and not<sup>a</sup> unilevel thing. Man is at once a physical, a vital and a mental being. Admittedly he is distinguished from other animals by his mind. But he has a body, a vital force functioning in his physical frame and a mind which can become in many a self-reflective light and also capable of leading his vitality and physical existence. As the Upanishad puts it: "Man is the mental being, the leader of vitality and the body." This is however a description of the ideal man. The majority of men do not lead their vitality and physicality by their mentality but are led by them.

There are people who like primarily to fulfil their physical needs and desires. They can be described as barbarians for they live in physical consciousness. Physical strength is the sign of manhood and pursuit of knowledge is a peculiarity and weakness. The barbarian is led more by instinct than by reason. He however is not a being who belonged to the past only. There are barbarians in all societies, in every age and clime, even in the more advanced civilisations. An advanced civilisation may not be highly or truly cultured. A society may have all the appurtenances of comfortable, even luminous life, the most developed technology and means of fulfilling all conceivable pleasures. But it may not be evolved in the qualities of mind. If culture is an inward operation (Arnold), then such a society is not cultured though civilised.

The contemporary world is the example of high civilisation and low culture. The advance of science and technology and ways of quick travel and communication have made possible the spread of knowledge and ideas. But it has created a consumer economy mentality. Possession of things and gadgets, opulence, one-man-upship are the hall-marks of the modern civilisation. It has produced a new brand of barbarians. They are the new Philistines. The Philistine identifies himself with the vital consciousness. The vital is the seat of desire and its characteristic drive is for possession, excitement and sensation. The Philistine, thanks to modern science and technology, is educated and reads books but thrives on newspapers and magazines, has heard or perhaps has even read Whitman and Melville, but has no idea of what their merit is as a poet or a novelist. He mouths other people's opinions and echoes their views in art, literature, society and hardly ever thinks for himself. "He does

not act but only reacts." (Sri Aurobindo)

There are ~~not~~ many people in any cultural environment who live on the level of the mind, for disinterested knowledge, creation and appreciation of beauty, selfless service of their fellows. It is not that they neglect, nor do they need to, the satisfaction of the vital needs or health and strength of the body. In fact a man who can strike a fine balance between these three levels or sides of his personality and life may properly be deemed more cultured than others whose developments are lopsided. The ideal of culture must be total and whole.

The idea of total and harmonious culture raises a most important question. Is there in man a principle of harmony? The mind even at its very best is certainly not an instrument of achieving harmony between the different parts or aspects of man's personality. I said above that man is the mental being which is the leader of the vital and the body. True enough, but yet it is obvious that the leadership of the mind is not effective. We must look for something else in him which can effectuate harmony of the various aspects of his personality. There is a person behind the external personality - the triple nature of mind, vital and the body - which is a spiritual reality. This is the soul in him, a portion of God, the limited and evolving divine element in him. It is in the soul that the key to harmony can be found.

But the soul, an evolving entity, has the mind as its best and highest power. Mind or reason, however, is incapable of achieving harmony between the warring aspects of his personality. He needs to evolve further, to elevate himself to a higher level of consciousness - a consciousness which has inherent in it integral and comprehensive knowledge and enlightened and infallible will.

I have till now spoken about the culture of an individual human being and nothing about harmony of cultures. The reason is culture is not something impersonal. A culture of a people is what the people make it. Conflict of culture is certainly a deplorable thing. But it seems to me that the conflict is not so much between cultures as between people who create and belong to different cultural environments. If they can become really cultured they would be able to appreciate world views and

systems of values other than their own. Intellectual, moral and religious bigotry would give place to mutual understanding and appreciation. Religion has been a divisive force and the cause of conflicts between different nations of humanity. This is because the externals of religion are considered more important - dogmas, rituals, cults - than the inner essence of religion which is discovery of the spirit in man and his relation with the supreme Spirit. That, however, is not a sufficient guard against conflict of cultures. Spirituality comprehensive and forceful must be the guiding light and leading power of both individual and collective life. All life must become the fertile soil in which total and harmonious culture can flourish.

*A Basu*  
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