

THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF WORLD CULTURE

Basavanagudi, Bangalore - 560 004

LET US CONFRONT WORLD CULTURE

by

M A S RAJAN

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Davinson Memorial Lecture

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The Indian Institute of World Culture

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INTERODUCTORY NOTE

Shri M.A.S Rajan, a distinguished retired civilian from Karnataka, delivered under the auspices of the Institute on 27 November 2003 this year's "Davinson Memorial Endowment Lecture" on the theme: "Let Us Confront World Culture." Having regard to the abiding relevance of the theme and its scholarly, Illuminating and thought-provoking exposition by the speaker's observation that the Insitute," will have to be read with his note of caution that we would be well adbised to "protect local cultural practices from the bull-dozers of elite mono-culture." Of special relevance to the Institute is his final appeal, based on a UNESCO document; "Let us rejoice in diversity, while maintaining absolute standards of judging what is right, good and true."

December 2003

(K.R. Ramachandran)
Former President, IWC

BIO-DATA OF SRI M.A.S. RAJAN

Mr. M.A.S. Rajan, is a M.Sc., of the Central College of Bangalore. A first class student throughout and a Gold Medalist in Physics he entered the Mysore Civil Service in 1943 through a competitive examination and became an officer of the Indian Administrative Service when that service was constituted.

He worked in the princely state of Mysore before Independence, and then in the Karnataka and Central Governments. He has performed with distinction a variety of jobs at various levels, including the highest, in general administration as well as in such specialised fields as land revenue, population census, defence management, administrator's training, aircraft manufacture, photo film manufacture, and policy making for the film and other media. He acted for sometime, as the State Vigilance Commissioner of Karnataka. He retired in 1979 after 36 years of Government service.

Mr. Rajan has travelled widely, especially as UN Fellow in 1952-53 and Ford Foundation Fellow in 1961-1962. He studied for a year at the Harvard University under the latter. He has authored a number of Government reports and several papers.

In 1986 his learned book on Land Reforms was published from Delhi and was well received by scholars and research students. In 1988 another scholarly book on Consciousness which he edited was published by the Academy of Sanskrit Research. It has proved popular.

After retirement Mr. Raj an served as Honorary Professor in the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore for 3 years, and was for some time Company Director in three companies, and R&D Advisor in one company, all in the manufacturing field of the private sector. He is enrolled on the Register of the Indian Council of Social Science Research.

These days he keeps himself engaged by serving on the Governing Bodies of various institutions such as MYRADA and being a member of some public societies, like the Institute of International Affairs, the Indian Insitute of Public Administration, apart from writing occasional contributions to journals and newspapers.

LET US CONFRONT WORLD CULTURE

M A S RAJAN¹

Let me first say a word about the title of this presentation. To use today's lingo, my statement would be called a disclaimer. To read the title as a bout of some kind, would, I submit, be less than fair to the role and work of this esteemed institution, the Indian Institute of World Culture.

Having said this, I must hasten to add that during the course of this presentation I shall be "walking through" (to use a buzzword of these days) the idea of World Culture and looking at some of its modern avatars.

My late friend Bill Davinson whose memory is associated with this meeting was an activist and a humanitarian, who was at first passionately devoted to the welfare of poverty-stricken refugees from Tibet. Later, his forte was rural development as an accessory of rehabilitation of poor people. He was a member of what I would call the Development Fraternity, especially devoted to people below the poverty line. So one would expect this discussion to be on poverty and development. What in heaven's name, one might exclaim, has World Culture to do with poverty related development? That is a legitimate question. The hope is that what follows will be able to throw some light on that connection.

In fact on this issue I will be arguing that to serve the best interests of our cultural heritage, the Development Fraternity would do well to pay heed to the appeal: "Leave the poor alone, please! Take your ideas to where they belong!"

Semantics of definition

A well-known practice in traditional seminars of olden days was to ask the participants to spell out, at the outset, the meaning of the technical terms which they would be using in their presentation - the *paaribhashika padas*. Following hoary practice, we may ask what the term *culture* stands for. In Sanskrit the rough equivalent term is *Sanskriti*. Its meaning is specific, centering on *kriti* that is, action, performance, and coloured by the prefix which stands for proper, good, virtuous. Curiously a person of culture was in the olden days addressed by the honorific expression *Arva*. The English dictionary gives just a couple of meanings of the word culture, as a noun and as an adjective. A century-old (1904) edition of Roget's Thesaurus places it under three semantic fields: knowledge, improvement and taste, reflecting the old-world emphasis on refinement and an elevating value system. About half a century ago the venerated guru, Swami Sivananda used these expressions (among others, in a long article)⁵ to describe culture: "The essence of true culture is based on a spiritual sense of values and a spiritual outlook of life . . . Pure thought, decent speech, nobility of character, impartial love, truthfulness, honesty, straightforwardness, forbearance - such values are the natural insignia of right culture." Interestingly, what he thought was the negation of culture is perhaps relevant today: "Culture is not just literature, music and dancing, or sculpture, architecture, painting or drawing or astronomy or mathematics. Culture is not opportunism, weathercock behavior, or any kind of refined hypocrisy. . . . Culture is not in dress, food (etc), though these may receive some impact of good taste due to habits engendered by inward regeneration, which is the mark of culture."

Today's Thesaurus on the Internet has a large number of Semantic fields, reflecting the shift away from the old notions.

¹ Sri M A S Rajan is a retired IAS Officer of Karnataka residing in Bangalore and is an occasional contributor of articles.

A very modern explanation of culture in the anthropological sense, runs thus:-” Culture is a core part of our identities as human beings, connected to our mother tongues, to our families as children, to our root assumptions about life and the world, to our links to our ancestors, and to the fundamental texts, written or unwritten, of our social world. It is the glue that binds us together with those whom we recognize as being “people like us.” It is what makes a set of individuals a people and not simply a gathering of strangers ”ⁱⁱ

The entity called Culture has been linked to all kinds of subjects; history, geography, religion, politics and everything else.

There is a gigantic, stupendous mass of writing on it. I am no student of that literature but even a lay reader can observe that culture is a vastly over-used, misused, morphed, mutilated, and manipulated word that has acquired a bewildering variety of connotations. Exploring the semantics of culture, and world culture, can be fascinating but it can be never-ending. I cannot do it. As a chagrined observer of the blind insensitivity all round us, in a showcase metropolis like Bangalore. I present a rough collage composed out of other people’s considered thoughts. And just to explain the theme topic before us I place before you a couple of illustrations relevant to it.

First let me ask myself what kind of turf does World Culture occupy in this heavily congested territory of ideas? How does this esteemed pay heed to the appeal: “Leave the poor alone, please! Take your ideas to where they belong!”

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First let me ask myself what kind of turf does World Culture occupy in this heavily congested territory of ideas? How this esteemed does located in that patch? To speculate on this point one could look at the fare it provided during, say, this month. Overall, the events are typical of what goes by the ubiquitous expression ‘cultural programme’. A Sanskrit play; a local language talk on the pleasures of reading; a talk on yoga; classical music of local ethnic interest vocal and on modern instruments, light music; classical south Indian dance; a series of items celebrating Children’s fortnight - music competitions for devotional songs, for narrating jokes and for painting. However what is noteworthy is that all the individual items in the month’s menu are devoted to themes of exceptionally local interest. This may be called grassroots culture of the local middle class. Evidently the Institute believes that world culture is supported, promoted and reinforced whenever any culture-driven programme is observed anywhere, no matter how local. From one angle, this may appear to be an odd way of looking at world culture. But from another angle it is a very laudable and modern view which pictures world culture as composed of myriad cultures, like stars in the firmament. I will have occasion to recall this imagery later on.

Meanwhile I would tend to believe that the Institute’s approach was not always this, surely not when the Institute came into being. As far as I know the ideologues who organized the institution then acted under a different conception of world culture. They had a vision of a new, intuitive spiritual creed that would enfold all of humanity - that was the world culture they had in mind. Over the years of course concepts have evolved into more up-to-date mutations.

Some time ago a British Minister stirred a controversy announcing a citizenship test, which he explained “would promote greater pride among

British people about their own culture and identity - English Scottish, Welsh and Irish.”ⁱⁱⁱ That test was quickly dubbed a ‘Britishness test’. Closer home there is Indianness and there is Italianness, so to Bihari-ness, Kashmiriyat, Mysorean-ness, and so on. “The problem is that these labels - British, English, (Indian, Kashmiri) and so on - are essentially political labels rather than distillations of habit or custom. The latter are nebulous and harder to define but arguably more insightful.

Notice that the boundary in these instances is geographical. But cultural distillations can occupy trickier spaces. Hindu-ness, Islamiyat Christian-ness and such, which go into doctrinal rather than spiritual space. All these try to give identity to a type of culture, which is not only non-homogenous but is also hard to define in specific down-to earth terms. There might be some exceptions. The present leadership in the Vatican envisages a world-wide

adoption of the Christian dogma The Muslim Ummah embeds a vision of one world following the precept; of the Koran and has Jihad as its instrument to implement its injunction: as to a pure way of life. The quasi-religion called Communism sought to mould the whole world through an International Communist doctrine. On another plane there is the imagery and ideology of the Global Village which - although its relevance arose within the context of mass: communication - implies a goal that is tantamount to a single, monolithic 'village' culture throughout the globe. (One would be tempted to cite the concept: Vasudaiva Kutumbakam here. It is also a global conception and if we accept it as totally benign, it is because of its context).

Then again, there are speculations concerning culture which transcend the semantics of the term altogether and use it in a general ambiguous, sanitized, all-pervading sense.

One example is the subject field of "memetics". Observing 'the continuous change in cultural behaviours, many evolutionary biologists 'have tried to adopt the principle of evolution by selection to understand' that phenomenon. Richard Dawkins "coined the term 'merae' as an analog to the biological unit of inheritance namely, the gene or the genetic replicator". 'The rather simple distinction between genetic explicators as 'genes' on the one hand, opposed to all non-genetic replicators as 'memes' has been firmly imprinted in the evolutionary thinking about cultural information.' 'Dennett ...sees the human mind as being built up with memes comparable to the programming of a computer.^{iv}

Memetics thus implies a view of culture as a mental construct, something that transcends society, which reveals itself in individuals as a personal inheritance. But more significantly it further implies that culture as behavioral 'distillations of habit and custom', is utterly individual and hence diverse and atomized, and dispersed throughout humankind.

While in the arena of memetics, World Culture is an innocuous mental construct, in recent times another brand of world culture has emerged which has real life and is full of vitality but is far from benign. In fact it is dangerous. This brand of culture has been "mediated by satellites, television, Internet and the Web. The power of this new global culture - if indeed it can be called culture at all - is such that it indeed threatens local cultures and vernacular languages."

The political scientist Professor Benjamin Barber calls this the "McWorld". This brings me to the central argument of my talk today.

Prof. Barber has some years ago argued that world culture is increasingly polarized around two extremes. The first is "McWorld", the cosmopolitan, international, consumerist, multinationalized, advertising-based culture of cable TV, popular magazines, Hollywood films - - a 'culture which aims at universal accessibility, in which billions watch the same World Cup finals, a culture where MTV (translated), dramatizations of the lives of imaginary American millionaires, CNN, and films like Titanic dominate and flatten local cultures, producing a thin but powerful layer of consumerist, advertiser-driven, entertainment-based, and perhaps in the last analysis, American-influenced culture with great popular (if lowest denominator) appeal, backed by enormous financial and technological resources.

The live icons of this new world culture are the "digirati". Its wonderful, ubiquitous, invisible substrate and invaluable ally is the Internet or the Web. By digirati one means the beneficiaries of the enormous, successful information technology industry and the other knowledge-based sectors of the economy such as biotechnology and pharmacology. The world of high-level programmers, systems analysts, entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists has a culture, a life style, and a level of affluence that distinguishes itself from those of older

elites whether in America or elsewhere. The emerging digirati are to be found not only in nations like India and the U.S., but in Israel, Ireland, Taiwan, and other countries or city-states with vibrant information industries. . . On the outskirts of Chennai, Poona, Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi, and Hyderabad luxury apartments are rising to house this new group. Although initially concentrated in information technology, this new digirati are also found, to varying degrees, in the biotech, pharmaceutical and other high-tech areas.

This essentially is the 'World Culture' that we have to confront, and which is part of the title of this presentation. It is very modern, technologically armed, and socially and financially very powerful. Its challenge needs to be met with circumspection and an intelligent vision of what is good for our future.

There are several major threats from this new culture. One is the danger posed by its image as the panacea for under-development and hence the harbinger of what is called development. A second is the erosion of local cultures and the rise of a mindless uniformity. A subtext is the insidious homogenizing power of the English language.

Effects of Development

Development is a well-used word whose complexity is little understood. At one time it was a favourite remedy for the ills of the poor. It was the flavour of the times in the 60's and 70's, and it was the name for whole UN Decades (the 3rd one was 1981—90). Now the view is very different.

A UNESCO document of 1996 observed from a global perspective that: 'Development thinking and practice has already brought in environmental, gender and social concerns.'^{vi} Another observation in it is this: "No area of economics has experienced as many abrupt changes in its leading paradigm as has economic development."

Development is now seen as widening the rich-poor gulf and inflicting pain on people, especially the poor. For example: 'The net effect of the policies set by the Washington Consensus^{vii} has all too often been to benefit the few at the expense of the many, the well-off at the expense of the poor. In many cases commercial interests and values supersede concern for the environment, democracy, human rights, and social justice.'^{viii} This is a statement from the distinguished economist who was Economic Advisor to the World Bank for 3 years (1997-1

Statistics of income inequality shockingly support these statements "In 1960 the income of the richest 20% of the world's population (7C was about 30 times higher than that of the poorest 20%. But by this ratio has risen to 82 and it continues to scale new heights even now (September 2003)". That was a remark by Dr Lopez-Carlos, Chief Economist of the World Economic Forum, Davos, reproduced in the Newsweek

Shriller voices come from people's movements. To cite an ex; "Look at 'developed' countries. They generate enough waste to poison the atmosphere and change the temperature of the earth. "In the vein the slogan has been raised that the need is not for development but for protection.^{ix} "Protect the poor from being further pauperized, protect the citizen from being deprived of democratic rights through corporatization of public goods" and so on.

If globally, Development has thus turned out as a calamity the poor in the less developed part of the world, the clear less (the poor countries such as ours is to keep away from the bra Development that has been practiced thus far. We need to save and p the poor from the global onslaught; and say on their behalf - 'j Development, please keep away from

US!^x In this sense it is a pity that the new World Culture just described comes as a protagonist of Development and that the mantra that drives the digirati is ¹ Development.

In other words, we have to ask ourselves:- will the prosper the elite digirati spread to the rest of society, especially to urban and to rural villagers, or will it create an increasingly separate, cosmopolitan, knowledge-based enclave? Considering the nature of the technology that the digirati utilize as well the insular, blinkered, conceited mindset described earlier that marks them out, the greater likelihood would appear to be that their prosperity would remain confined to their ethereal enclave. This is some kind of protection to the poor and the villagers and to their cultures. But they, and indeed everybody else have to be constantly vigilant about the depredations of the digirati culture beyond the enclave. This is best achieved by strong support to an atomically dispersed multiculturalism.

That is to say. it would be appropriate to appeal: “protect local cultural practices from the bulldozers of elite monoculture”.

Multiple cultures, to meet ‘World Culture’

Human civilization is a mosaic of different cultures. If development were allowed to take a single linear path, cultural diversity would be at grave risk. To study the multiple viewpoints on this issue in depth, around 1991 an independent World Commission on Culture and Development was established to prepare a World report on Culture and Development. The Commission’s report, ‘Our Creative Diversity’ was presented in November 1995 to the UNESCO and to the United Nations General Assembly. Several statements are made in the report and in related documents. For example: “Cultural diversity is as important as biodiversity. Pluralism pays attention to the accumulated treasure of all human experience, wisdom and conduct.” “Global telecommunications are fostering a perception of homogenization in cultural value and lifestyles worldwide. As a result, a politics of differentiation has emerged with great force leading to a search for distinctiveness among individuals and peoples.”^{xi} Clearly the world everywhere is facing a chaotic scramble for identity.’ For people everywhere the most immediate, familiar, collectively shared instrument at hand to cope with this scramble is inherited culture; that is the microculture at the grassroots. A UNESCO document hopes that Culture can act as a ‘bridge over the gap between local identity, ethnic or religious affiliation, national citizenship and, in some cases, macro-regional allegiance.’ Clearly an amorphous broadband World Culture cannot fulfill that role. And McWorld certainly cannot.

To digress a little here, homogenization of culture, or call it monoculturism is taking place even now, subtly and in all comers of the world of ‘culture’ it seems. Consider this weird illustration:TM Every culture has its own conception of ideal beauty in the feminine form, especially loveliness of the face. Now plastic surgeons, spurred by the giants of the cosmetics industry are bypassing this diversity and pursuing an emerging global standard of beauty and in the process creating a new kind of plastic aesthetic. Even geometrical programming on the computer has been harnessed in this pursuit. Biologists and psychologists may affirm that a perfect smile, an ample bosom, a muscular bicep, a compliant hip or whatever, attracts the opposite sex as it is just something that triggers a positive response in the brain, which in turn has been programmed by evolution to ensure that we choose the best mates. But the global drive has no qualms about going against nature or obliterating individual characteristics and variety in beauty. A global standardization which creates a vast enterprise and brings in vast profits is what McWorld wants.

The saving grace is that this variety of cultural bulldozing still remains in the elite levels and has no foreseeable prospect of reaching the poor.

Prof. Kenneth Keniston an eminent social anthropologist belonging to the world of Information and Communication Technology has another perspective on this topic of plurality of cultures. The core of his anxiety is conveyed in the title of one of his publications: “Can the Cultures of India survive the Information Age?”^{xiii}

I give a rough paraphrase of his statements:

He urges three main propositions. South Asia and more particularly India, is richly endowed with many cultures each with a wealth of traditional values. The region has a corresponding wealth of languages each with a marvelous heritage. “India is the most multilingual and multicultural major nation on earth.” All these have co-existed for centuries, emerging conflicts between them have been resolved one way or another, and presently an overall harmony prevails in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural environment. “Linguistic and cultural divides have torn apart or threatened to dismember nations like the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Canada, but in India they have by and large been managed harmoniously.” But now one among the languages, English is very powerful politically, socially, financially, and more than all technologically, although only a miniscule 50% of the populace are literate in it.

The linguistic imperialism of English has mushroomed thanks to the spread of English-rich and English-fuelled computers and ITC technologies.^{xiv} Prof Keniston has given details to show that “the content of localized software is determined not only by the language chosen for localization, but by deep, underlying, usually implicit and unacknowledged. . . assumptions inherent in the software itself. And software carries with it a view of the world, of people, of reality, of time, and of the capabilities of users, which may or may not be compatible with any given cultural and social context.”^{xv} Left unchecked the imperialist force will ride roughshod over the region’s cultural diversity.

What do we do about this?

Develop more vigorously than at present our own language technologies compatible with the prevalent English ones. Our people are not doing enough on this. According to Prof Keniston, “The Government of India’s efforts have been dispersed in a variety of activities, often brilliant but together not effective in creating widely-used local language software.” Again: “The dynamic major Indian software firms, oriented toward exports and services have shown little interest in localization. The creative work done by many Indian individuals and groups has so far not produced effective applications in the major Indian languages.”^{xvi}

Cherish our micro-cultures as a matter of pride and self-respect, with self-assurance and unwavering purpose, as part of a battle against English hegemony.

In all this, do not hate English and English based culture. They may remain as a separate layer. Confronting English frontally or without mindfulness will not do. It is not also safe to simply allow events to take their course, that runs the risk that our micro-cultures will get flattened out under the bulldozer of the new World Culture called McWorld.

That is what ‘confronts’ stands for in the title of this paper.

Some observations from the UNESCO document earlier cited¹ are relevant in this concluding context. “The Commission viewed culture, the foundation spring of remembrance

and identity, as the major source of energy for creating new senses of belonging as well as new ways of living together.

“Let us rejoice in diversity, while maintaining absolute standards of judging what is right, good and true”



ⁱ Swami Sivananda, “What is Culture and what is Not”, in Bhavan’s Journal vol 50 No 1. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai. 15 Aug 2003

ⁱⁱ From Kenneth Keniston. ‘Cultural Diversity or Global Monoculture’ www.kken.net/publications

ⁱⁱⁱ From “The Week”; 21 Oct 03. Jon Stock: Last Page

^{iv} Journal of Memetics at <http://iom.emit.cfom.org>

^v Benjamin R. Barber, Jihad versus McWorld (New York: Times Books, 1995).