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**THE ROLE OF
CULTURE IN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY**

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PREFACE

For a wider dissemination of the lecture delivered by Sri N. C. Krishnan under the J. Srinivasan Memorial Lecture on 11th May, 1976 at the Indian Institute of World Culture, we publish a resume of Sri Krishnan's thoughtful- address on an important facet of Industrial Society.

Sri N, C. Krishnan, Chartered Accountant of 25 years' standing, was president of the All-India Institute of Chartered Accountants in its jubilee year and is an Associate of the London Institute of Taxation. Besides studying law, he underwent training in taxation and estate duty in a Chartered Accountant's Firm in England. The University of Madras has nominated him to the Advisory Council on Trade and Industry. He has traveled far and wide and has deep literary and philosophical interests.

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J. Srinivasan, in whose memory this lecture is instituted, was a unique combination of a professional man of repute and rectitude in this City and a philanthropist; and friend to the distressed and the needy. I had known him ever since his childhood, for we were brought up together in the same home, school, college and apprenticeship to the profession till he set up practice in this City over twenty years ago. How often had we playfully recited together these lines of Masfield in our College?

“Man with the burning soul
Has but an hour of breath
To build a ship of truth
On which his soul may sail —
Sail on the sea of death,
For death takes toll
Of beauty, courage, youth
Of all but truth”

Little realizing then that we were only playing the tune for a game of musical chairs! But, he had played the game of life fair and good, and I am certain, as Socrates affirmed in his final address to the Athenians, “No evil can befall a good man either in life or death, and his fate is not a matter of indifference to the Gods.”

J. Srinivasan was associated with the Indian Institute of World Culture in an intimate manner, may be not much known to the audience here, as he had not attended these meetings frequently, or had he ever spoken from this platform. But he was connected with this institution ever since its inception, and particularly with the Founder B. P. Wadia on the business, administrative and financial side. J. S. might not have been an aesthete, poet or playwright; but this did not prevent him from drinking deep at the source itself, from the fount of culture. For, he was, like his Guru B. P. Wadia, one of those who believed that culture dwells within the sphere of a living organism; and it is that organism alone which can explain how any culture may move and change. Viewing culture not as anything static but as an organic cherished growth, B.P.W. had founded this Institute nearly three decades back, and it is a glowing testimony to his faith, and vision that it had carried on its activities continuously, week in and week out, without a break, thanks to the unceasing efforts of its President, Madame Sophia Wadia, the dynamic Secretary Shri M. V. Venkataramaiah and members of the Managing Committee.

LIVING ORGANISM

Why do we say that culture is a living organism? For, after all, what is culture anyway, if it is not a way of life — with all its busy activities, values, arts, symbols, structures and institutions? It has to be remembered that permeating every corner of this gigantic, complex, living entity, called culture, is the total mobile body of feelings, motives, beliefs and intentions which inform the ceaseless actions of our daily lives. When we talk of culture, we have a tendency to lift certain traditionally sanctioned areas out of the living totality and treat them separately, like the anatomist in his dissecting table. Culture, then, has been taken by the layman to be a body of literature, which includes poems, plays, essays, novels, etc., or it is music, painting, architecture, etc. This traditional popular idea forgets that culture is a continuous endeavour; it is not an end-product, nor is it a state that is achieved and done with. But like the Holy Grail, it is a perpetual quest.

Particularly is it so in an unbroken, Continuous, dynamic flow of a technological age,

when it is harden to make this act of separation: to lift out a frame from a movie; or a piece of music electronically stored and to look at it hard. But whenever we do so, let us not forget to take note of the fact that we are distorting the body of beliefs and feelings carried by that particular form of art; on the other hand, we have to study an experience drawn out of the living flesh and blood which gives it some significance. Here, I may be permitted to quote what Madame H. P. Blavatsky wrote nearly a century ago in LUCIFER, August 1890, which is still most appropriate to the occasion:

“Real culture is spiritual. It proceeds from within outwards, and unless a person is naturally noble-minded and strives to progress on the spiritual before he does so on the physical or outward plane, such culture and civilization will be no better than whitened sepulchers full of dead men’s bones and decay ”,

In spite of all the definitions given about culture, one has to come to the conclusion that culture is a collective organism in which is enshrined (a) science, which is a sense of curiosity about life, (b) philosophy, an attitude to life and (c) religion a reverence for life. Hence has Andre Malraux defined culture as “the sum of all the forms of art, of love and of thought, which in the course of centuries, have enabled man to be less enslaved”. If one has to properly evaluate any area of culture — and my field is its role in industrial society — one has to work through three stages:

1. The need to recognize not only what traditions his materials derive from but something about the source- of his own criteria and judgment;
2. He will need some theories to explain what has; happened, why changes occurred and in what order. He has to see why industry has arrived and what it has done ; and
3. He has to bring home to his mind the vivid sense of the human and moral meaning of what he sees, whether it is alive or dead, coarse or fine.

Naturally anyone studying the culture of his age cannot be isolated from his surroundings, however distressing and intolerable they may be. He stands at the cross-roads — with his books and learning on one side and his vibrant life and experiences on die other.

INDUSTRY — A MENACE

One of the irresolvable problems in human affairs is that any fallacy by constant repetition by fellowmen is elevated to the status of revealed truth. It is not necessarily so in Goebbelsian Germany alone but happens in every democratic society too. How else could one understand the severe condemnation of modern culture and industrialization prevalent today among several sections of the public? Ever since the beginning of the century when Mahatma Gandhi wrote the “Hind Swaraj”, a classic to be reckoned' along with Marx’s “Manifesto” or Darwin’s “Origin of the Species”, industrial life has been derided, specifying the .machine as the arch culprit for ushering in the “disease of desolation and despair” in the name of civilization and deploring with nostalgic air the lost countryside now fast .grown into urban cities, repeating Goldsmith’s lines:

“’T11 fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay”

Let us listen to a few such denunciations culled at random from this classic:

“Machinery represents a great sin.” (p. 96)

“It is like a great snake-hole which may contain from one to a hundred snakes” (p. 99)

“India has nothing to learn from anybody else” (p. 55)

“Western Civilization is to propagate immorality” (p. 58)

“Civilization of India is not to be beaten in the world” (p. 54)

“Railways, lawyers and doctors have impoverished this country, (p. 35) Etc., etc.
Along with these pronouncements follows this anaethema :

“And if anyone speaks to the contrary, know that he is ignorant.”

At the risk of being branded an ignoramus, I must express my disagreement to the above declarations. Why should any one gibber at industrialization, I wonder, particularly here in India? After all, did not India pioneer some of the earliest sophistication in technology (including weaponry, if the extant literary evidence is not to be thrown aside)? The basic principles of science were first formulated here. Does not the *Gita* in Chapter VII emphasize the need for the combination of Gnana with Vignana?

Rather would I look at the machine, industrialization and progress in the way Shelley addressed the West Wind r

“ Destroyer and preserver, hear, Oh, hear ! ”

One notes a double impulse of worship and fear in the way science has been progressing, particularly since the advent of the atomic age. Re-reading Gandhiji’s animadversions against science and technology, I was reminded of the contrasting symbols which Henry Adams used, namely, “The Virgin and the dynamo To the medieval mind the virgin had a personal immediacy, as the modem is attracted to- the dynamo, streptomycin or the electronic brain or whatever the current miracle symbol may be.

Every society has its routines and rituals, the primitive groups being more tyrannically bound by customs, traditions, and taboos, than the industrial society. While the former is tied to the rituals of tradition and group life, the latter too is bound by the rituals of the machine, its products, their distribution and consumption. While it is admitted that the modern industrial society with its mass production has put a premium on uniformity, every individual with a personality pattern and style of his own need not succumb to the standardization of his life. But he uses it only as a convenience as it gives him a larger margin of leisure and greater scope for creative learning. But man is a free soul— free to use this greater leisure and ampler scope for betterment of the world or to abuse it. Comes to mind Caliban’s reply to Prospero:

You taught me to speak
And I learnt to curse”

A similar story is told of Christ coming down to an urban: city where he sees a drunkard lying near the gutter and crying. When Jesus asks him why he is wasting his precious life he answers:

“I was dead, but you raised me from the dead,
What else have I to do but drink? ”

Proceeding further, he sees a man stealing a purse from another, and when he asks him why he is doing a wrong thing, the robber answers:

“I was blind and you restored my sight”,

When machines jam and go wrong, or when we are just helpless on the road with a clutch failure of our car, we hate them utterly, blame the manufacturer and look round for the mechanic to curse. Likewise do the modern Calibans seeing men as machines, curse the God, the manufacturer, for all their ills and suffering. Why blame machinery for present day ills, for the wise see it, far from being an unjustifiable violation or an outrage, rather as a breakdown of the moral law, thus exemplifying and enhancing the human condition.

Frank Lloyd Wright clearly enunciates the situation thus:

“That we may be enamored by the negation brought by the machine may be inevitable for a time. But, I like to imagine this novel negation to be only a platform under foot to enable a greater splendor of life to be ours than any known to Greek or Roman, Goth or Moor.....We should know a life beside which the Life they know would seem not only limited in scale and narrow in range but pale in richness of the color of imagination and integrity of spirit

Industrial technology does not impose any uniformity on society, as there is always the free will of man. Technology is only the shell of life, but a shell that need not hamper nor constrict the modes of our life and thought. The dangers of machinery and industrial advancement of which the Mahatma was most vehement, do not flow from the gadget that scientists have fashioned to lighten human burdens, nor from the material abundance-the cornucopia of science and industry-which, for that matter only makes for a richer cultural life.

But, we must not forget that everyone is a product of his age, and if we could sing the praises of the machine it is because we read, see, hear and think through the filter of our own mental make-up. Likewise were the censures made against machinery at the initial stages of the Industrial Revolution.

Looking at such a contrasting picture, one is reminded of the opening pages of the famous novel of the times: You remember, it is “The Tale of Two Cities”:

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times;
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness;
it was the season of Light, it was the season of darkness;
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity;
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair;
we had everything before us, we had nothing before us....”

The Industrial Revolution was brought about by that great and growing middle class of nineteenth century England whose dominant position was the wonder of Europe. This was the class which had made that island “the workshop of Europe” and it was this England which was arraigned by Napoleon as “a nation of shop-keepers this was an achievement which naturally did not promote a spiritual ideal towards good, and which provoked several writers of the period to denounce its benighted condition and the gross materialism of its interests. Matthew Arnold castigated this class as being “drugged with business ” and to which he gave the name of Philistines, the enemies of the chosen people, the elite, who not only fostered but lived in “ sweetness and light.”

It is natural; therefore, that Gandhiji too could not refrain from condemning violently machinery and industrial culture. He was fighting against the evils manifest in Manchester and other industrial areas in those days to which he was a close witness during his stay in England. This is evident from the following passage in *Hind Swaraj*:

“Where there is machinery there are large cities and where there are large cities, there are tram cars and railways; and there only does one see electric light. English villages do not boast any of these things. Honest physicians will tell you that, where means of artificial locomotion have increased, the health of the people has suffered. I cannot recall a single good point in connection with machinery. Books can be written to demonstrate its evils.” (p. 99).

PROMOTHEUS Vs. FAUSTUS

But why should decay and destruction be associated with, industrial society? Is it because it is inferred, under the Lysenko theory, that in a society of machines and industrialism, individuals too would become robots? Things are not so simple, for the relation between society and individual is governed by various factors. Some of them may be indicated:

(a) A society of small scale cottage industries involving no concentration of power may not be vulnerable to any breakdown, nor subject to any drastic government control, as the present industrial sector of the Five Year Plans is. The latter, being a highly sophisticated industrial society, may carry with it an imperative toward a controlled order which, in turn — either- in peace or war — may encourage totalitarianism thus fettering the free spirit of man ; or

(b) A society with no recognized elite group as the Samurai cult in Japan or the Brahmin seers in India, to serve as the arbiter of moral thought and style — which is one definite form of conformism — is an amorphous, drifting group. But the weak individual may seek to hide his insecurity by attuning himself to the " tyranny of opinion" (in Tamil we say : " What will four persons say ? "). Such a man is ruled more by imitation and prestige than by his. Own sense of worth.

Such trends, it has to be noted, are the very warp and woof of any social living. It is noteworthy that India, in spite of the machines and the large industrial base it has attained in the last two decades, has proved on balance less conformist than some other nations where the new technology has played a lesser role, say Italy, Spain, Portugal or Indonesia, which are under totalitarian regimes, and hence more conformist. When we turn to Russia or China, the machine is adored and sonnets written on the tractor and the locomotive. It is obvious, therefore, that the totalitarian spirit can prevail in any culture, irrespective of the nature of the shell of technology. No amount of reiteration would be too much to emphasize the fact that there is no unvarying relation between industrial development and decadent culture.

It may be argued; particularly by the Gandhian group that industrial advancement is the result of a Faustian covenant. Where by man has sold his soul to the machine and transformed his ways of life and thought in the image of the machine (one is here reminded of Chaplin's "Modern Times") in turn for the range of power and profit the machine would bring within his reach. This may be a fine allegory pleasing to the Mahatma's soul. But, truer than the Faustian bargain comes to my mind the image of Prometheus:

" A god.... in fetters, anguish-fraught
The foe of Zeus, in hatred held by all. . . .
stealing fire from the gods in order to light a torch which leads on to the path of progress for man.

CHURNING OF THE OCEAN

Under the blazing torch of Prometheus, one realizes that the modern man is living not merely in the unidimensional world of natural or biological urges, which can neither be ignored nor suppressed, but in two other universes as well (1) there is a social universe with its life goals and institutional obligations and, more importantly, (2) a moral universe with values that give life its meaning in terms of the spiritual. In the words of Madame Blavatsky:

"This drama of the struggle of Prometheus with the Olympic tyrant and despot, sensual Zeus, one sees enacted daily within our actual mankind: the lower

passions chain the higher aspirations to the rock of matter, to generate in many a case the vulture of sorrow, pain and repentance.”

Partial critics of present day industrial society are vehement about corruption and sensuality but forget to see beneath : the elements of strength in the moral struggle, - or shall we say revolution — going on. There is this constant quest for new standards which itself is a sign of cultural stamina. On the surface of this ferment not much is evident .as in its initial stages it seems to be disinterested; but out of this ceaseless groping — like the churning of the ocean by gods and demons in the beginning — there emerges viewer codes which distil the ambivalent sense of social discipline and individual striving for emotional expression. There is no hypocrisy, or Victorian prudery in this struggle .but blunt outspokenness and a measure of honesty, an outstanding feature of the times. For what are ultimately the values of life goals for which this great battle is being waged, if not for freedom, democratic equality, honesty, loyalty, mobility, productivity, belief in individual life and worth? Summed up in one phrase, it amounts to a cultural super- ego.

It may be pointed out by carping critics that there is -nothing new in this ferment; for in earlier centuries too, the life goals were centered round the virtue *of* work, pride of craftsmanship, thrift, achievement and fulfillment of tasks .assigned. Yes, but in between the Garden of Eden was spoilt by the five-headed dragon (here I may be pardoned for mixing up of allegories) of progress, prestige, money, power and security (in short, what is usually called “the bitch goddess success”). But man’s soul is ever crying for the stars, and once again making an attempt he is putting •out his hands far — (as Browning put it):

“Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp.
Or, what’s a heaven for? ”

It is a pleasing sight to look at most of the youth in the digger towns and cities of India walking with heads unbowed, healthy, free from malnutrition and nagging pains. They' seem to be not from the upper classes but from the ordinary lower middle classes.

Is it not a gratifying feature that the first fruits of a. developing industrial nation picked up from the ordinary sections of society show promising signs of catching up with* their counterparts in the most advanced countries of the globe ? No less promising are the pointers that the creative imagination in the arts and crafts has been unfettered. Have you ever seen the young artists at work, either in, Cholamandal in Madras or in Lalit Kala in Delhi, experimenting and innovating towards new horizons of thought and expression ? Whether their work be rather like the Western, models or our traditional Indian forms, there is no gainsaying the fact that they are originally inspired and without any servility. In literature too, especially in our various regional languages, a new type of creative work is coming up-proving their virtuosity both in theme and style.

On the industrial front, the stagnant cesspool of the- earlier mode of production keeping the people enslaved to the totem gods of the cow and the monkey has given way to the technological thrust of the West drawing the working class into the centralized mode of production. This gives them a fair chance of an equal share in management thus making life happy for each and all.

BREAKING THE GENETIC CODE

Science has made giant strides both in its theory and its application. The general level of knowledge of people has vastly increased. There is an enormous uplift in the social consciousness of backward peoples everywhere. It is the -dawn of liberation for almost every

nation which has hitherto been under the control of colonialism.

Technological development during the last century has been particularly rich in scientific probings into the mystery of energy, motion, space, into the mystery of the universe itself and investigations into the nature of quasars, of radiations from outside the galaxy itself. And what is more, not content with the mystery of the stars above, but like Pascal wondering about the mystery of the mind of man below, science has investigated into the nature of chromosomes and begun to translate the genetic code. These enquiries are lively and sustained, with moments of awakening like lightning flashes opening up newer vistas for further Investigations. The modern mind has pierced with a single beam of light — like a laser beam, through all the levels of nature - extending from the superficial level which can be reached by the senses and further beyond to the deepest and most hidden levels of man and die universe.

Such a culture founded on science has brought forth this “whole ribbed frame of our technology and immense power to benefit or destroy humanity. Surely, science being the heir -of centuries of intellectual development needed something better than a desert to grow in. It needed Universities, intellectual exchange on an international basis and the leisure for speculation and contemplation. India, having the whole body of Western science to use as an unlimited drawing account, has not lagged behind in carrying the share of the burden of scientific research and thinking. It is a rich and diversified galaxy starting with Ramanujam, Ray, Bose and Raman coming on to the atomic era with names like Bhabha, Sethna, Ramanna and the like. And what shall we say of our scientists collaborating in Western tories like Chandrasekhar, Koronha and a host more ? The theoretical discoveries were the result of world-wide knowledge and our contribution to world science has been achieved through the diversion and distribution of the research, the silent working in the various national research laboratories, the fitting of the findings into a pattern, the construction of plants, machinery and machine tools, the combination of economic power with talent and resources, all contributing to the earnest, experimental empiric cast of mind of the scientist.

Out of such talent and effort has poured out the vast cornucopia of the applications of science and the whole new Industries ; aviation, electric power, radio, movies, T.V. drugs, light metals, electronics, isotopes, radar, X-rays, radiation therapy, laser, etc. etc. In rocketry we have reached such vast heights of technical development that we could send men to the moon where they could carry out experiments and land back on the earth as if they had been on a vacation trip to the hills ! The bulk of the NASA-based space research technology comes from processes, perhaps even unimagined only a few decades back.

CLASSICAL PHYSICS UNDERCUT

Let us now look at these scientists at closer range. They must be living within universes that must be renewed quite often in constantly shortening cycles ; for they- have to take account of constant obsolescence. The cultural revolution (sorry for the phrase, as it has nothing to do with the Chinese counterpart) out of which the new industries and technology have come is just h*If a century old. This would not have come into being but for the earlier work in quantum mechanics,

cosmic rays, the neutron and proton, and the overturning of the classical concepts of mass and measurement under the aegis of Einsteinian physics ; for this led on to an era. of scientific changes that present a challenge to the present: civilization.

Basic to such an industrial culture, ever growing and¹ bursting in its seams, are two conditions : (a) the mutatory births of scientific genius ; and more important (b) the pervasiveness of scientific outlook. The latter can only prevail' in a new culture where alone the insights demanded by the scientist can flower. Can you visualize the young Einstein, pondering over the question of the speed of light and the erratic movement of Mercury (what we call in astrology 'Vakra Budha ') reaching his solution by empiricism alone ? He could reach it only by undercutting the assumptions of classical physics, seeing the universe as a series, of observation by a scientist who is himself part of that frame.

BALANCE SHEET

True to my profession, let me draw the balance- sheet of the fruits of this culture in an industrial society, born of science and technology. The record on the assets side is phenomenal ; a continuing rise in the graph of man-hour productivity ; a high rate of capital formation the profits are rising steadily year by year belying Marx's predictions, viz., employment levels at a high pitch and standards of living of workers progressing continuously belying Gandhiji's fears ; a wide variety of consumer goods- available to the poorest man ; a strong tendency to consume., reflecting the rise in living standards among middle and low income groups ; growth in real wages ; a production, record rising annually ; a capacity to take an ever-increasing tax-structure ; a continuing sense of economic dynamism, etc. etc.

Yes, all this progress, it is admitted, is on the economic side ; but our subject is about culture. And the question may be asked ; what is the degree of creativity which this prosperous society has helped to produce ? The answer is simple ; for in no other historical times have so much of artistic talent in all fields, literature, painting, architecture, music, dance, etc. been given so much opportunities for expression.

Here comes a major issue on the liabilities side : that the industrial society is used to the quantification of value functions in terms of value indices ; and the creative functions of artists which are not vendible may not be brought into full manifestation. But within the financial framework as much scope as possible is being given for use values, and life values which, of course, the critics of pecuniary calculus may not agree. In spite of the clarity and apparent objectivity of quantitatively measured goals, it has to be borne in mind that they are all subordinate to intangible, subjective cultural goals. Bouldering in " The Ethics of Rational Decision " has emphasized this value issue very clearly and illustrates it by pointing out that the habit of profit and loss account of businessmen and industrialists may and usually does lead to the neglect of such valuable assets as loyalty, morale, and complexity of personal relations.

This brings us to the question of the urgent need for the widening of our visions and objectives — or to put it from the Board of Directors' point of view — " agenda We should not suffer from " Agrophobia " — fear of open spaces ; here it is a matter of open spaces in the mind. Failing to get ready to meet the situation created by industrial culture, if one seeks retreat in cosy places or consolations of philosophy, it will turn out only to be a reversion back to tribalism, nationalism, religious and political sectarianism and dogmatism. A clean life, an open mind and a pure heart are the *sine qua non* requisites demanded of the culture ; as it opens out new horizons of the power of ethical ideas. This in turn may be substantially extended to the development of improved methods of information processing, such as computer programming both by the individual and by the organizations.

Does not this situation imply that we can no mote afford to continue with the Ptolemaic perspective with which people see the world revolving around themselves ? Being neither geocentric nor anthropocentric, the society today urgently requires a Copernican revolution

of thought through which we may be taught to regard our feelings, thoughts and decisions as involving the total social system, ignoring that part of it which revolves around our own petty selves.

NEWER VISTAS

Evidently this new perspective is foreshadowed by man's escaping from the confines of the earth and planting his feet on the moon; and in the coming decades as he explores the solar system, it is confidently hoped, he will at the same time discover newer vistas in the human mind ; outlines of which are to be found in our age-old Patanjali and Shankara.

To sum up, no one can put the clock back. Industry and an Industrial Society are the facts of contemporary life. They are certain to continue for as long as one can foresee. It is a mistake to suppose that the several drawbacks which are pointed as arising from an industrial culture are integral to it. Most of them have merely happened alongside of it. For want of intelligent and timely planning, they are adventitious and can be eliminated without injuring the central fabric of that culture. Instances of overcrowding, malnutrition, environmental pollution are not part of industrial development. The very fact that measures are now being taken to tackle them shows that an industrial culture need not be tied down to such injurious factors. What is required, therefore, is to free the culture from the defects and not to mistake the defects themselves for the culture.

In this context one may cite the example of the moral protests being voiced against nuclear research. The discovery of nuclear power is neither moral nor immoral. It is not necessary that it should be put to only one use. It is pertinent to mention that when gunpowder was invented, similar protests were made. On the other hand, one is entitled to look to a future, when the exhaustion of the present forms of sources of energy occurs, the nuclear power will keep the world going.

Finally a caution has to be administered against the pseudo-poetic and pseudo-philosophic criticisms leveled against industrial advancement as such on the ground that it is soul-less, monotonous and makes of men a mere machine ; it is a wrong view. All work is monotonous. It is sufficient to cite the case of professional cricketers who is paid for every run he makes and one who plays it as a game, to illustrate this point. But a disciplined industrial society affords an amount of leisure outside of work which was never available in an earlier culture, and to make life rich and variegated, it is the use to which that available leisure is put that matters. Monotony of life is more horrible than monotony of work.