

# **THE HUMAN SITUATION**

**Vidyalankara Professor S. K. Ramachandra Rao**

**Transaction No. 64**

**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF WORLD CULTURE  
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## TRANSACTIONS

Many valuable lectures are given, papers read and discussed, and oral reviews of outstanding books presented, at the Indian Institute of World Culture. The wider dissemination of at least a few of these addresses and papers is obviously in the interest of the better inter-cultural understanding so important for world peace and brotherhood.

### TRANSACTION No. 64

Vidyalankara Professor S. K. Ramachandra Rao, a prominent versatile scholar, was requested to deliver the 1983 Shri B. P. Wadia Memorial Address in October. He decided to speak on THE HUMAN SITUATION. "It is a topic," Professor Ramachandra Rao said, "in which he (B. P. Wadia) was interested in, and this is the theme in which all of us are bound to be interested because it concerns our future and our survival, as individuals and as a species."

Paying tribute to Shri B. P. Wadia, the distinguished speaker said, "He answered the description of human dignity as few people can do. His thoughts were noble, his heart was compassionate and his disposition sincere and generous. He fully practiced what he preached, and there was no dichotomy in his heart and in his mind. He was concerned with the discontents of our civilization and endeavoured all his life to correct our conception of culture."

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# THE HUMAN SITUATION

*Vidyalankara Professor S. K. RAMACHANDRA RAO*

When some fifty thousand years ago, an enterprising anthropoid ape began walking about the earth in an almost erect posture and wielding a cudgel in hand, the human situation began. Not that the human situation appeared all of a sudden and complete in all details, like the Greek Goddess Pallas Athene. The foundations of the human situation can be found at the anthropoid and primate levels, and even at the mammalian level. But, the new species embarked on an independent career in a unique manner. The new species has been called 'Homo sapiens' the expression suggesting that the new species was distinguished by its capacity to think. After a century of psychological work, we still do not know precisely what thinking is. But, several aspects thereof have been identified. The ability, for instance, to conjure up images and ideas, the power to use symbols, the capacity to reason from cause to effect and from effect to cause, the ability to find adequate words to crystallize and communicate the internal processes, sense of values, collective thinking and creation of culture, art, interest in the past and concern for the future.

It is not improbable that the rudiments of thinking could be discovered at pre-human levels, but man developed this faculty, integrated the aspects and refined them as no animal had ever done before. There was considerable evolutionary facilitation for this new equipment; the perfectly erect posture, liberating the fore-limbs for prehension and manipulation, and raising the head several feet above the ground level, thus affording a wider vision, refined optical apparatus affording a more minute, complex and accurate observation of the environment, and more important than all, the development of the neocortex.

Not many of us know that we have two brains inside our head; one which is inner, more primitive and more fundamental and the other outer, more recent and least often used. The inner brain consists of two structurally distinct but functionally inter-related parts. The inner-most part is called the brain-stem, which incidentally we share even with the reptiles. This part is responsible for the biological drives and instinctive behavior. The other part which surrounds the brain-stem is known as the 'limbic system', (*limbus* meaning the border) which we share with all mammals, and which is responsible for the expression and experience of our emotional life. The two parts constitute a unity, and form the bulk of human behaviour even at the sophisticated level. The outer brain, called the new bark or neocortex, appeared at the early mammalian stage, but became significant only at the human level, having stabilized itself about 50,000 years ago. This is the outermost layer responsible for language and thought, both of which distinguish the species from all others. Paul Maclean speaks of them as three structurally different parts of the human brain, each with its own intelligence and subjectivity.

It is the outer brain that has brought about the peculiarly human situation: cultural development being more significant than the biological. Man is characterized not only by his ability to think elaborately and continuously, but to express and communicate his thoughts to himself and to others. Culture as a human affair is derived from these twin abilities, and brings about a continuing human situation independent of individual participants. Culture consists essentially of using tools and making tools for the survival of individuals. But the Survival of individuals is made contingent upon the survival of groups.

There is an inherent paradox in this. Individual survival is the business of the inner brain, while group dynamics (societal roles, collective cohesion, law, administration, professional identifications and so on) is the matter managed by the outer brain. The

gregarious impulse is no doubt a pre-human occurrence, but at the earlier levels the urge is individual survival rather than the survival of the group. Among human beings, however, groups have come to acquire existences of their own and behave like organisms in their own right. But, the group being the function of the most recent and the most exterior brain is the first to suffer in tinges of stress. It is not surprising that large masses of mankind even today are primarily interested in individual survival, and employ group dynamics only towards this end.

We are told that the neocortex or the outer brain is not as yet so well-integrated with the inner brain as the two parts of the inner-brain themselves have been, the inner brain is a more or less closed and stable self-organizing system, whereas the enter brain is constantly open to the changing demands of the environment, and therefore is in a state flux. And, being self-organized and embedded deep within the organism, the inner brain is also the more stable. There appears to be a conflict between the two brains manifesting itself in numerous stresses is individual life as well as collective activity. The emphasis that Karl Marx laid on class struggle in historical revolution, that Charles Darwin laid on struggle in biological evolution, and that Sigmund Freud laid on the struggle in individual growth must all be viewed in this general framework.

## -II-

The human situation involves a conflict between the animal background, represented by the inner brain and dominated by instinct and emotion on the one hand, and the projected human mature characterized by reason and reflection, which are products of the outer brain.

Conflict, however, was not intended by the evolutionary emergence of the Neocortex. Nature is not known to pose problems for herself. Even as the limbic system was meant to augment the brain-stem, the neocortex must have been designed to augment the inner brain. But the freedom provided by the neocortex was misunderstood and misused by man. And this been a continuing feature of the human situation.

Western historical perspective would visualize three distinct phases of transformation in the human situation: (1) invention of agriculture at the beginning of the Neolithic period; (2) rise of Christianity at the fall of the Roman Empire around the beginning of this century; and (3) transition in the middle ages to the present so-called scientific age around the 16-17th centuries. The result of this exercise of reason and reflection, agriculture was no doubt in the nature of an exploitation of nature, but, initially at least it did not disturb the eco-system, in which man, other animals, plants, soil and air co-existed. Agriculture brought in its train many changes in the human situation, the principal ones being: scattered but well-defined human settlements, temporary or permanent ownership of land, domestication of animals, irrigation, and clearance and exploitation of forests. All these disturbed to an extent the ecosystem in which the human species was contained.

It must not be supposed that even agriculture was invented all of a sudden. Changes have been continuous, and the invention of agriculture was the aftermath of numerous efforts, changes, and approximations. It marked a stage which was very different from the previous hunting and food-gathering stages, inasmuch as the desire and need to manipulate the environment presented themselves strongly to man. Industry was but a step further; but it set about exploiting not only the environment but also fellow human beings. Industry and monetary economy go hand in hand, even as money and greed do. Industry is essentially a commercial proposition meant to secure individual profit by collective effort and it ignores what happens to the environment or to human beings. Technology is truly the devil's

advocate; it is a tool in the hands of ambitious industrialists who call themselves enterprising and who amass wealth at all costs. Even if we disregard the impact on human nature, the release of dangerous pollutants into the environment and a grave disturbance of the biosphere are major consequences of technology; they have gone on ever since industry took hold of man's imagination and began to direct his thoughts and activities.

There has also been a steady increase in human populations, with its necessary involvements such as exploitation of natural resources like metals and minerals, fuel, and building materials. The rapid rise in the world's population is associated with man's increasing failure to control power and technology. The result is a grave and unprecedented disturbance of the eco-system.

The middle ages saw the growth of industries, the growth of population, and increasing urbanization. There began a sharp cleavage between the educated and the ignorant, between the rich and the poor, between the ethos of the town and the spirit of the countryside, and between agriculture and industry. The lure of wealth in terms of *money* was strong and took hold of people increasingly. The love of power was a concurrent trend: it was structured as economic power, political power, social power and religious power. All this was conspicuous in the framework of urban culture.

The historical perspective detailed above is no doubt mainly western; it may not apply to the Asian countries in the exact chronological sequence. But the trends are almost the same albeit somewhat delayed. For instance, in Japan during 1920, only 18% of the population was urban; by 1940, the figure had risen to 40% and now, as much as 80% of the Japanese population live in urban surroundings! The world is fast moving towards maximum urbanization in all countries;

Cities are not a new phenomenon; human beings have built cities for about 4,000 years now. But most of the people until recently had little to do with cities; and the cities, until recently, were small in size and the population within the city was never overmuch or unmanageable. From the 19th century onwards, however; cities have grown in number as well as in size. It is estimated that more than 40% of the world's people live in urban areas now. Of the many evils of urbanization are crowding and congestion; mass migration from the countryside; spread of slums; pollution of air, water and land; noise, numerous physical and mental illnesses peculiar to the urban environment These have been noticed in all countries without exception. The environmental quality of the city is in sharp contrast to the material well-being that one looks for in the city.

The human situation in the countryside is undoubtedly more natural, *more* productive, and more satisfying than in the city. The environment presented by a city is not only distorted and artificial, but involves considerable stress on the economic, social, domestic, cultural and religious planes.

### -III-

Industry became a special feature of the middle ages; but it became a big force only in the 19th century. This was due in a large measure to the progress in science. The present period which is known as the scientific age began around the 16th and 17th centuries, when the so-called scientific outlook began to take shape. The landmarks of this age are the Copernican notion that the earth inhabited by man was subordinate to the Sun, Galileo's condition of the world as a machine, the mathematical model initially provided by Newton, the mechanistic model formulated by Descartes, and scientific method emphasized by Francis Bacon. This age comprehends the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries fully; and the

outlook fostered for three centuries Has survived in the 20th century also, although science is now being increasingly distrusted or accepted only with reservations. The outlook of medieval science surviving even today envisaged a world in which there was neither room nor role for God, human soul or ethics. There is thus a sharp conflict between science and spirituality. The antagonism between reason and religion has found expression in numerous situations despite all efforts to reconcile the two.

Peculiarly, science is associated with urbanization, while religion thrives in the countryside. Religion has been with man ever since his career began. The importance of religion to man is that it provides belief-systems concerning the goals of life, reasons for living and relation to cosmos as a whole. The world view fostered by religion is largely in consonance with the ecosystem. It is principally derived from the inner brain, having to do very much with basic drives and emotions. Religion lost much of its relevance to human survival when it became institutionalized. The harm wrought by religious institutions to man's peace and progress is well-known. But, this does not obviate man's dependence on religion to provide him with belief-systems without which his life would neither be unified nor become meaningful.

The importance of belief-systems for the health of individuals can hardly be overemphasized. They make the person resilient and immune to stresses from outside as well as inside. It is well-known that psychiatric disorders are linked with the disintegration of and that most psychosomatic diseases are corrected by reinforcing or reinstating appropriate belief-systems. Carl Simonton, the famous radiation oncologist has shown by his numerous studies that the belief-systems of cancer patients play an effective role in therapeutic success. The value of religion lies only in providing the individual with a wholesome and integrative belief-system that handles satisfactorily the individual's biological drives, organismic needs and emotions both positive and negative.

It is usual for the belief-systems to be transmitted through generations within a cultural milieu, largely by processes which cannot be described as rational. They cannot as such be empirically observed, nor adequately analyzed, much less verifiably quantified. But no one can deny that they are facts and that they work. They pertain not so much to the personal level of consciousness as to the collective level of the unconscious (to employ the familiar Jungian model). Religion that seeks to establish itself on reason cannot possibly provide the belief-system that is acceptable to the inner brain. Organized religion, being principally a matter of the neocortex, focuses attention on social, economic and even political considerations rather than on strictly spiritual experiences of individuals themselves.

Organized religion is thus a contradiction in terms, and it has only created problems. Religion is meant to organize the inside of the individual; individuals cannot possibly organize a religion from outside. The rise of Christianity as an organized religion after the fall of the Roman Empire is an illustration to point. The organization of Buddhism as a state religion in some of the South-East Asian countries affords another illustration. Religious organizations in India are traceable only after contact with Christianity; and we know very well how all these religious institutions and spiritual movements have failed to evoke a sense of religion among the people. The truth is that religion does not rest on reason; it is largely an unconscious-process. Religion in India was always left unorganized, and has been weak and nebulous as a collective force.

The present predicament is the alienation of increasing numbers of people from belief-systems. Religion, in trying to make itself rational has undervalued the relevance of belief-systems, and has thereby lost its appeal. It is natural also that organized religion came into

sharp conflict with science from the 15th century onwards. Science has been a winner in the struggle, and organized religion in its fight for survival has sought to make itself 'scientific' Scientific religion however, is a strange amalgam which serves neither the purpose of religion nor that of science.

It is idle to expect science to provide now or at any time substitute belief-systems, based entirely on verified facts and reason. For one thing, the path carved out by science is not a steady and continuous one. It is strewn with occasional discoveries, periodical interpretations and their frequent revisions. And, being dependent upon facts of observation, the subject-matter of science is so varied that despite the commonality of the scientific method, science is being increasingly fragmented into a multiplicity of disciplines in the name of specialization. Science which is thus itself not united cannot be expected to provide man with a working framework which will unify his thoughts or behavior, and relate him to the world around him.

For another, the general orientation of science is antagonistic to certain notions which are most relevant to man. Being empirical, it tends to reject *a priori* assumptions concerning the problems of life. It seeks to assume an impersonal attitude of neutrality. In other words, science being wedded to facts and rational explanations thereof cannot legitimately be interested in human issues. Relying wholly on reason, it cannot accommodate urges and emotions which are more properly regarded as concerns of religion. The so-called biosocial sciences and health sciences are of recent origin, and do not completely answer to the descriptions of scientific disciplines. Their 'facts' are mostly assumptions open to diverse and often conflicting interpretations. In short, science is a creature of the neocortex, and thus keeps out of its bounds, aspirations, inhibitions, emotions, prejudices, needs, individual differences, personal satisfactions and such other intensely human concerns; and a belief-system that ignores them cannot obviously support man and his life.

Unlike religion which suffers by being organized, science profits by being organized. It is designed to be collective activity, and its needs are by no means individual or personal. Science and industry were not very closely linked in the early stages of the development of science, but since the beginning of this century, technology has been leaning heavily on science. We have seen that industry itself began as the organized mode of exploitation; and now conjoined with the impersonal science; technology is naturally indifferent to human welfare. The most glaring instance is technology in all developed countries serving the needs of warfare and destruction. Science is no longer uncommitted and non-utilitarian in orientation. It has teamed up with technology to produce the most menacing weapons, weapons that can wipe out completely large sections of mankind in the matter of minutes and weapons that can render larger sections disabled and maimed. It has also devised most efficient tools exploitation. Consider, for instance, the threat of unemployment that stares in the face of large multitudes of working people owing to computer science and technology.

The evil association of science and technology is further illustrated by the staggering extent of air and water pollution, pollution to such an extent that the health of mankind all over the world is seriously threatened. The two together have also been thoughtlessly and steadily depleting the energy resources of planet. The biosphere (the soil, air and water supporting life of all forms) is already disturbed, and the ecosystem of mankind fast is getting distorted.

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Thanks to organized religion, industrialization, urbanization, indiscriminate encouragement of science and technology, the human situation today presents a rather sordid

picture. Thoughtful persons all over the world are seriously concerned about the survival of human species. The odds are heavily against it. Sorokin/, Mumford/, Capra/, and others who have thought and written about this situation extensively, point out that the predicament today is unprecedented in human history. They have dwelt on several aspects of this predicament, such as the population explosion with its attendant evils of poverty, unemployment and undernourishment, high inflation, energy depletion, air pollution nuclear weapons and threat of global warfare, unhealthy and inhuman technology, and social disintegration.

Changes today are faster and more extensive than ever before. Far from affecting isolated pockets of human beings as they used to, they now involve the entire globe. Crisis now tends to be more comprehensive than at any time before, for several major transitions have coincided, economic, political, ideological, social, religious and cultural. Capra suggests that we are about to reach, if in fact we have not already reached, a 'turning point'. But, what is around the corner does not seem at the moment pleasant. The futurologists are not agreed about the precise shape of things to come; but they are agreed that it will be in the nature of a shock.

Efforts are being made since over a decade to make modern man understand the dynamics and dimensions of the present predicament. The limitations of science, evils of technology, neglect of intuitive wisdom in preference to rational thinking, indifference to integrative spiritual experiences, over-emphasis on scientific method and linear thinking, encouragement of racial and political discrimination, eagerness in acquiring and exhibiting military might by nations big and small, and other such details have been brought frequently to the attention of modern man by the writings of authorities like Arnold Toynbee, Rene Dubos, Ivan Illich, Karl Polyani, John Galbraith, Theodore Roszak, Paul Weiss, and Fritzjof Capra.

One may question the purpose served by individual thinkers focusing their attention on this problem or by the lay-folk understanding the present predicament. Organized religions, science and technology have taken such deep roots that it will be difficult to dislodge or correct them. But, a counter-culture has already taken shape and is making headway. The concern with ecology is being voiced more earnestly and effectively than ever. There is a positive shift in the values making people understand that small is beautiful. The movement towards small scale and decentralized and labour-intensive technology is gaining ground. There are already holistic health movements underlining the discontents of the present-day Cartesian bio-medical model. There are also concurrently spiritual movements emphasizing the evils of organized religion. Capra calls this the 'rising culture which has not only become aware of the troublesome consequences of undifferentiated growth of population, industrialization, urbanization and centralized political power, but pleads vigorously for the return to a more human scale'. He quotes with approval the statement of Schumacher: "Wisdom demands a new orientation of science and technology towards the organic, the gentle, the non-violent, the elegant and beautiful".

A feature of the rising culture is the appreciation of the Eastern approach to the problems of life, especially the Chinese and Indian. I do not know what it is like in China, but in India it is unfortunate and ironical that this approach is today more textual than actual. The global impact of Western civilization has not spared India, and whatever the traditional approach, the evils of undifferentiated growth are spreading even here. The changes that are afoot in this country appear to herald the predicament that has already enveloped the Western world. The urgent need of the day seems to be to regain the traditional Indian

approach to what is now being known as 'deep ecology'.

The planet which human beings inhabit constitutes a balanced, well-poised eco-system which supports all forms of life by providing appropriate environments. Human beings, endowed as they are with superior powers of perception and action, should deem it their responsibility to protect the environment and preserve the balance of the ecosystem. Science has brought about values which tend to make absolute distinctions between life and inert matter, between lowly forms of life and higher evolutes, between human beings and animals inferior to them, between primitives and the sophisticated folk. It has also conjured up the vision of violent confrontation between the individual organism and the environment, and has taught the doctrine of survival only by exploiting the environment

The traditional Indian outlook, however, has been to regard all things (both living and non living) as constituting a unity; it does not encourage the idea of confrontation between the individual and the environment, but teaches that the most desirable style of life is one of peaceful but creative coexistence. Life is not a struggle, but a journey. Each of us must pass through the eco-system as gently as possible, as non-Violently as possible, and as elegantly as possible. The highest evolved person, according to the Gita, is one who neither disturbs surrounding nor is disturbed by it. While the value of collective action has been recognized right from the Vedic times, the ideal that has been held out is isolate, passive and quiet existence. Indian - thought has never looked upon the environment (physical or human) as a challenge, much less as an. opponent to be vanquished and subjugated. The real enemies, according to this thought, are actually within the individual: greed, hatred, envy and so on. A hero is one who conquers them, and the conqueror is characterized by being at peace with himself and with the surrounding.

It is a fact that science and technology did not develop in India, although beginnings were made. This is partly because idle curiosity had no hold over the Indian mind, and partly because the Indian temperament did not believe in exploiting the environment for human profit .The respect shown to plants, trees, forests, earth, water and air was profound. Even when food had to be drawn from plants, fuel extracted from trees and medicines made out of herbs, the watchword was 'Take only what is enough and no more'. A beautiful prayer to mother earth, that the pious folk until recent times used to recite as soon as they got up from bed, says: "It is by necessity that I have to tread on you, forgive me for this violence!" .The earth in their eyes was as much of living being as a fellow human being. Agriculture, the mainstay of the nation, did not develop disturbing technology. The Indian mind, without the Western orientation, could not think of tractors, pesticides, synthetic manures and such other violent devices to step up production.

Indian medicine, to take another example, thought not in terms of fighting the disease, but in terms of restoring the balance in the individual when it waft lost It did not imagine that the world of man was filled with viruses, bacteria, microbes, antibodies, Melons and other belligerent agents that were always intent on destroying man or at least injuring his health. Aggressive and violent forms of therapy were carefully avoided when more natural and gentle forms were available. This is the real reason why surgery, which prepared an excellent groundwork, did not develop in India. The Indian outlook emphasized that the body had its own innate healing mechanism and that the business of the physician was to remove the obstacles in the working of this natural mechanism as gently as possible.

The Indian attitude towards death is likewise in consonance with deep ecology. Death is not a matter of destruction, but of transition from one state to another. It holds no terror. Indeed it should be looked upon as a welcome passage, and not fought against.

Only it should not be violent or agonizing. It is not only in the religious and philosophical framework that this ideology is current. There are prescriptions in Indian medical texts to make the end when it is inevitable peaceful, and there are also passages which speak of the premonitions of death so that the patient as well as the physician are prepared adequately for the event. The distinction that the medical system in India invariably makes between the diseases that are curable (*sadhya*) and those that are incurable (*asadhya*) may appear odd to the modern mind, but the unsophisticated Indian patient was supposed to take it in his stride and prepare himself.

Understanding of, and commitment to, deep ecology on the part of the thinking section of the world's population appears to be the only answer to the crying need of the day to save man on the planet and to save the planet for man. The way mankind has been moving for the past three or four hundred years has made the survival of mankind uncertain and put the planet in peril.

It is not my intention to sound desperate or even pessimistic. While the picture presented by discerning thinkers is no doubt riddled with anxiety, I feel strongly that human resourcefulness will come to our succour at the right moment. But I am not naive enough to imagine complacently that this resourcefulness will be sent by God or will appear spontaneously. Such of those specimens of the human species as are invested with power and endowed with intelligence must needs work towards this end both individually and collectively. Man's talents must be focused on forging a better integration of the outer brain with the inner. By so doing he would be fulfilling the human destiny.

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