

Comparing India and the West

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During the last two decades, I have been pursuing an unorthodox way of studying cultural differences, focusing mainly on the Indian and the western cultures. Because I believe that one can answer questions about the circumscription of the words 'Indian' and 'western' cultures satisfactorily (Balangadhara, 1994), I will assume their intelligibility in what follows. In this paper, I want to raise a rather intriguing problem about comparing these two cultures. I shall do that without looking at other approaches to the issue and in the form of an argument. In order to come to the point quickly, let me make use of Said's *Orientalism*.

The Challenge of Orientalism

How best should we look at Orientalist discourse? One way: it as a description of the Orient. The second way: it is a description of the western experience of the Orient. I believe the latter to be the case. If we accept that 'Orientalism' is how the western culture came to terms with the reality that the East is, then, 'Orientalism' refers not only to the discourse about experience but also to the way of reflecting about and structuring this experience. In this sense, even though Orientalism is a discourse about western cultural experience, it is *oblique*. It is oblique because *it appears to be about other cultures*. It is 'western' in the sense that it refers to the experiences of the members from a particular culture. Orientalism is the western way of thinking about its experience of non-western cultures. However, it takes the form of an *apparent discourse about the Orient*.

In this process, western culture built and elaborated conceptual frameworks using resources available from its own culture. These descriptions helped in Europe's description and understanding of itself. That is to say, Europe's description of other cultures is fundamentally entwined in many untold ways with the way it has experienced the world. The challenge of Orientalism, thus, *is a challenge to understand the western culture*. That is, to understand the self-description of the West and the way it has described the others is to begin understanding western culture itself.

Western Culture from a Comparative Perspective

I want to draw out one of the implications of this argument explicitly. If we study a culture this way, we begin by conceptualizing the subject matter of our study itself, which is the western culture, in a *comparative* way. The West is what it says about the others and itself. We compare what it says about the others with what it says about itself in order to find a common conceptual structure. In one sense, this stance is congruent with the insight we have about human beings: when a person describes another human being, the resulting description tells us much about the describer himself. The same holds good at the level of individual descriptions provided by members of a particular culture. In other words, if there is a common conceptual structure to the European descriptions of India, then such a structure reflects a shared and common European culture. The research that both predates and postdates Said's *Orientalism* tells us that *such a structure is present*. If the same structure is found to be present in its self-description, then we can justifiably say that such a structure is the western culture. This argument also provides us with a methodology to objectively, non-arbitrarily and scientifically study the western culture *in a comparative way*. Since I have no time to elaborate on this point, let me leave it here and turn my attention to see whether the same consideration holds good with respect to India.

At first sight, it looks as though this insight should also work when we study the Indian culture: that culture too is what it

says about itself and what it says about the 'others'. If we dig into the Indian intellectual traditions with this expectation, we are bound to come out puzzled: (a) the 'native' Indian traditions have produced very little about themselves and even less about 'the others'; (b) the modern Indian intelligentsia appears to merely reproduce the western descriptions of India and the western culture. How to understand or explain these facts and what do they say about a comparative study of the Indian culture?

Let us look at these questions separately and begin with the issue about the absence of 'native' Indian descriptions about themselves and the others. What exactly is absent in the Indian traditions? Let me take three randomly chosen topics: religion and God; ethics; social structure.

The standard text-book trivia which we teach our students routinely assure us not only that there are multiple 'native' religions in India (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, different forms of Saivism, multiple varieties of Vaisnavism, the Bhakti movements, Sikhism, and many more and other kinds of 'popular' religions) but also that they arose in conflict with the ruling 'orthodoxies'. For instance, the pure Vedic religion is supposed to have given birth to a degenerate 'Brahmanism'. The *Sramana* traditions (exemplified by both Jainism and Buddhism) are alleged to have fought Brahmanism. The latter itself is said to have mutated into 'Hinduism', partially strengthened by Advaitic religion that fought Buddhism and so on. In such a case, one would expect a huge volume of literature regarding religion (what religion is, what these individual religions are, etc) and even more literature in theology. After all, both Buddhism and Jainism deny God, do they not? Yet, there is hardly any theology in India (if we look at Christianity as an example of what it means to write theological tracts) and there is hardly any explicit reflection on the nature of religion. All one needs is an acquaintance with the history of Christianity to notice how staggering this absence is. To this day, neither the scholar nor the layman can answer the question about what makes, say, 'Hinduism' into a religion or what that 'Brahmanism' is which Buddhism fought. Are we to seriously believe that Buddhism,

as a religion, fought another religion, Brahmanism, for centuries on end without even being able to say what made Brahmanism into a religion?

Similar considerations hold good elsewhere. Despite the presence of the voluminous *Subhashita* and *Dharmashastra* literatures, India has hardly produced noticeable tracts and sustained reflections on 'ethics'. There is no equivalent of an '*Ethica Nichomachea*', let alone a '*Summa Theologica*' in the Indian intellectual traditions. This does not mean that there is no evidence for intellectual reflections; on the contrary. Yet, certain kinds of reflections are noticeable for their absence.

One such example is the famous 'Indian caste system'. We are assured that the Indian social structure is synonymous with 'the caste system' and all we have by way of an explanation (or even justification) of this system are a few verses: in the *Purusha Sukta*, in the *Gita* and in some *Dharmashastras*. No Indian could tell you the 'principles' of this system, even though quite a few modern 'theories' about it float around. Sociologists, anthropologists, political theorists have provided all kinds of descriptions without being sure of the kind of system that 'the caste system' is supposed to be.

The Absence of Intellectual Reflection

In this sense, we notice two kinds of facts when we try to study Indian culture. First, there is a noticeable absence of intellectual reflection on these and allied phenomena; second, in the course of the last three hundred years or so, Indian intellectuals have merely reproduced western descriptions of the Indian culture and her traditions. When we study India, our question should then be: why is there such a vacuum? It requires noting that this question cannot be answered by appealing to other 'negative facts', for example, the contention that Indian culture did not have 'sciences.' We need to appeal to what exists in the world in order to explain what does not.

Let me make this general point in a more concrete way. Consider the kind of questions that people in the West routinely ask today: Why do the Hindus wear *bindi*? Why do Indians not

eat beef? Is it true that the most Indians worship the phallus? What do Indians think about the caste-system? Do they still practice *Sati* in India? Why do Indian gods have six or eight arms? What is the Hindu religious symbol? Do most Indians worship statues in temples? Do the Buddhists believe in God? Are Hindus religious? And so on and so forth.

Consider now the fact that most Indians do not ask these questions in their process of socialization. *Why are these questions not raised there?* I mean to say, why do they not go around asking questions about eating beef, wearing *bindi*, worshipping the *Shiva Linga*, and such like in India? Why have people not found it important to write huge tracts about such practices? Surely, it is not because they know the answers to these questions: if they did, they would have no problem in providing the same answers to the western interlocutors. Here is a simple but a very important answer: *it does not occur to most Indians to raise these questions about their traditions.* It does not occur to them not because they are any less curious or intelligent than people in the western culture but because such questions do not make sense in their cultural milieu. That is to say, *they learn not to ask such questions about their tradition* because they are learning to become conversant with the Indian tradition. Of course, when I say that they do not ask such questions, it does not mean that they have never raised these questions at any point in their lives: for instance, as children they too would have raised many such questions, and the answers have satisfied them. Such answers would (mostly) refer to the nature of their inherited practices.

When Indians confront such questions in the West, two things happen: (a) they feel compelled to provide an answer; (b) the answers they give very closely track the answers already provided by Westerners. That is to say, when such questions are asked of those practicing Indian traditions, *one should not assume* that these questions are intelligible to these Indians; they are not. *It is in the nature of the western culture to encourage such questions to be raised.* Furthermore, such questions also outline the kind of answers that are admissible.

One of the most important consequences of my claim is this: when the western culture quizzes Indians about the nature of their traditions, this culture is telling us about itself. To provide answers to the western interlocutors about Indian traditions one needs to understand the nature of western culture. Simply put: *to understand let alone answer such questions about the Indian traditions, one has to understand the western culture.*

Cross-Cultural Asymmetry

In other words, we face an asymmetry. To study and understand western culture, we need to study what it says about the others and itself. However, we need to do exactly the same thing even when we want to study Indian culture. Alternately put, we compare the western descriptions (of itself and the others) to understand the West; if we want to understand India, we have to begin by saying why (and in what sense) India is not like the West. Our expectation of wanting to study India by looking at what it says about itself and the others is not met. Nor could we simply continue with the so-called ‘empirical’ and/or ‘textual’ studies to understand Indian culture because, in this process, we will merely add to the western descriptions of India and not advance our understanding of the Indian culture.

Why is there such an asymmetry? It has to do with what colonialism is also about: establishing frameworks of inquiry into the nature of human beings and societies through the use of power and violence (S. N. Balagangadhara et al., 2008). Once established and generalized, such frameworks continue to draw their legitimacy through sources other than those that are cognitive in nature. Today, it appears to me, this legitimizing process has reached its apotheosis in the guise of an attitude that suggests that a science of culture and the sciences of the social are simply impossible because of human and epistemic limitations. Needless to say, a persistent ‘anti-scientific’ attitude adds fodder to such an attitude.

I believe that it is possible to develop a science of culture that is in every way as scientific as physics or biology. However, we shall not get there unless we realize that our road will be comparative in nature: study the West in a comparative way and study other cultures to isolate their *differentia specifica* from the West. They will be two different types of comparison but they will give us what we lack and so badly need today: knowledge of human beings in their societies and cultures.

References

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