

Seven Letters To My RSS Friend: Letter #2

My Dear Judge Sahab,

My first letter dealt with some basic points of Indian historiography. As I did not wish to make the letter longer I did not give my own worldview or basic perspective on the human situation and value system which is the matrix of my interpretation of Indian history. The worldview and value system are the fruit of my own humble search for truth in the broad sense. However, not being a historian myself, my interpretation of Indian history is based on the work of Indian and foreign historians, internationally renowned and respected, such as Jadunath Sarkar, Moreland, Tarachand, Habib, Pannikar, Romila Thapar, et al. Because of their adopting a critical methodology, and cultivating universal empathy, they avoid (as far as humanly possible) conscious or unconscious bias and defensive reasoning. They follow where the argument leads them, while lesser historians become partial or antipathetic to some person or ideology, as the case may be.

Humans are born as helpless creatures who gradually develop a sense of personal identity or self-image, and acquire a thought and value system reflected in the symbols, rites, rituals, institutions, moral and social codes of a societal unit. This set of ideas, ideals and institutions is transmitted to individuals through cultural conditioning. Every individual, to begin with, accepts them as the natural base for all further growth. Thought systems arise because isolated bits of information never satisfy the human craving for a broad integrated framework of ideas and ideals. The concern for wholeness is the common root of religion, philosophy and science.

Science first describes discrete entities or processes and then seeks their causal or regular inter-connections in precise quantitative and verifiable terms. Scientists having creative imagination or intuition project hypothetical natural explanations of these inter-connections. When other fellow scientists, on the basis of their own tests, freely confirm previous tests or findings, the hypotheses are accepted as scientific laws, though even then, these laws remain subject to revision in the light of fresh discoveries. This method of scientific investigation is the real strength and glory of science and the essence of the scientific revolution of the modern age as such. It is this method that has enabled man to control and manipulate the external environment as had never happened before in history.

Humankind, however, has other concerns, namely, the creation of beauty, the pursuit of morality and the cultivation of spirituality. Pure science, therefore, is like a banquet at which only a single dish is served. Science, by itself, is unable to guide the human observer how to relate himself to the mystery of the universe. Even if there be no verifiable or conclusive answer to the riddle of existence and even if all actual or possible attempts at answering the riddle be human projections, the concern for such matters remains irrepressible and also crucially important for balanced inner growth. What is it that constitutes the riddle? Well, it is the universal natural phenomena of biological conception, birth, growth, decay, and death, the ceaseless struggle for survival, the flux of creation and destruction, the regular sequence of events, the power of reason to grasp these interconnections through a mash of imagination and observation, the variety and power of human emotions: hope and joy, pain and despair, suffering and fear, the sexual instinct and mutual attraction of the sexes, the experience of triumph and tragedy, the primary sense of morality and beauty, as distinct from their particular models found at different times and in different places, and finally the enveloping sense of wonder and a sense of mystery or holiness of it all. The above basic features that are invariably and universally present in human life may be said to be the 'ontic dimensions' of human existence. And what is the right or true interpretation of these dimensions, as a totality without ignoring any single facet as such constitutes the riddle of the universe.

An abiding depth concern with this mystery or riddle is an integral part of being fully human. Man cannot live by bread alone. Nor can he live by morality, legality, or science alone without giving some central overarching significance to the cosmos. This can only be done through some existential interpretation, provided by spirituality, religion or philosophy.

Just as the child assimilates the natural language spoken in his milieu, he assimilates the existential interpretation current in his milieu. This interpretation may be called the spiritual language of the spirit, and just as there is a plurality of natural languages, there are plural languages of the spirit. Every such language comprises myths, rites, and rituals to enable the individual to relate himself to the mystery of the universe, thereby winning solace, courage, guidance and peace in the conduct of life. There is a general tendency to believe that one's own language of the spirit is the sweetest and the best. Moreover, this belief naturally boosts one's group respect or sense of importance or uniqueness in history. One tends to miss the glaring fact that every language of the spirit is instinct with paradox and faith rather than clarity and proof. However, the existence of plural languages of the spirit does not subtract from the beauty and power of any particular language, even as the beauty and power of the great works of, say, Shakespeare do not diminish that of the works of Goethe or Kalidas. If there is no reason why only one language should be spoken by the entire human family, why should it be so terribly important that there should be only one language of the spirit, say, Hinduism, Christianity or Islam? Should not righteous action and authentic commitment, as such, be deemed more important than conversion to any single religious faith? I dare say the concern for doing away with all diversity reflects a concern for power rather than for piety.

I might go even one step further. While pure spirituality (without religious dogma) hugely helps and fortifies man in the midst of the inevitable temptations, failures and tragedies of life, it is not strictly necessary for the pursuit of morality or values in general. Spirituality, like human love cannot be willed or forced through logic. I submit, every interpretation is permissible, but it should not devalue man's existential wonder at the mystery of the universe. I further submit, this approach is adumbrated in the Gita. The pure Quranic approach, without the gloss of traditional views, also converges on this point. Great spiritual humanists hailing from the West also testify to this truth.

I now come to the basic values I have come to accept after an honest and patient search. I will list the following without implying that the list is exhaustive: existential wonder at the mystery of existence, whether or not the sense of wonder and mystery flowers into the idea of the god of religion; clear and honest self-awareness or authenticity; the unconditional will to perform one's duty for its own sake; reverence for all living beings; unconditional respect for the dignity of the individual; the disinterested search for truth; the appreciation and creation of beauty; the pursuit of social justice flowing from active concern for universal welfare; democracy or governance with the consent of the governed; loving tolerance of dissent; universal empathy; universal compassion and kindness; mature heterosexual love with or without physical consummation; and, finally, unconditional inner peace and equanimity.

It must be noted that the above value terms are rather abstract or generalized. Consequently, they all could be variously interpreted by different persons. Here I shall not spell out my own understanding of these terms. I am aware their interpretation is bound to differ in every age due to the ever-changing human situation – the growth in cumulative knowledge, and the tremendously increased communication or dialogue within the human family. Plural interpretations of all basic values are quite natural in human society. The quest for uniformity or sameness in the literal sense is futile and harmful. The Upanisads point out that cows may be of different colors, but their milk is the same. In its own idiom the Quran also says the same. It is tragic when the quest for power turns this milk into poison, no matter who does this, be they the Taliban destroying the statue of the Buddha or the Bajrang Dal demolishing the Babari Masjid.

The human situation is marked by racial/ethnic and cultural plurality. Every distinct group believes its own 'blood, ideas and ideals' to be superior and tries to get the maximum share of the cake. This triggers the struggle for power both within and between different groups. Aggression and defense may be said to be two sides of the coin of world history. This is punctuated in every age by advances and setbacks depending upon how one looks at the ongoing contest for power and self-assertion.

The players or antagonists in the struggle for power naturally perceive this struggle as a fight between good and evil. This perception gives them inner strength and is also valid at times. But the full truth of the matter is that different individuals and groups reach the peak of their inner energy and vitality at different points of time. Their material interests and cherished ideas and ideals propel a clash between those on the offensive and those on the defensive. Each party emphasizes its concern for ideals, rather than for worldly profit, and the battle is joined. Victory accrues, generally, to those whose ideas and interests harmonize with 'the spirit of the age', as pointed out by the German thinker, Hegel.

Interaction between contending groups goes on in war and peace. Time moves on and fresh ideas and ideals surface. Winners and losers in wars both gain and lose at the cultural level due to the inevitable cross-fertilization of ideas and ideals. This process has been tremendously accelerated by the ongoing communications revolution. Economic as well as cultural 'globalism' is fast emerging in the present age. This has both benefits as well as dangers. Humanity needs friends, not masters. Humanity needs the brotherhood of man, not any lesser one, be it of race, religion, or a nation. Even the brotherhood of man will fail if it ignores the dimension of a higher spirituality. Communism in the form of an aggressive atheistic Humanism has failed. Aggressive religious fundamentalism, be it Islamic, Hindu or Christian will all fail. Loving tolerance and an openness of being is the only valid approach.

Spiritual Humanism will gradually take roots through the organized efforts at self-criticism and reform by the humanist vanguard of each religious community. This vanguard will purge the limitations in its own tradition instead of pointing out the flaws of others. Inter-faith cooperation will drive out adversarial relationships between different religious traditions. The human family, carried on the wings of science and technology, democracy and spirituality will slowly make Tagore's dream come true when the poet sang:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world is not broken up into fragments by
narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless living stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into
the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever widening
thought and action —

Into that heaven of freedom, let my country awake.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Jamal Khwaja