

Some Random Thoughts On Knowledge - East and West

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It was to contrast their own culture from the 'Other' Islamic Ottomans that scholars from Western Europe started using the term the East. But as they began to realise that the Ottomans are only their Near East, other countries/ cultures/ lands that were East to them like the Middle East and the Far East came to be used.

While the Near Eastern Islam was depicted as an evil, a total contrast to Western Christianity, the Far East was not so well understood by the West and remained a mystery for quite sometime, and for that reason perhaps was not viewed with hostility. The Near East was the enemy in every sense while the Far Eastern Indian or Chinese evoked more curiosity than hostility.

It is a moot question whether the terms West and East have lost their relevance today and North and South may be more appropriate. I believe the terms West and East may still be useful in contrasting cultures and ways of life.

Take the question of Knowledge. That knowledge is power is perhaps a more Western construct than Eastern or Indian. A purely instrumental view of knowledge is somewhat alien to us. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge was quite a common and accepted view. Similarly, the alleged Kshatriya - Brahmin axis is perhaps more an attempt to find an equivalent to the king-church axis of the West here than what actually obtained in much of India.

Dharampal used to say that in India the king always feared the 'curse' of the knowledgeable Brahmin just as the Brahmin too feared the wrath of the king and kept a distance from the king. The notion of a Royal Rishi is perhaps a later construct, may be from the 19th century or so. For, Buddhism which is said to have viewed the Kshatriya as superior to the Brahmin varna does not seem to have enjoyed Royal power.

More than the power- knowledge equation, what may contrast the East and the West may be related to an interesting epistemological stand of the Eastern saint- philosophers. My Marxist friend SN Nagarajan always held that there is an Eastern Marxism of Mao and others which is richer than Western Marxism. He argued that the Eastern philosophers, especially

of the Bhakti traditions, believed in the cognitive and libertine role of love and service. In contrast, the West has always held love as a major hindrance to the pursuit of Truth. The Bhakti poets and philosophers of India, on the contrary, argued that one will never get at Truth only through jnana. In fact, Ramanuja and his followers held that the arrogance of wealth, birth and knowledge would prevent us from seeing Truth.

It is thus possible to hold the view that there is a fundamental epistemological difference between the West and the East on the question of what is true knowledge and the best way to obtain that knowledge.

Some of the distinctions that are drawn between lower and higher knowledge and the refusal to look at knowledge without values or morals may all be logically deducible from such an epistemology. What is good economics or what is good science may be answered by both very differently. Perhaps Mahatma Gandhi's views on right knowledge with right practice is very close to this epistemology.

When I was doing my fieldwork among Ayurvedic doctors in seventies, one doctor answered my question on how scientific Ayurveda thus: "ours is a sastra, which is more than science. Science only tells you what is. We go further and tell you what should be/ ought to be". He added that Ayurvedic texts suggest that one may refuse treatment to a patient on certain valid grounds. One of them is rajadroha or sedition!