A Clash of Cultural Ideologies: Are we still Evolving?
How important is Sugar in Tea?

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Abstract

My visit to United States as a Fulbright Scholar made me realize the need to build bridges across the socio-cultural barriers that exist between India and the United States. This paper highlights the necessity to understand the cultural differences that exist between our nations. These are evidently seen as differences in beliefs, value systems, cultural norms, social relationships, morality, religion and family system. But even despite all of this, there were certain similarities that too, which I observed. We laugh the same way, think about humanity, form affiliations, celebrate our birthdays and festivals with family, contribute to the community and thrive for the best. Despite cultural disparity and language differences, we think quite in the same way. We are ambitious, law abiding, enjoy good food, and Indian movies. This paper focuses on the mutuality that exists between the two nations and how we need to join hands for the benefit of mankind, peace and humanity.

Keywords: culture, morality, socialization

As I retrospect my visit as a Fulbright-Nehru Scholar to St Olaf College in Northfield, a small place in Minnesota, I am overwhelmed with so many beautiful memories. These thoughts and feelings are truly compelling and powerful in inducing a vision that I seek to share. I intend to initiate a discussion that will elaborate upon the experiences that helped me understand the American culture, perhaps.

Moral Obligations

Our culture provides us the boundaries of our moral domains. The domains in which we feel what is right or wrong, or in which we feel it is appropriate to make judgements of what of what is morally justified or not (Heine, 2012). In Indian culture as compared to the Western one, our socio-cultural experiences shape the way we think about people, our feelings and codes of conduct. There are certain obligations that make us act in a particular way. There is no law or rule that forces one to abide by these moral codes of conduct. The moral development of a person begins during the early stages of socialization, and these are inculcated so deep into our persona that one feels compelled to abide by them. In comparison to the Western culture, I feel these moral obligations determine the course of our lives, our choices we make and the decisions we take. For example from deciding what to wear at a social gathering, or the course to opt for or a decision for job or choosing a life partner, everything is viewed in light of the social norms that are prevalent in the society. There are many studies (e.g., Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990) that show the moral force of interpersonal obligations. These often cause dilemmas in a persons’ mind, in which neither options seems ideal, yet a person tries to preserve them depending upon the underlying motivation to protect oneself from the fear of social isolation or moral disrespect.

In my first lecture class in US, I asked my students to help me understand the American culture while I shared Indian experiences with them. It was a very fruitful interaction with the students, researchers, faculty and members of the staff. As I interacted with different people, addressing them with their first name was extremely difficult in the beginning. But there was more to it. I realised there were no status barriers. Each person was an individual in his or her own right. In India, it is disrespectful to address an elder person or people in senior positions by name. At times, I felt pretty embarrassed and experienced a sense of conflict with the morals that I grew up with. In India, we have moral obligations that run our lives. The moral values and social norms are so deeply engraved in our
personality since childhood, that it becomes very difficult to act otherwise. I did not observe these barriers in United States. These are barriers as they block the interpersonal exchange which could be mutually beneficial for growth and sustenance. The mutual respect and regard was the same. What’s in a name? In India, a name is kept with a purpose, mostly implying goodness or a representation of God. Many people in United States did not even bother to find out if their name meant anything. They focussed on developing themselves as a good human being, and stating that it was all that mattered. In Indian culture also emphasis is laid upon being a good human being, yet importance is given to the influence of inherited family value systems and cultural heritage.

The disclosure of my interactions will further elucidate upon the nature of the self in relation to the complexity and variability of human behaviour. It is important to understand the underlying issues and reflect upon them to unravel the processes that mediate our behaviour and thinking patterns. To rethink our selfhood within our cultural boundaries and envisage a situation where regardless of our own cultural origins, find a way to embrace the goodness that is apparent among different cultures.

Cultural traditions

Rudyard Kipling, the Nobel Laureate in the ballad of East and West, wrote that the East is the East and the West is the West, and never the twain shall meet (Laungani, 2010). However, it is possible for the East and the West to meet. This is possible in terms of friendship, equality, and a genuine desire to learn from each other. There were many cultural festivals celebrated at St Olaf, for example, the Chinese New Year, the Indian Holi festival and the Norway festival, with full pomp and show, to name a few. The best part was that everyone enjoyed the dance, music, drama, poetry and cuisine. My involvement with the Women’s club helped me interact with women from America, Thailand, China, Japan, Tibet, Bahrain and Norway, and also learn about their cuisines. It was a cultural group where there were active discussions about our thoughts, beliefs, interests, social and economic systems, education, gender issues, family and marriage as we cooked lunch together and then enjoyed it over the lunch table. I also noted that if there was any mishap anywhere around the world, everybody seemed to be as concerned as if it happened in their own homeland. There was a genuine expression of human emotions, though a little more subtle than that expressed in India. There was equality and a sense of cultural sensitivity that motivated everyone towards common humanitarian goals, like fighting for human rights or the colour run that helped in raising funds for the abused women in India. People who had no idea about India or Indian people were unitedly working for humanitarian issues of global importance, for peace and wellbeing.

I realized that my role was much greater than what I had anticipated. I was not only an academician but also a cultural ambassador. There was a keen interest in India and the Indian culture. My seminars highlighted the importance of Indian thought and culture, people, habits, festivals, value systems, education, gender issues, psycho-social development, traditions, spirituality and Yoga. When I realized that my seminar was on Saint Patrick’s day, I decided to wear a green saree and also made my presentation in green. I had to add sugar in tea. I was also learning about Western cultural norms and expectations, yet adding an Indian perspective into their existing thoughts about various psycho-social and cultural issues.

Building Bridges

There was so much to share, so much to learn, and then a desire to move together towards a goal of common good, beyond the barriers of language or geographical location. There was a mutual respect for cultural differences, with a hope for a world view. My seminars and workshops at various Universities such as Yale, Connecticut, Merrimack, Texas, Penn State, Boston, and Howard aimed at bridging the gaps between the two cultures by sharing knowledge, illuminating experiences, and proving insights through research evidence about the inherent similarity in the emotion perception, facial expressions, self and consciousness, and yoga and meditation. I tried to build a bridge across the apparent cultural disparity using the insights from great Indian Texts such as The Bhagvad Gita, Ramayana, and Vedas, and preaching from Gautam Buddha, Sri Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi. I tried to unite the minds by putting forth the ideas that were spoken by these great spiritual texts and
thinkers. I tried indulging in a comparative analysis of the Western approach with the Indian one, which opened pathway for further deliberations and understanding the underlying implications for us to reconsider our approach to life, our existence, and perhaps how to make our existence more meaningful. The interpretation of these ideas varies with cultures or nations. Hence, these active discussions also unfolded much human subjectivity, that is important for pursuing humanitarian efforts of global importance.

Some people feel that their perceptions are objective, scientific, and logical, while other may base it on personal experiences and evaluations. Kant argued in his critique of Pure Reason, that reason leads us to self-contradiction and impasse. This is so as the reality may not correspond to reason. Hence, it may not be possible even in principle to understand reality by using reason alone (cited in Magee, 2002:178). However, Cicero, the great Roman Philosopher pointed out that the whole foundation of humanity consists of the links between people. These links could be of kindness, goodness, generosity and justice (Grayling, 2003). The Bhagvad Gita propagates that there is a bond between different people, irrespective of the language they speak or their gender or status, which is the bond of humanity, belongingness and truth. The emphasis is upon discovering the truth of existence and self-realization. Lord Sri Krishna presented a foundation for understanding the purpose in life and the way to live harmoniously, saying that peace is above all the desires of the ego, that all conflicts must be resolved for higher gains for humanity, and for the evolving the sense of self.

\textit{Shanti} or peace is the key towards freedom and bliss. It is a way to cope with the distressing situations and reducing the painful aggression in the world. The path of meditation or sadhna, helps to resolve all problems. These methods play an important role in modern psychotherapy. In the Western psychology, we talk about ego as the executive of our personality, which discriminates, decides, and plans. Bhagvad Gita proposes that it is the \textit{budhi} or intellect that has the ability to perform the higher level functioning. While the ego or \textit{ahamkar} is the root cause of most problems in the world, mindfulness Meditation opens the inner self and helps to gain insights about the meaning of one’s existence and higher level of consciousness associated with euphoric feelings and a strange enlightenment and contentment.

\textbf{Ideological differences}

In comparison to the West, Indian people are conditioned to live the different stages of life or the four ashramas as \textit{brahmacharya}, \textit{grihastha}, \textit{vanaprastha} and \textit{sanyas}. There are a different set of prescribed modes of conduct that one is supposed to adhere to. For example unlike the West, a divorce or remarriage is still quite unacceptable in India; the widows are supposed to wear white and avoid any indulgence in festivities; the women are expected to take care of their family and groom their children and then get involved in spiritualistic or religious pursuits. In the West, people live life as of the present, but in India we keep striving for the future, particularly in the life beyond death. There is lot of emphasis on good deeds or \textit{Karma} theory as proposed in the Bhagvad Gita, as that is the desirable mode of action. Sometimes, we also tend to attribute our fruits of action to deeds that we have done or the crimes or charity we did in the past life. These along with beliefs about reincarnation are difficult for the Westerners to comprehend, but then there are individual differences everywhere. Despite the differences, there are a lot of similarities that bring the two cultures together; people pray, offer food to the poor, indulge in charity, help fellow beings, cultivate beautiful gardens, feed the birds, mow the lawns and many more similarities exist. In India, we live, think and act as “we”, that is in relation to the people we care for, belonging to a community, but in the West it is “I”, as an individual.

Another intriguing thing was the difference in the relational mobility between Indian and Western cultures. Americans are more physically mobile than Indians. As I interacted with the people there I realised that most of them had changed their residence as many as five or six times. As Oishi(2010) also mentioned that Americans are especially mobile people. There were people from different states and nations. They also had a distinct pattern of living. They would first live in a small home, raise their family, then shift into a bigger home to accommodate the growing needs and once their children would move away, and as they would age, they would opt for smaller homes or homes
with special health care facilities. This is something that is rare in India, where in the children are expected or morally obliged to take care of their elderly parents or grandparents. Indian people develop a strong family bonding that sustains them throughout their life, while the Americans often form relationships who live around them. In an Indian family,a child is nurtured with an underlying expectation of a support system in old age, and the child is hence morally obliged by these social norms. While in Western cultures the parent-child relationship is very different. They bring up their children with an independent life style patterns. It is a relatively itinerant lifestyle that they lead(Henrich et al., 2010).

Indian thought emphasizes the need to understand the atman, the pure self. It is present in all entities, and is the source of all knowledge. Being the centre of consciousness, it is regarded as the source of everlasting, eternal, infinite source. It does not perish or decay like the body. Hence, the emphasis is to understand the mental life in totality, and perhaps the relation between the body and the mind. The atman is the main force behind our thoughts and actions. It is important to comprehend this relationship as it not only helps us cope with daily hassles or stresses, but also proves beneficial in various pursuits of life. Optimum importance is hence devoted towards organising the internal life to attain a state of tranquillity and, becoming useful for one self and others around. The great Indian epics not only guide our cognitive processes, but also our emotions and behaviour patterns. They teach us the right and selfless modes of action and virtues like gratitude, forgiveness and compassion. The wellbeing of others is more important than our own. The Karma Yoga emphasizes on the need to work selflessly and honestly with devotion, and not to strive for the rewards. Mahatma Gandhi’s notions about truth, non-violence, selflessness, human rights, dignity, respect for women, forgiveness, and compassion have deeply influenced our thinking process.

Cicero justifies his philosophy by saying that there is in all men and women, a divine spark for reason. This conferred a duty on to all human beings to develop themselves to the optimum level, as civilized and educated individuals (Grayling, 2003). The most important thing is to understand the truth. Hence, irrespective of the cultural differences, truth plays an integral role in our development as a person, with larger aims of unity, dignity and love. When I attended a lecture on the civil rights movement by Martin Luther King Jr, I could perceive a deep underlying association with Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violence resistance to strive for human rights. There was so much similarity in their approach towards life, which was tremendously inspiring.

Social display of emotions

Often when we talk about multicultural, it connotes a variety of meanings, values, beliefs, attitudes, and traditions that exist in the world. Laungani(2010) proposes that all human beings are products of their own culture; and each culture has its unique qualities and ways to give meaning in life. During my visits to different parts of United States, I realized that though there were differences in each one with respect to their local traditions, style of life, way of language usage, dress and eating habits, each had a distinct uniqueness about them. I learnt how to shovel the snow, how to walk like a duck in the ice, how to mow the lawn, how to push my garbage can through the thick snow, how to be independent and practical. I extended the notion of Indian hospitality, where a guest is treated as God and no one goes hungry form the house. When I was invited to dinners or lunches it was mostly self help, while when I invited people I was pampering them to the best of my ability. It is considered lucky to have guests over for at one’s place in India. There is such warmth, concern, and transparency in human relationships. While when anyone visited my house, I would invite them indoors, offer tea and some snacks first and then talk. The word spread around and soon I came to be known for my hospitality and warmth. Yet other families and friends that I was deeply in touch with, extended their help, warmth and affection in all possible ways. Hence, I realise that in both the cultures, there was a genuine feeling of compassion, friendship and affection, though display patterns varied. Even though there are cultural differences, yet a person has a special ability to transcend within his own cultural restrictions. However, it is difficult to know as to what constitutes a good life and how it should be lived (Parekh, 2000). People in India express emotions more often as compared to people in US, who are more subtle in the display of negative emotions as compared to Indian people. I remember when I
met my Professor’s mother, I embraced her with affection. She was so surprised and asked her daughter to do the same more often. It was so overwhelming. I realised that the experience of affection was similar in both cultures, but the display varied. This portrayed that each culture had something or the other to offer, and influence one’s value system significantly. Each culture offers unique features, and it depends upon how we perceive and imbibe them into our own, without losing the essence of our own culture. These are often expressed in artistic, literary, social and cultural pursuits.

There is a great influx of different cultural representations that can be seen in India as well as in US, and it is influencing our existing social norms, value systems, thinking processes, academics, work environment, health care system, and human resources. The important question then, is how would one respond to these changes? Will they lead to discrimination, rejection or persuasion? It is particularly important to diagnose the consequences of these cultural influences into our psycho-social functioning. I feel that more and more people in the US drink tea while Indians are resorting to black coffee. The fact remains that we are tea drinkers, but adopting Western style of life. Are we also contributing to the humanitarian concerns or are we merely self-centred in our approach to life? People in Western culture think more in individualistic terms than those in Eastern cultures. As Mascolo(2014) states that “Yes, it is a lovely culture clash. Westerners are all individualistic and see themselves as able to define themselves independent of hierarchies and role commitments; while Indians are much more rational and see themselves as part of an inextricable “We”. Because Westerners can extricate themselves so easily from “we”, they become arrogant with a self-defining ego.” Well then the best way to assimilate and integrate with the society would be to accommodate the norms and values of the host country and spread an essence of your native country.

The whole idea is to just add some sugar to the cup of tea. That is to say, that one has to be the sugar, adding sweetness to the culture one is migrating to, blend in with the existing socio-cultural norms while keeping your culturally acquired ideologies, psycho-social and emotional values into the newly evolved identity. It is therefore not important to merely exist, but to live and figure out how one can create a difference in the lives of the others.

References