

INDIRA GANDHI MEMORIAL LECTURE 1991

CULTURAL PLURALISM

ANISUZZAMAN



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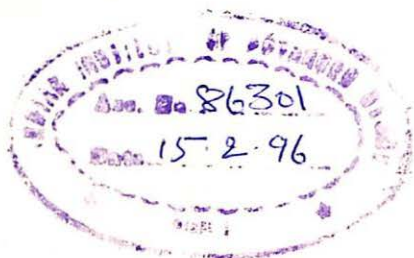
*Professor of Bengali
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FOREWORD

The Indira Gandhi Memorial Lectureship was instituted by the Society in the year 1985. Dr. Gopal Singh, Lt. Governor of Goa was the first recipient. After that it was subsequently offered to Justice Md. Hedatullah, the well-known jurist, Professor Uma Shankar Joshi, the renowned literateur, Professor Hiren Mukherjee, the noted parliamentarian and scholar, Dr. Kireet Joshi, well-known philosopher and educationist, Dr. Nikhil Chakraborty, the renowned journalist, Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma, the President of India, who is well known for his scholastic achievement and Professor Anisuzzaman, the well-known scholar of Dhaka University, Bangladesh.

As per stipulation of the endowment the lecture is to be delivered as far as possible from amongst the following subjects :

- a) unity and diversity
- b) secularism
- c) cultural plurality
- d) historical and philosophical trends and
- e) national integration

Professor Anisuzzaman, the well-known scholar was requested by the Society to speak on the subject of cultural pluralism.

In a world torn assunder by intolerance of all kinds of ethnic religious, racist, provincialist etc. - the subject appeared as a natural choice. This is also because the lecture devoted to the memory of our late Prime Minister and one of the main architect for the revival of the Asiatic Society and giving it the new shape, who stood all her life for world peace and solidarity and even upheld the cause by her tragic end, was considered quite befitting. A lot of rethinking, introspection, discussion and soul searching can, no doubt initiate the first right step towards a better understanding of ourselves, and a better identification of Man. It is a pity that after decades of what we had clamoured as "development" and "progress", the world stands

on the brink of self-destruction caused by mindless infighting and violence inflicted upon man by man himself.

But, again, man alone can put a stop to all this insanity, by re-establishing cultural plurality in its right perspective.

Professor Anisuzzaman, from the neighbouring country Bangladesh was considered as a right person to deliver the lecture on the subject because of his rich experience and scholasticism.

The present publication is the lecture delivered by him over two days on September 16 & 17, 1993 before a learned audience. While delivering the lecture instantaneously illuminating and stimulating responses came from the audience. The feed-back from the audience in the form of views and opinions and question and interjection established our sense of priority. It generated much desired rethinking on the issue ushering in the germination of a veritable new discourse on multiculturalism. As someone from the audience rightly observed Professor Anisuzzaman's presentation had not only been on cultural pluralism, but also had been pluralist in approach.

The Asiatic Society takes pleasure and pride in publishing the lecture as a monograph with an avowed objective to providing a stimulus for carrying on further dialogue and discussions on a subject of such vital importance in the context of what had been manifested in different parts of the world as well as in our own country.

Dr. Chandan Roychaudhuri
General Secretary

I would like to express my deep sense of gratitude to the Asiatic Society for having asked me to deliver the Indira Gandhi Memorial Lecture for 1991. To be invited to deliver a lecture in the Asiatic Society, the oldest academic institution in this part of the world, is, indeed, a great honour. It is more so when such lecture is named after one of the most illustrious children of India. I can well remember the days when I first came to know of her through the remarkable letters that Jawaharlal Nehru wrote her from the confines of prisons. One sentence in the *Glimpses of world history* that at once revealed the love of a father and anguish of a political prisoner left an indelible mark on my adolescent mind: "Priyadarshini, dear to the sight, but dearer still when sight is denied." I had the privilege of meeting Indira Gandhi for the first time in 1964 when, in her capacity as Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, she came to address the faculty and students of the University of Chicago on Contemporary India. She was as eloquent in her speech as she was hard on some of the Indian students who had put uncomfortable questions on situations obtaining at home. Afterwards, Professor Susanne Rudolph and Professor Lloyd Rudolph, who had organized the lecture, gave her tea, when I had the opportunity of exchanging few words with her. I found her extremely polite and patient. Years later, in 1971, I called on her in New Delhi, as a member of a delegation of Bangladesh teachers and some of our colleagues from Calcutta, to draw her attention to the need for making some institutional arrangements to provide education to the children from Bangladesh who were living in refugee camps in India. She was kind, sympathetic and understanding. I met her for the last time in Dhaka in 1972 when she paid an official visit to Bangladesh, for the independence of which she had showed great vision and resolute courage. This time she was exuberant, but made every effort not to show it. For many of my compatriots and myself,

her contribution to our liberation struggle overshadows her other achievements and limitations of which, like most other statesmen, she had had her share. As I stand here today, I recall with gratitude that role of hers and offer my sincere tribute to her memory.

I

I have been asked by the Asiatic Society to speak on Cultural Pluralism in the kind but misplaced confidence that a student of Bengali literature, such as I am, shall be able to do justice to such a complex subject. I must warn you that I am going to belie their expectations and yours. The only defence I can offer is that the invitation of the Asiatic Society was too tempting for me to refuse.

The notion that diversity is the rule of nature has been suggested by many thinkers throughout history. This is the seminal idea around which the concept of pluralism in its philosophical, sociological, political, social and cultural manifestations have developed. Many scholars have traced philosophical pluralism to Leibniz who maintained that the divine order of the universe is reflected in each of its parts, the smallest unit being the monad. He argued that everything complex must have been made of simple and indivisible parts and, therefore, everything extended could be divided into such parts. The monads are infinite but each is distinguished from the other. In sociology, pluralism acknowledges the existence of more than one principle that determines the course of history. Political and social pluralism refer to the idea or fact of coexistence of various political, ideological, cultural or ethnic groups without the predominance of any group in particular. It also calls for the transfer of political power to self-governing intermediate bodies capable of countervailing both an atomistic and a totalitarian state. This concept grew out of the premise that individuals are voluntarily affiliated to one or all of a variety of reasonably independent groups –

cultural, educational, religious, professional and economic—which add up to make the society that people live in; that such groups stand between absolute individualism and rigid statism; and that a diversity of such homogeneous groups could be accommodated within the heterogeneous state. Taking a step forward it asserted that sovereignty is divisible and allegiance to the state contingent and qualified, and that it would also be legitimate to side with the group in the event of its coming into conflict with the state and to bring in something described as contingent anarchy. Later on, however, the idea was modified to recognize the primacy of a unified purpose above and beyond the will of plurality of groups, to expect the state to satisfy the needs of the groups, on the one hand, and to maintain the natural equilibrium of competing group-interests, on the other, and to underline the need for protecting the individuals from oligarchic tendencies of groups.

"Culture", according to Raymond Williams, "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought." We may, perhaps, agree that culture refers to all the accepted and patterned ways of behaviours of a given people and includes their material achievements, intellectual activities and spiritual ideas. Williams cites the argument of Herder that it is necessary to speak of cultures instead of culture : for there are " the specific and variable cultures of different nations and periods, but also the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation." This indicates to the plurality of cultures. The concept of cultural pluralism admits of many cultures in the world and their right to develop their own way.

The idea of cultural pluralism leads us to several other questions : how does one view the plurality of cultures; how does the interaction of cultures work; how is the social and political fabric

of a nation affected when it includes in its fold more than one culture; and, finally, does this view of plurality of cultures run counter to the concept of unity and universality of the culture of mankind? We shall now try to address ourselves to these questions.

II

One can obviously see that there is, and has been in history, a variety of cultures. Some cultures produce something which may not be known to others at all. The Maya, Aztec and Inca Indians excelled in architecture and metal work, weaving and pottery, but basketry was developed to unusually high levels by California Indians. Mexicans and Peruvians developed settled cultivation at about the same time. Yet, potato became the principal foodstuff in Peru while it was unknown in Mexico. The life of the early cultivators was very different in many ways from that of the early nomads. The early Sumerians had no horses while their Semitic contemporaries were riding on horseback to move from one place to another. Tragedy represented the highest level of Greek literary creativity, but Sanskrit playwrights never tried their hands in this form. Even today what is taboo in some society is widely practised in another. Making noise while eating is normal with some people, but others disapprove of it strongly. Some people prefer to sit on chairs while others like to sit cross-legged on the floor. Some people do their work standing while others kneel or squat for the same purpose. We find people defining for themselves what is proper food or appropriate dress. Indian classical music hardly appeals to the uninitiated and, similarly, many fail to appreciate western vocalists. We may say that each society has a culture of its own and sometimes, as we have already noticed, there may be cultural difference within a given society while several societies may also share a common culture.

There is no particular value of good or evil attached to any of the practices we have just mentioned, but people belonging to a

culture usually have a strong preference for their own. Even when one can see that there is a variety of cultures, one is predisposed to take his culture as the norm and the cultures of others as deviations. Herodotus realized this when he said that "... if one were to offer men the choice of all the customs in the world they would examine the whole number and end up by preferring their own." The faith in the justification of one's way of life is, perhaps, necessary for the orderly running of his society, but at a certain point it develops into an ethnocentric view that leads him to believe that his is the superior culture to the exclusion of others. Each of the American Indian tribes used to call itself something like "the people" while referring to other tribes in most pejorative terms. Alberuni recorded in the eleventh century that it was rather common for one nation to deprecate others. It may be interesting to quote here a creation myth current among the Malay people as reported by Ina Brown :

The Creator made the first man of clay and baked him in the oven but took him out too soon. He had a very unattractive pasty white skin and lanky hair. He became the ancestor of the white people. The Creator tried again but this time he left the man in too long. His skin was burned black and his hair frizzled by the heat. This one became the ancestor of the Negroes. Profiting by his earlier mistakes, the Creator got the third one just right, a beautiful golden brown. This one, needless to say, became the ancestor of the Malay who look just as men should.

The ethnocentric view, however, showed itself far beyond Malaya and far beyond what could be accepted as funny.

Arno Peters, who has produced a new world-map in the early eighties, for instance, complains that the current map of the world, drawn after Mercator's projection, distorts the actualities of the earth in favour of the countries inhabited by the white people. This image of the world, which has been accepted as definitive for four hundred years, Peters says, is a Eurocentric one where two-thirds of the map surface represent the northern half of the earth while

compressing the southern half into the remaining one-third of the area. He points out that in the Mercator map Europe appears to be larger than South America which, in fact, is nearly double in size; Soviet Union, though smaller, seems considerably larger than South Africa; Scandinavia appears as large as India when, in reality, the latter is three times larger, and Greenland seems larger than China which is about four times larger. Mercator's projection was made in sixteenth century — the time of European expansion — and it seemed quite in order that Europe should occupy in his map a centre-of-the-stage position, but the vision has not been corrected even years after the loss of European empires. Similarly, Peters argues, most of the world histories, having been written in Europe, betrays a Eurocentric attitude. Thus what is dark ages for Europe was taken to be the dark ages for the world despite the fact that China, India and Arabia were making steady progress at the time.

This Eurocentric view found an exponent in Macaulay who, by his famous Minute on Education in 1835, had largely shaped the destiny of India. Macaulay was as contemptuous of the languages and literatures of Asia as William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society, was fond and respectful of them. The other thing that distinguished them was the fact while Jones, who knew 28 languages, had taken pains to master Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit, Macaulay learnt none of the oriental languages, but that did not deter him from passing judgement on them :

I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. ... I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. ...

The question now before us is simply whether, when it is in our power to teach this language [English], we shall teach languages in which, by universal confession, there are no books

on any subject which deserve to be compared to our own; whether, when we can teach European science, we shall teach systems which, by universal confession, whenever they differ from those of Europe, differ for the worse; and whether, when we can patronize sound philosophy and true history, we shall countenance, at the public expense, medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier, astronomy which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school, history abounding with kings thirty feet high and regins thirty thousand years long, and geography, made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter.

This arrogant ethnocentricity, this overwhelming sense of superiority and this total contempt for other peoples' cultures found even cruder expressions in many places of Asia, Africa and the Americas where the European powers established their colonies. The colonial view generally assumed that there could not have been anything in the colonies' past history that was positive or in which one could take legitimate pride or which was worthy of preservation. James Mill, author of the *History of British India*, belonged to this school of thought and to him, the civilizations of Arabia, Persia, India, China, Korea and Japan were all inferior. Confronted with the results of William Jones' researches on India's past, he came up with the explanation that Jones must have been misled by his informant pundits, who, having learnt of the progress made in the west, put the credit of their being originated in India.

It is, therefore, small wonder that the early European settlers in the Americas attributed the splended monuments in Yucatan, Guatemala or Peru to Phoenicians, Egyptians or anyone else but the natives. The worse happened when, in Central America and the Andean areas, the Spanish conquerors virutally exterminated those sections of the population which were supposed to be "repositories of the indigenous culture". In Africa, the relations of Europeans to Africans was generally that of a superior culture—representing a technological society—to an inferior culture—isolated, non-literate

and tribal, and this relationship had to be reinforced by racial discrimination. It became the white man's responsibility to 'civilize' the blacks and thus it also became essential to undermine the structure of African society and the traditional way of African life.

I am not suggesting that the world was only full of Mills and Macaulays. Joneses and Colebrookes certainly were there, but they were in short supply. Moreover, Mills and Macaulays were pillars of empire. Their cultural views went hand in hand with attitudes of political domination and justification of economic exploitation of the colonies. As they divided the world into centre and periphery, they also had divided human culture into a dominant one—their own—and a subordinate one—that of the others. A variation of the theme was to recreate the others after their own image. France, for instance, attempted, for a period, to turn her African possessions into little Frances and tried to assimilate Africans into French culture by making Black Frenchmen of them. But most of the time, the colonialists stressed upon the colonists' otherness.

In response, there also appeared the assertion of the otherness by the colonists. This trend is represented in Africa by Kenyatta who wanted to revive tribal values, rituals and organizations in Kenya, for "all these different aspects of life together that make up a social culture", and no part of it could be undermined without destroying the whole. Not only did he consider these as vital institutions for his people, but also claimed that these were superior to the European ones.

Opposed to this view was that of Nkrumah's who wanted Ghana to "benefit from western technology and institutions without sacrificing the values of its pre-technological society". The conflict between these two trends was somehow tempered by another development which saw a mixture of "the neo-traditionalism of some of the educated *elite* and the modernism of some of the tribal chiefs". The spirit of African cultural revival was accompanied by a glorification of 'negritude' and a search for Pan-African cultural elements. The search is still on.

To many, of course, different cultures became a matter of anthropological interest or of simple curiosity. Even today cultural difference has turned in many places into a spectacle for the tourists to enjoy rather than something for the imperialists to overcome. Otherness has become a saleable commodity — amazingly exotic, quite thrilling and tolerably pleasant. Years ago, I was told by a Filipino sociologist that, in view of the changes affecting the life and habitation of fishermen in the Philippines, some businessmen came out with the brilliant idea of buying up an island and setting a fishermen's traditional village, with the difference that tourists, arriving there on conducted tours, would have been received by beauties clad in fishing nets. The fantasy, however, could not be materialized due to the opposition of social workers, working with the fishermen, of which my informant was a leading one.

III

Meeting of cultures has produced different sorts of results in different parts of the world. The experience of post-colonial Latin America seems to have been very different from that of Africa. According to the Unesco *History of mankind*.

In the regions of Central and South America once dominated by the great empires of the Aztecs, Incas and Mayas, a European overlay rested on a broad Indian foundation. Here, developments of the twentieth century took the form of a cultural reorientation and a movement toward integration which brought to prominence the Indian heritage. The process involved a social revolution through which depressed classes and isolated peoples moved toward full citizenship.

Mexico, which led the process, provides us with the perfect example. Her revolution of 1910 helped the Indians to come out of isolation and incorporate into Mexican national life while giving the Mexicans a new sense of dignity in the integration of the Indian

heritage. We may compare this development with the cultural scene in Egypt where the resurgent Arab nationalism never allowed the Egyptians to identify themselves fully with Pharonic tradition although they take pride in the cultural achievements in their distant past. The consolidation in Mexico of heterogeneous groups, separated by class and ethnic division, was led by the *mestizo* who were of mixed Indian and European descent. It was much easier for them to give equal place to the Indian and European heritage. Although, linguistically, monolingualism of over fifty Amerindian languages gave place, first, to bilingualism with Spanish, and, eventually, to Spanish monolingualism, there has been a genuine rebirth of the arts culminating in the outstanding development of Mexican mural painting that combined traditional indigenous forms and modern social themes. The *indigenismo* movement rejected ethnocentric Indianism on the one hand and a servile imitation of the west on the other. Basing the movement, as it did, on the intrinsic strength of the Indian culture, it also recognized the forces at work in society that make cultural change inevitable. While the principles and influence of the movement have embraced most of the areas in Central and South America, historians tend to give in it a special position to Mexico :

Now Mexico offered to the world the first demonstration in modern times that a people could express its self-respect in terms which it had formerly despised. In a world where European superiority was still almost unchallenged, it was an assertion of human dignity for the mixed blood to be able to boast that he was Indian instead of apologizing for being only partly white. At midcentury Mexico remained an outstanding example of the successful integration and reorientation of races and cultures.

This does not undermine the achievements of the United States which has always been cited as the best example of cultural assimilation. It was no mean success that immigrants from so many European and non-European countries, with different cultures and

diverse background, could accept one language and develop a keen sense of a separate social life. Most of the immigrants who landed in America left their own countries for good and voluntarily jumped into the melting pot. The sense of belonging to America was reinforced by the arts and letters produced in the States even by those who had learnt their skills in Europe. Despite the prejudice against the black, Negro spirituals and Jazz became very much a part of American culture. Restrictions imposed on immigrants from certain areas who were taken to be less assimilable also helped develop solidarity. This, however, could not totally do away with discrimination against the black and Hispanic population. One of the prices of this solidarity was paid by American Indians who were not only displaced, but relegated to reservations.

Across the northern border, Canadians did not produce the kind of fusion that USA did. They developed a bi-cultural society with the English-speaking Protestant majority and French-speaking Catholic minority. When Britain acquired the territory from France in the eighteenth century, it allowed the French population to retain their language, laws, usage and customs. Practically, no attempt was made at synthesizing and the partnership has not been an easy one. Language is an issue on which this uneasiness has often showed itself.

Belgium has also got a language problem. The country was founded a century and a half ago but a thousand-year old linguistic boundary separates Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north from French Wollonia in the south. Many scholars hold that the 1963 laws, fixing the linguistic boundary, have virtually broken up the unitary Belgian state.

That brings us to the language issues throughout the world. Many countries have heterogeneity of languages and this has given rise to problems some of which have been solved in a number of ways while some others have remained unsolved. As in Mexico, Spanish remains dominant in Peru while Portuguese occupies the same position in Brazil. Paraguay practises bilingualism (Guarani

and Spanish). So does Kenya (Swahili and English) while Senegal practises trilingualism (French, Wolof which is the *lingua franca*, and a mother-tongue). 124 African languages and dialects are spoken in Cameroon and Arabic is held in high esteem, but education is given in English because there is no common vernacular. Similarly, mother tongues in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) greatly vary in terms of standardization which complicate the problem of imparting education. Only ten per cent Tanzanians speak Swahili which is the national language and, as a result, English has continued to be important. In Singapore, a small minority speak Mandarin which is being officially promoted at the cost of Hokkien, a major *lingua franca*, and Malay, and the assignment of mother tongues has complicated matters a great deal. Mandarin is also being promoted in Taiwan where it is the language of the minority and Fukienese and Hakka are threatened with extinction. Basque and Catalan have been suppressed in Spain for a long time, which contributed to the rise of Basque separatism and the movement for political and cultural autonomy for the Catalonians. Recent concessions given to the autonomy movements have satisfied the Catalonians but not the Basques.

These examples are perhaps adequate to bring home the question of accommodation of and prejudice against other cultures and the possibilities and problems of practising genuine pluralism within the given system of nation-state.

IV

Let us now take a look at the cultural situation obtaining at home and nearer — in the South Asian area. People here and also outsiders have, time and again, referred to the unique feature in the cultural life of the subcontinent—unity in diversity. Sometimes however the wood is lost for the trees—diversity becomes so obvious as to obstruct the view of unity.

The sense of unity was inspired by the political union forced under the British rule, by the perception of a geographical unit lying between the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean, and by the consciousness of a continuum in history. Many would attribute the unity to Hinduism, others to the similarity in the manner in which 'the truth' was sought after by votaries, from the Vedantic visionary down to the Baul mendicant, while some recount the fact, for whatever its worth, that the frontiers of the Mughal empire were, most of the time, either defended or extended by Rajput generals. There was also the realization that the mingling of different peoples and interaction of diverse cultures had set in a process of assimilation which led to syncretism such as one finds in the *Bhakti* movement or in the Sufi-Yoga tradition. The process resulted in the creation of a mosaic of composite culture. If the foundation of Hinduism was laid by the Vedic people, many of the sacred animals and trees and the Mother goddess came from the Harappans. The Mauryans developed statecraft, the Mughals architecture and miniature painting. The Muslims introduced many musical instruments and paper while the Europeans gave the steam-engine and the printing press. Rice and cotton were the gifts of the pre-Aryans, and the Portuguese brought in potato, pineapple and tobacco. It was because of the materialization of a composite culture that disparate objects and ideas can still be identified as Indian. Over everything else, Indian unity was a shared feeling, a lofty vision and a fond dream.

The spirit of this unity, however, was far from a mono-cultural one. Pluralism existed and was encouraged. Viewing from another point, one realizes that India, before the advent of the British, came to be nearly united only under Chandragupta Maurya, Muhammad bin Tughlaq and Aurangzeb. During the rest of her history she remained fragmented : Megasthenes came to know of the existence of 118 kingdoms in the fourth century B.C. Even the great mass of land and waterways may be divided into three distinct geographical areas : the northern plains, the Deccan and the far south. the people came from different races and stocks. Many cultural trends, from

far and near, confluenced. Several faiths were developed and even each of these appears to be pluralistic. Hindu religion and philosophy have so many doctrines and systems, Buddhism has its vehicles (yanas), Islam has several sects, different schools of jurisprudence and multiple Sufi-orders; Sikhism is open to several interpretations; and Christianity has many churches. Different social groups still follow a variety of social practices and life-cycle ceremonies.

While pluralism was considered valid and diversity respected, conflicts and polarizations were not unknown. It was on the basis of one of the diversities - religion - that the demand for a separate homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent was made and realized in the foundation of Pakistan. But once Pakistan was established, the unity forged in the new state on the basis of religion was proved to be ephemeral. The rulers of Pakistan tried to impose monoculturalism in a situation of cultural plurality. The Bengali-speaking majority of Pakistan did everything in their power to meet this onslaught on their culture : sacrificing lives to make Bengali a state language, resisting the bid to introduce Arabic script for Bengali, protesting an attempt to divide their cultural heritage on religious lines, and reviving traditional cultural events and festivities. As they stressed upon their Bengali identity, they also developed a secular attitude which they were bound to do in the circumstances. Political frustrations and economic grievances came to be added to the reawakened sense of cultural entity and finally led to the birth of Bangladesh.

We were so happy and contented at the near homogeneity of our linguistic and cultural milieu that most of us were completely taken by surprise when fellow citizens from the hill areas claimed that they were different from the Bengalees. In order to achieve their demands for political autonomy and for recognition of separate cultural identity, the hillsmen of Bangladesh, who belong to at least 13 tribes having distinct ways of life, now claim themselves to be a nation. In the event of their success, the possibility of which seems to be remote at the moment, the separateness of each of the ethnic groups, I am sure, will surface.

The other unpredictable development in Bangladesh has been the surreptitious return of religion in politics which cannot but work as a divisive factor. The people never asked for it, but the rulers, for their political gains, first, deleted the principle of secularism from the Constitution and, then, introduced in it a provision making Islam the State religion. These measures have not only demolished one of the pillars on which the State of Bangladesh was founded, but they have also divided the people along religious line and, that too, on an unequal basis.

Undoubtedly, the hillsmen belong to a different culture from the Bangalees, whereas the religious factor is but only one element of Bengali culture. Cultural pluralism demands that we accord an equal place to the cultures of the ethnic groups along with the mainstream culture; it also demands that one religious group does not dominate the others. Our experience in the last half a century has been this that it is easier to forge unity against a common enemy - say, during the nationalist movements of one kind or another— than to maintain it afterwards - say, for the purpose of nation-building or constructing a multinational state.

Pakistan cannot afford to be happy at the discomfiture of Bangladesh, for she has her share of the problem even after having got rid of the irritants in the east. She still tends to practise monoculturalism which faces challenge from Sind. The relegation of Ahmadiyahs to the position of non-Muslims, the conflict between Shias and Sunnis and the fundamentalist demand to also declare the Shias as non-Muslims point out to the danger of primacy of religion in culture and in the making of a nation or a state. Many in Pakistan and their fellow thinkers in Bangladesh and elsewhere could take a lesson from the movement for Arab nationalism which not only ignored the boundaries of the State but also transcended loyalty to Islam and led to the demise of the Pan-Islam movement.

Cultural pluralism seems also to have failed in Sri Lanka where the Buddhist Sinhalese majority is locked in an armed conflict with Hindu Tamil minority whose ethnic separatism has taken the shape of a violent demand for *Tamil Elam*.

Scholars cannot decide whether India should be seen as a multilingual nation or a multinational state. There are nearly a thousand languages, dialects and mother-tongue varieties in India while her Constitution schedules fifteen major languages, accounting for speeches of nearly 90 per cent of the population, to which the Sahitya Akademi has added, for its own purpose, English and four other Indian languages. There is a great divide between the Indo-Aryan languages in the north and the Dravidian languages in the south and a common language for all-Indian communication, a position for which Hindi has been marked, has not yet developed successfully. The borders of the states in India were drawn on linguistic considerations and a three language formula (Hindi, English and mother-tongue or, for the Hindi-speakers, another Indian language) was introduced both for practical purpose and to ease the tension on the language issue.

For a country like India which is made of people belonging to many language, different faiths, various ethnic groups and diverse social practices, cultural pluralism is the most natural course to pursue. Unfortunately, India has been plagued by communal conflicts (involving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs), caste violence (Bihar and elsewhere), and separatist movements with violent overtones (Assam, Nagaland, Punjab and Kashmir). The causes of these developments are many in which concern for perceived loss of cultural identity has played a significant role. For instance, in Punjab, the Sikh-Punjabi-Gurumukhi combine was pitted against the Hindu-Hindi-Devanagari association.

Just as I am grived at the loss of secularism in my country, I find the rise of *Hindutva*, as explained and practised by certain quarters in India, as a frightening threat to her secularism. In this view, Hinduism is a monolithic and militant faith, which, perhaps, is not quite the perception of others, and it is equated with India, which, perhaps, is the last thing expected in a culturally plural society. But India is, and has been for centuries, a plural society in more ways than one, and when one boasts of a long cultural

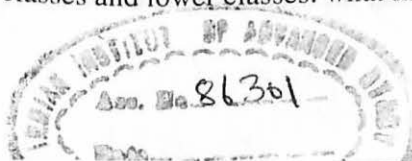
continuity in India, unparalleled in history, he speaks of a culture which originated in pre-Vedic times, which was shaped by many peoples and diverse influences, including those seen by the exponents of Hindutva as outsiders or others, and which, one hopes is not going to disintegrate under any pressure in the near future. Secularism, as Amartya Sen rightly points out, is an inseparable part of a more comprehensive idea of an integrally pluralist society, and a very important aspect of the recognition of the larger idea of a heterogeneous identity.

I have said more than enough on secularism. It was not to you alone that I was addressing. I was also taking to myself and my countrymen for whom, I believe, secularism is equally indispensable for building up a humane society. Looking at South Asia and beyond today, I cannot get rid of a lingering suspicion, which I hate to admit, that, as we understand cultural pluralism or the norms of a plural society more and more, we tend to value it less and less.

V

I should have pointed out, while I was speaking about India, that there is one view which finds casteism as another form of pluralism. M N Srinivas, for instance, says that living in a caste society means living in a pluralistic cultural universe. I find it very difficult to agree with this view. The truth to which this statement points out is the cultural differences between the upper castes and lower castes, but cultural pluralism does not only emphasize or acknowledge separateness, it expects accommodation and toleration which seem to be lacking in this case. It is equally true that with the spread of education and economic opportunities, one notices a mobility in people's position in society and often the caste division is being replaced by class division which is not peculiar to India.

Almost everywhere cultural difference exists between the people of the upper classes and lower classes. what in English parlance is



often referred to as the difference between U and non-U. There are other cultural differences as well such as the ones between what is usually, if not quite correctly, called the modern and the traditional. In the west we find differences between the cultures of the white and the black or the recent phenomenon of the cultures of the heterosexual and the homosexual. In each case there is a lack of mutual respect. Only in some cases, owing to a great extent to the development of a new sense of self-identity, cultural or national, there have appeared a renewed interest of the urban people in what has come to be known as folk culture.

We also tend to divide cultures in certain other ways. We talk of high culture to denote its intellectuality and of popular culture to refer to its aspect of popular entertainment. There is also the expression sub-culture to mean the culture of a distinguishable smaller group. Both the terms popular culture and sub-culture are used in a slightly derogatory sense and those affected by these have hit back the high priests of high cultures as culture-vultures.

In 1959, C P Snow delivered his lecture on *The two cultures* and created unprecedented waves of controversy in the west. By two cultures he meant the scientific and literary ones between which he observed a gulf of mutual incomprehension :

The total incomprehension gives, much more pervasively than we realise, living in it, an unscientific flavour of the whole 'traditional' culture, and that unscientific flavour is often, much more than we admit, on the point of turning anti-scientific. The feelings of one pole become the anti-feelings of the other. If the scientists have the future in their bones, then the traditional culture responds by wishing the future did not exist. It is the traditional culture, to an extent remarkably little diminished by the emergence of the scientific one, which manages the western world.

Snow's partiality for the scientific culture is obvious, though one does not know why did he find it necessary to indulge in this kind of controversy. Among the responses he evoked, the most gentle

one, perhaps, came from Lionel Trilling who judged *The two cultures* as "a book which is mistaken in a very large way". While rejecting Snow's simplifications and his unfounded accusation that the culture of humanity was less concerned than that of science with the conditions prevailing in the world, Trilling gave us a brilliant concept of culture :

The concept of culture is an idea of great attractiveness and undoubted usefulness. We may say that it begins in the assumption that all human expressions and artifacts are indicative of some considerable tendencies in the life of social groups or sub-groups, and that what is indicative is also causative—all cultural facts have their consequences. To think in cultural terms is to consider human expressions not only in their overt existence and a avowed intention, but in, as it were, their secret life, taking cognizance of the desire and impulses which lie behind the open formulation. In the judgments which we make when we think in the category of culture we rely to a very large extent upon the style in which an expression is made, believing that style will indicate, or betray, what is not intended to be expressed. The aesthetic mode is integral to the idea of culture, and our judgments of special groups are likely to be made chiefly on an aesthetic basis—we like or do not like what we call their lifestyles, and even when we judge moralities, the criterion by which we choose between two moralities of, say, equal strictness or equal laxness is likely to be an aesthetic one.

The concept of culture affords to those who use it in a sense of the liberation of their thought, for they deal less with abstractions and mere objects, more with the momentous actualities of human feelings as these shape and condition the human community, as they make and as they indicate the quality of man's existence. Not the least of the attractions of the cultural mode of thought are the passions which attend it—because it assumes that all things are causative or indicative of the whole of the cultural life, it proposes to us those

intensities of moralized feeling which seem appropriate to our sense that all that is good in life is at stake in every cultural action. An instance of mediocrity or failure in art or thought is not only what it is but also a sin, deserving to be treated as such. These passions are vivifying : they have the semblance of heroism.

If all that is good in life is at stake in every cultural action it is more so when elements in culture militate against basic human values and bear the traces of racism, jingoism, obscurantism or some other reprehensible idea. The only thing we can do is to meet this challenge by another set of ideas that may appeal to the nobler instincts of man. Bearing this in mind, the development of plural cultures should be welcome and their equal place in society ensured. What is most needed is to bring into existence conditions which will create the scope for development of the potential — not only of individuals but also of groups which, by sheer forces of circumstances, may be lacking the opportunity of expression of their creativity.

VI

In The religion of man Rabindranath Tagore attempted to define man as he appeared to the poet :

When I say that I am a man, it is implied by the word that there is a such a thing as a general ideal of Man which persistently manifests itself in every particular human being, who is different from all other individuals.

Then he went on to add :

Our impulse to give expression to Universal Man produces arts and literature. ... And not merely in his arts, but in his own behaviour, the individual for his excellence give emphasis to an ideal which has some value of truth that ideally belongs to all men.

Tagore looked upon civilization not as the product of a certain group of people or area but as the creation of the human race, and as an expression of the Universal Man.

This view of man and his civilization is important for understanding culture. Since cultures are related to definite space and time and since they admit of differences, they may be seen as particular and specific rather than universal. But there is also a commonality that runs through all cultures, manifesting itself in every particular culture which is different in many ways from other cultures.

This is so because culture deals with human beings and their world, and it is, therefore, bound to reflect both the particularity and universality of man that Tagore speaks of and also of the particularity and universality of the society one belongs to.

Anouar Abdel-Malek feels that we are witnessing at the present a resurgence of the dimension of specificity which is deeply rooted in our different histories and which has been obtained after having faced the menaces of reductionism and hegemonism. We have already noticed aspects of hegemonism in cultural history. We also know that 'other' cultures have often been assessed by the norms of the dominant culture. This lies at the root of reductionist approach to culture. Abdel-Malek speaks of three inter-woven circles of specificities : national, cultural and civilizational. This means that specificities are dynamic and not static and that we may refer to different specificities in different contexts. Thus we may talk of a Tamil culture, an Indian culture and a South Asian or an Asian culture. We may wish to distinguish the trees and we may like to see the whole wood.

Abdel-Malek warns that specificity will not wither away by a stroke of transnational voluntarism. This, of course, is true. Just as one does not want to lose his identity, so one does not want to lose the identity of his culture. This reminds one of the saying of Montaigne that "the most universal quality is diversity".

But we are living in a world which is also growing smaller and

becoming interdependent. The magnificent and powerful communication systems developed in our times have made exchange of cultures easier and information about cultures easily available. There is a special need and also opportunity today of "interaction between universalization tendencies and tendencies towards cultural specificity", and of arriving at universality through specificities.

This is very different from the idea of cultural homogeneity. Scholars have shown that the requirements of the industrial society, whose productive system was based on cumulative science and technology, included cultural homogeneity and its convergence with a political unit. This homogeneity, in one form or other, was demanded by the west of other cultures and at some point of time, an alien culture was imposed on them. As other societies entered the industrial age, common elements also spread through.

But the universality we are talking about is not the same thing as the homogeneity. All cultures bear the mark of the locus and period, and also carry within themselves the seeds of universalism. The folk poet of Bengal, who possibly never travelled far, had a simple expression to make about the universality of man :

নানান বরন গাভী রে ভাই একই বরন দুধ ।
জগৎ ভরমিয়া দেখলাম একই মায়ের পুত ॥

(cows are of many colours, but the colour of milk is the same; having roamed through the world, I find everywhere the children begat by the same mother). What the poet says about man, applies equally to his culture.

VII

We have seen that cultural diversity is natural, but the acceptance of such diversity does not come so easily. To one belonging to a

particular culture other cultures appear as exogenous. Very often people view their own culture as the normative one while treating those of others as deviations. This is the ethnocentric or the monoculturist position. Take, for instance, the use of the word 'native'. Originally, it was used in relation to a place where one was born, and then in the sense of a local inhabitant. During the period of European domination of the world, it came to designate 'the inferior inhabitants of a place subjected to alien power or conquest', and, more particularly, to refer to a 'non-European'. "To go native" has not been an experience of admiration : it is said jocularly, but, perhaps, not without a measure of contempt or disapproval.

Meeting of cultures has sometimes produced fusion, but has more frequently led to antagonism. Some people have ignored other cultures, but in many cases, particularly, in the colonial times, many have felt a strong urge to interfere with others' cultures. Such problems have not resolved themselves even after the apparent demise of colonialism. We have, not infrequently, noticed that even within a national formation, the culture of the dominant group tends to take precedence over those of others. In such contexts, dominated groups, big or small, within the newly independent nation-states, appear gradually to become more conscious of their cultural separateness and begin to assert their distinctiveness. This results in tensions and conflicts, and, joined by the ambitions of the nascent elite within such groups, the situation tends to lead to political confrontations. Thus plurality of cultures has got the potential of "destabilizing" the given format of a nation-state. What is seen as the separatist movement from one point of view and a struggle for independence from the other always carries within itself a large cultural content and much of its inspiration and many of its symbols are drawn from the cultural field.

The co-existence of cultures is possible where the notion of a plural society is politically accepted. The concept of cultural pluralism seems to have developed with the gradual awareness of the need for a pluralistic world where the partnership among the nations

is more humane and egalitarian as also for a plural society within each nation. The concept accepts that a political nation or nation-state does not have to be monocultural and that a cultural nation may live in more than one nation-state. We can also try to reduce the tensions mentioned before by developing the universal aspects of culture which are based on the basic unity of mankind; by making genuine attempts to know and understand other cultures; and by fostering a spirit of toleration and accommodation. Instead of forcing homogeneity, we should help flower diversity which at certain point could meet and become complementary elements of a growing human culture.

I would like to end this lecture with the words of Pascal : "Plurality which is not reduced to unity is confusion; unity which does not depend on plurality is tyranny".

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Born in 1937, Professor Anisuzzaman took his BA (Honours) and MA degrees in Bengali from the University of Dhaka, standing first in the first class in both. He obtained Ph D from the same University in 1962; did further research on Bengali literature and society as a Post-doctoral Fellow at the University of Chicago (1964-65) and as a Commonwealth Academic Staff Fellow at the University of London (1974-75); and was associated with research projects of the United Nations University (1978-83). Having taught at the Universities of Dhaka (1959-69) and Chittagong (1969-85), he has returned to the former in 1985 as a Professor of Bengali.

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* All are published from Dhaka, unless mentioned otherwise.

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