

VIVE LA DIFFERANCE! IMPERIALISM, COLONIALISM, POST-COLONIALISM: CHALLENGES TO CULTURAL PLURALITY

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I use the term 'imperialism' here to refer to the attitudes and behaviour patterns of a culture that exercises hegemony of some kind or other on cultures different from itself. The term colonialism could then be used to the situation of a culture that is dominated by another culture. One of these is identified in terms of assumed superiority which does not brook any questioning by the other, while the other is tacitly assumed to be the recipients of the so-called benefits of contact with the dominant culture. The two are conceived as opposites and the relationship is dialectical. The privileged culture, it is believed, bestows respectability on the under-privileged one. It has obviously greater military power, economic viability, and political authority, and hence establishes an influence on the other. Post-colonialism in this context will be understood as the condition of continuing, dependence or- servility, even when the imperial power may have physically withdrawal from the scene for the time being.

The imperial abuse of power is matched 'in degree by the colonial practice of Servility: in matters of culture, it involves the substitution, partial or wholesale, of alien forms of cultural expression and manifestation by the colonized. The colonization of the country is followed by the colonializes of the subject population, and this invariably colonializes the culture also. In the later 19th century and early 20th century, Indians in government offices and schools wearing a dhoti tucked around the waste, a shirt and tie, a c6at, and often a turban or hat on the head, were a common sight in many parts of India, This motley could be seen as a regular feature not only in this bizarre costume, but also ill the intellectual attitudes as well as the behavioural patterns among educated Indians. Educated in those days meant only trained in the western way in new model schools. Tile impact of imperialism on culture was thus institutionalized and was the most visible aspect of the hegemony of the British. The worship of

everything British was built into the psyche of the educated Indians, who were happy to be willing slaves under the foreign masters. Some Babus continued to admire the British, like Nirad Choudhuri, who thought that there were no villages in India; for him only the villages in England were real villages. Food habits too changed among the urban classes, and even food items assumed foreign names, which were considered civilized, sophisticated and tasty. Even foreign games, too, like cricket, acquired a respectability seldom conceded to native ones using stick and ball. Even gestures like nodding the head or shrugging the shoulders or waving the hand had to be borrowed along with the use of British idioms and Received Pronunciation, discarding the unwanted intrusions of substandard Indianisms. While the spokesmen of imperialism did whatever they liked without strict adherence to scruples in the manner of Robert Clive, who probably laid the first stone of the British Empire in India, sometimes called Indian empire too. The legacy of the Commonwealth bestowed on the colonials and sometimes gleefully accepted by them as an honour, was bound to lose its tinsel glamour, when the “mother country” does not have the wherewithal to keep it going and maintain its relevance. All culture is hybrid by definition, but what is deplorable is the high and low status between the unequal partners—on the parallel of the haves and have-nots, the pure and the impure, the mainstream and the marginal. This discrimination led to imbalance in cultural give and take, and what should ideally have been a close collaboration degraded ‘into a donor and recipient relationship and vitiated the whole enterprise. The indiscriminate discrimination in the political power game affected the cultural scenario also and led to the depletion of national and native cultures. This is the kind of threat that underlies any attempt at one-way globalization—any one way of life being glorified as superior and standard, while all the others are labeled as ethnic or exotic. All cultures are of equal value and worth, the tribal is not inferior to the urban—‘the rural is not subordinate to the metropolitan. But those who have not been brought up in an ambience of cultural equality may be prompted by the greatness in political power or economic superiority to underestimate the real quality of cultures.

Unity, not uniformity, is the objective to be sought. Hence, diversity ‘in unity, rather than unity in diversity, should be the goal of a new world. It is not ‘just the goal depending upon any whimsical choice. But the facts of life are such that this world of ours is made up of many cultures. This plurality is a fact, and not a desideratum. Just as every language is adequate to meet the needs of its users, every culture is intrinsically on a par with other cultures, and it is in their reciprocal relationship that they jointly seek fulfillment. The hegemony of any single culture, like the hegemony

of any single political power, will create an unhealthy atmosphere in which all cultures will ultimately perish. Together they can flourish and replenish the earth, but when put 'in Jeopardy by stressing globalization and ignoring regional creativity, they may prove sterile and stunted. Today the threat is greater, since information technology seems to pave the path of standardization, until a counter-technology is developed which will control the tendency towards homogenization of cultures.

Marginalization can take place not only 'in the context of globalization; perhaps less conspicuous, but equally damaging can be the marginalization that takes place as a result of internal colonialism, without any external or extra-national force acting, as a catalyst. The tribal people, the first nations, the aborigines are subtly bypassed, sidelined, and made marginal not only 'in the political sphere, but in the economic and cultural spheres too. The downtrodden communities in India, the Red Indians in America, the Innuits in Canada, the Maoris and Bushmen in Australia, the Afro-Americans in USA are living yet languishing examples of the tyranny of subjugation and subordination within the same country. The literature of every nation can sensitize each citizen to the deplorable situation arising from 'internal colonialism or the "imperial" display of power and hegemony maintained by one set of people over others within the same country. Perhaps this subjugation in subtle ways extends to the domestic sphere as well; the domination of the male over the female is a form of imposing male preferences on the female. Patriarchy of one kind or other is 'in operation in the imperial/colonial mode of human relationship. The impoverishment of culture resulting from the attempt at homogenization can be controlled and checked only if the existing power structure is not allowed to keep this imbalance.

The Indian term for "culture" is "samskrti." But if it is juxtaposed to "prakrti," as in the dichotomy of nature versus nurture, it loses its vitality and validity, which are ultimately drawn from nature, human or nonhuman. It leads to the notion of dominance. It destroys the value of tolerance. Indian society is, and has always been, multiracial, multilingual, multi-religious, multiethnic, and so is the world today, and any attempt to reduce it to a mono-racial, monolingual, mono-religious, mono-ethnic will eventually lead to its ruin. The lotus flower is many-petalled, so are the rays of the sun, radiating in a wide spectrum and covering the entire multiverse, resplendent and glorious, magnificent and gorgeous in its immaculate splendour, displaying vibrant variety and rich diversity underlying its unity, celebrating the full orchestral symphony of diversity, resisting standardization, uniformity and homogeneity. Culture, per se, is

resistance to tyranny, to centralization, to hegemony, to the domination of one over the many; it is bahuvacan or plural, by definition. In one sense there are only cultures: each nation is part of that map, contributing its specific flavour and savour. Culture is a mosaic, not a monolith. Culture is freedom, equality, recognition and acceptance of the other; it flourishes in an atmosphere of shared existence, a festival of differences and divergences, not a i-nonochrome. True maturity or wisdom consists in imbibing the spirit of the other, without surrendering one's individuality and identity. The imposition of a hegemony we call imperialism; the surrender of autonomy we call colonialism. Neither imperial nor colonial is true culture. Let me end with a few lines from my poem called *Gotrayanam* (la migration of des tribus), describing the progress and proliferation of culture across man's history and the earth's geography:

Listen to me, friends,
 You, who have taken the pledge
 To venture out, what is it
 That inspires us
 To recreate the promised land?
 Come, chiefs of the clans,
 Gautama, Kashyapa,
 Vasishta, Parashara,
 Vishwamitra, Bharadwaja,
 Leaders of the clans to be,
 Come, line up one by one,
 Those ready for the plunge.

Pack up in bundles
 The load we have to take:
 The heritage we pride in,
 Ditties to be sung en route,
 Fables and jokes
 To be listened to with j'oy;
 Things to sustain us
 Through the long sojourn.

Refugees we are not,
 We wish not to plunder,
 Neither buyers of land
 Nor sellers are we,

We are not merchants,
We go as seekers, pilgrims.

Spurred on by the star
That shines in fiery eyes,
We know and savour
The depths of compassion,
We cancel and recast
The calendar of wisdom;
Together we'll build
A new edifice of culture.
The world we'll recognize
As an ever-changing image,
And seek a foothold
Along unfamiliar tracks.

To stay in one's own culture may be a virtue, but to outgrow one's own culture and recognize and accept other cultures is a greater glory, a greater fulfillment. So let us proceed on this route of unending discoveries, infinite satisfactions and thrills. Vive la difference!