

Shorter Note

CULTURE AS CULTIVATION OF CREATIVE PERSONALITY, FREEDOM AND PLURALITY: WALKING WITH S.P. NAGENDRA

Ananta Kumar Giri

Madras Institute of Social Sciences, Chennai, E-mail: aumkrishna@gmail.com

The first ingredient of this triad is the principle of harmony, which sustains the universe amidst all its incessant changes, the second is the principle of coordination in the social environment, and the third is the principle of Unity, 'which transcends all the diverse forms of states, behaviours and conflicts, and permeates thought and action with ineffable joy.' We thus arrive at a three-fold concept of the Ultimate Value: viz. Peace, Welfare, Unity. Life becomes charged with meaning, only when the individual begins seriously and consciously to realize the three-fold principle in his life, and it in and through such realization that he attains to the height of his personality. Progress then consists in the development of personality through a conscious realization of the three-fold life principle of Harmony, Welfare and Unity.

—S.P. Nagendra (1996a), "DP Mukherjee as a Sociologist," p. 10.

The etymology of the word [culture] links it with 'cultus,' therefore, its meaning as 'celebration of divine worship' or 'incarnation of religion,' or 'art of life,' by which phrase Whitehead means the art of living, the art of living well and the art of living better, or as the art of virtuous and prudential living, call it pursuit of excellence or participation in truth, beauty and goodness. It is another thing that in the culture of modern science which, for Snow, is the model to be imitated by other culture, that of the humanities, no virtue or prudence is required to know the truth.

—S.P. Nagendra (1996b), "Towards a Cultural Policy in India: Can Culture Be Planned?" p. 8-9.

Professor S.P. Nagendra was a creative sociologist of his times. Nagendra explored new horizons of art of knowledge and cultivation of personality. What Nagendra wrote about DP Mukerji can be applied to him: "The direction of his intellectual interest [...] lay in his effort to discover new meanings in the traditional Indian symbols which could be conducive to the

augmentation of Personality even in this age of fading lights and broken cultures” (1996a: 30). Nagendra had a dialogue with modern philosophical and sociological discourses as well as insights from Indian traditions. Nagendra lamented that Indian social sciences lacked a deep engagement with theory. He read widely and deeply and gifted us his essays and reflections after considerable deep meditations. These essays and works such as *The Concept of Ritual in Modern Sociological Theory* (Nagendra 1971), “DP Mukerji as a Sociologist” (Nagendra 1996a) and “Culture and Social Policy” (Nagendra 1996b) are not easily and widely available but need to be easily available to present generation of scholars so that we can engage in creative memory work as part of creative theorizing and cultivating a new art of self and society.

It feels like this morning our taking a walk in the beautiful garden of G.B. Pant Social Institute, Allahabad where we first met in August 1991 where Professor Nagendra was then Director. During our stay together on campus, we used to take a walk early in the morning and whether cold or warm we used to be together on the walk. During this walk we used to discuss many themes mostly pertaining to sociology, philosophy and social theory. Henry David Thoreau tells us that for ruminating while walking we need to walk like a camel. We must walk at a slow pace. But we sometimes walked like a camel and other times we moved a bit swiftly. These early morning walks also give us an experience that we are not proprietors of knowledge but what Thoreau calls children of the mist.

Nagendra urges us to live life as a work of art. As he tells us in his reflection on the legacy of D.P. Mukerji, a great challenge for society is to create a space for creative self-expression and making of personality which would integrate different concerns and aspirations of self and society such as “freedom, equality and progress” (1996a: 8). As Nagendra writes: “Professor Mukerji’s main thesis [...] is that freedom, equality and progress are the sine qua non of the development of personality, which is another way of saying that they essentially derive their meaning from their relationships with personality” (ibid). Furthermore, “[...] the real test of equality is whether it can provide the right opportunity for the self-expression to the individual [...] If the individual has the right milieu to give proper expression to his workmanship without any interference from the group or the society, he will be truly equal to others” (ibid: 16). Thus Nagendra is concerned about the nature and quality of social condition which facilitates creative self-expression of individual and development of personality.

Nagendra is also deeply concerned about an appropriate cultural condition of plurality which helps us overcome the regimented structures of uniformity and a totalizing unity. As he writes: “Incidentally there is much in common between the condition of freedom as suggested by Prof. Mukerji and that of plurality as conceived by Hannah Arendt. *It is in the company of others that man initiates deeds, which according to her, bring him out in his*

uniqueness and unpredictability and make him immortal. Plurality, therefore, is the essential ground of culture as is freedom" (ibid: 17; emphasis added). In cultivating plurality and freedom, the struggle here is between what Nagendra building on Bourdieu calls "monothetic logic" and "polythetic mentality" (1996b: 18). In cultivating plurality, it is helpful here to remember the following lines of Nagendra:

What Bourdieu calls 'monothetic logic,' the logic of science and the theoretical argument characterizes the mentality of a very small segment of our cultural communities; their predominant mode of thinking is still 'polythetic' [...] This mentality which we moderns consider as one of inferior intellectuality, is more conducive to plurality than the antipodal monothetic or logical mentality, in the sense that it is averse to imposing a cut and dried 'form' on life as the modern mentality is wont to do. The polythetic mentality thus provides for the realization of one's individuality in an infinite number of ways, at least in more ways than possible within the limits of uniformity imposed by the latter (ibid: 18).

Acknowledgement

This is the text of the first Professor SP Nagendra Memorial Lecture, delivered at Lucknow on Jan 11, 2011. The author thanks Dr. Vinod Chandra and the SP Nagendra Memorial Committee for Social Sciences, especially Professor Srivardhan Pathak, for their kind invitation. I am grateful to Professor P.S. Pandey, the President of the Society, and all distinguished audience, specially Professors M.S. Sodha, Manoj Kumar Mishra, Dr. Ananda Vardhan Pathak, Dr. Vineeta Pathak and Dr. Sukant K. Chaudhury for their kind interest and encouragement.

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