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## **Cultural Dynamics and Intellectual Debate: A Reflection on Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian***

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### **Abstract:**

The cultural divisions of the world can be easily traced by taking the example of the East and the West. A cultural divide is a virtual barrier caused by cultural variations that preclude interactions and harmonious exchange of beliefs among people of different cultures. West expects India to be a utopian land of mysticism or a nation without intellectual wisdom. The objective of the research article is to analyze the issue of cultural separatism, and it aims to propose the rudiments of cultural growth by taking India as a model. To explore the view, the notable work *The Argumentative Indian* by Amartya Sen has been taken up for the study. A lot is to be acknowledged about the history of colonial India and how it positively emerged as a nation full of arguments and agreements. India maintains its cultural identity and readily adapts to modern ideas. The study uses the model of India as an idol in carving the fundamentals of cultural growth on a broader level for both the Orient and the Occident. It further explains how India's internal clashes of opinions and the external Western assumptions motivate the Indians to discover, learn and bloom incandescently.

**Keywords:** Cultural divide, imitator, intellectual wisdom, rudiments, cultural identity, orient, occident.

### **Introduction:**

“Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 192). Such compelling views of the French philosopher, Albert Camus propose the gist of significance of the culture in human society. Culture refers to the lifestyle of a set of human

beings, their conduct, beliefs, values and emblems that they take delivery of; exceeded along by verbal exchange and imitation from one era to the other. The variation in culture that extends to all facets of human life creates an impression at the surface level as if such differences divide the world into smaller groups. However, a deeper understanding of cultural diversity within groups leads to a 'Bulk Phenomenon'. A similar view has been expressed explicitly by Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in his essay entitled *The World Community*. He writes, "We should use cultural and ideological differences peacefully. We should use cultural and ideological differences to enrich our wisdom and produce a higher international ethics" (87)

Since ancient times, the difference in cultures has always been a constant concern; the factors determining such differences might include political and economic supremacy. The narrative saga of cultural differences is highlighted primarily due to the conflict of interests which is evident not only between the East and the West but within the diverse countries of the world. Such difference is widely explicated by Edward Said in his worldwide acclaimed work *Orientalism*. He establishes the eponymous term 'Orientalism' as a critical idea to explain the West's attitude towards the East. In his book *Orientalism*, he writes:

One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or myths which were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away. I believe that Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient (which is what, in its academic or scholarly form, it claims to be). (14)

Amartya Sen, the recipient of the 'Nobel Prize' (Economics) in the year 1998, was born on 3 November 1933 in Santiniketan, West Bengal (on the campus of Visva-Bharati). Visva-Bharati presents Rabindranath Tagore's ideals and beliefs to the entire world. Thus early association of Amartya Sen with Rabindranath Tagore's ideals left an indelible impact on his life which can be traced throughout his writings. His area of research centred around the contribution of individuals' values in collective decision-making for the economic welfare of society. His diverse thinking served as a guideline to carve his theory of the possibility of peaceful coexistence of varying cultures. His book *The Argumentative Indian* published on June 2, 2005, delineates the notion of intellectual pluralism and glorifies India's history by focusing on the traditions of public debate. *The Argumentative Indian* is a collection of essays that outlines his desire to recognize modern India based on its lengthy argumentative style.

### **The Colonial Imprint on Indian Self-Identity:**

The major restraint in the way of cultural growth is the lack of acceptance of the possibility that conflicting opinions can coexist, learn from each other and evolve. The cliché of building walls and burning bridges to safeguard cultural authenticity is ill-founded. Communication plays a key role in crossing these cultural boundaries and embracing what lies beyond. Sen's arguments regarding the superficiality of the Westerns, considering India only as a spiritual land; objected based on atheist roots of Indian culture and tradition. During an interview in the *California* magazine, published by the University of California, Berkely, he explained:

In some ways, people had got used to the idea that India was spiritual and religion-oriented. That gave a leg up to the religious interpretation of India, although Sanskrit had a larger atheistic literature than exists in any other classical language. Madhav Acharya, the remarkable 14<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher, wrote this rather great book called *Sarvadarshansamgraha*, which discussed all the religious schools of thought within the Hindu structure. The first chapter is 'Atheism'- a very strong presentation of the argument in favor of atheism and materialism. (The Arguing Indian, *California Magazine*, 2014)

The underlying thoughts in Amartya Sen's book *The Argumentative Indian* highlight the mistaken views of people, preserving one's culture with the sense of withdrawal or their strong beliefs on cultural separatism. The constant urge to explore Indian traditions and values is patent in the West but the lack of admiration for the same supervenes the global cultural growth. On the contrary, Sen advocates the view that the nations should rather learn from each other, grab the necessities, evolve constantly and meet the converting requirements of time and social context to become better each passing day. Historical facts prove that the real interest of Europeans regarding Indian tradition arose with the establishment of the Royal Asiatic Society in Bengal East. William Jones translated plenty of Indian classics like *the Ramayana* and *Bhagavad Gita*. Through translation, the Westerns easily got access to the richness of the prevailing Indian culture but their depictions and portrayals were based on their oriental attitude. Therefore, the self-identity of the Indians is somewhere deeply affected by the power of the colonial cultures, their varieties of ideas and their classification each collaterally and dialectically.

Amartya Sen's work *The Argumentative Indian* depicts numerous examples from various fields by highlighting the contribution of Indian intellectuals in enriching the world knowledge

system. It is on the part of Westerners that they either ignore the Indian contribution or show an indifferent attitude in recovering a notable Indian cognizance of the existing culture. The reality is that this stance does not take adequate note of the dialectical elements of the connection between India and the West. India is the best example of the existence of a diverse cultural heritage along with its diverse beliefs, customs and responsibilities. Shashi Tharoor quotes E.P. Thompson's views in his work entitled *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*:

All the convergent influences of the world run through this society: Hindu, Moslem, Christian, Secular, liberal, Maoist, democratic socialist, Gandhian. There is not a thought that is being thought in the West or East that is not active in some Indian mind.  
(9)

### **Rudiments of Cultural Growth- The Concept of Indian Heterogeneity:**

The Indian heterogeneity can be very well understood with the example of the great Rabindranath Tagore, his literary works and his views about India as mentioned in the 'Culture and Communication' one of the sections of Sen's *The Argumentative Indian*. According to Amartya Sen, the West theorized at first that India was the source of superior wisdom. Schopenhauer to one degree even argued that the New Testament ought to somehow be of Indian origin. He asserted that the New Testament is attested with the aid of its Indian ethics, which transforms morals into asceticism, its pessimism, and its avatar, 'in the person of Christ'. Later on, Westerners rejected their theories with great ardour, sometimes blaming India for not living up to their unfounded expectations.

Similarly, Westerners judged the works of Rabindranath Tagore based on his physical appearance, and the way he dressed himself in non-western clothes. His subtle look with beard declared him 'a sage like poet' (94) who was mystic, confined in his religious mystery and enjoying a fearless relationship with God. Tagore's spirituality and mysticism in his devotional poems appeal to readers regardless of their beliefs. Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats were the first who led the refrain of adoration in the Western appreciation of Tagore, and very soon moved to shrill criticism. Yeats praises Rabindranath Tagore in such a manner:

These lyrics...display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all me lifelong...Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth. (Introduction to *Geetanjali*, 10)

Later in the year 1935, Yeats denounced the same work saying 'Damn Tagore'. Amartya Sen points out, "This arose partly from the inability of Tagore's writings to fit into the narrow box in which Yeats wanted to place and keep him." (95) Tagore enriched literature through his tremendous contribution in the form of drama, stories and poems. His works were published frequently, even in English, but Yeats was bothered by the difficulty of fitting Tagore's later writings into the picture which he had supplied to the West. This false portrayal affected not only Tagore but the Indian identities as well. Westerners ignored the deep-rooted diversity of the Indian society.

To elucidate the notion of cultural growth, Amartya Sen takes the example of Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, the two prominent thinkers of the Indian Renaissance. Both of them had different opinions on various matters but their difference in views never separated them from being an integral part of the vast Indian culture which gives India its true nature. Sen quotes Jawaharlal Nehru's words from his *Prison Diary*, 1941:

Gandhi and Tagore. Two types entirely different from each other, and yet both of them typical of India, both in the long line of India's great men...It is not so much because of any single virtue but because of the tout ensemble, that I felt that among the world's great men today Gandhi and Tagore were supreme as human beings. What good fortune for me to have come into close contact with them. (91)

Despite having dissimilar opinions, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi supported and accepted each other's beliefs which made possible the emergence of India as a developing nation. It is a mistake on the part of Westerners to label India as an irrational and mystic country and call it the land of snake charmers and ancient folklore. Westerners don't accept India as a hub of raw ideas and inventions. India is a pot which takes the incoming cultures and makes them an indispensable part of the Indian culture and society. Unlike the complete rejection of the Indian culture and identity by the Westerners, the great Indian leaders focused on adapting what was necessary to make feasible the growth of India. This understanding of the essentials of growth was a necessity to make the Indian nation a prosperous one. This can be traced by Tagore's opinion to propound India's right to be independent without denying the importance of what India could learn, freely and profitably from the West. Amartya Sen writes about Tagore in the essay titled *Tagore And His India*:

He was afraid that a rejection of the West in favour of an indigenous Indian tradition was not only limiting in itself; it could easily turn into hostility to other influences from

abroad, including Christianity, which came to parts of India by the fourth century, Judaism, which came through Jewish immigration shortly after the fall of Jerusalem, as did Zoroastrianism through Parsee migration...and most importantly Islam, which has had a very strong presence in India since the eighth century. (108)

The blind acceptance of Western approaches is useless; people should adapt and change in order to contribute to their individual growth as well as the growth of a nation. Tagore focused on the characteristic strengths of Western ideas such as rational argument and freedom of mind.

One of Tagore's students at Santiniketan, Satyajit Ray was deeply influenced by Tagore's vision of 'cultural give and take'. In his films, Ray does not emphasize on pure vision of a tradition-bound society but glorifies the heterogeneous lives and commitments of contemporary India. Satyajit Ray's appreciation of cultural differences, along with his pursuit of communication beyond regional boundaries is highly appreciated by Amartya Sen in his essay titled *Our Culture, Their Culture*:

He never fashioned his creation to cater to what the West may expect from India, but nor did he refuse to enjoy and learn from what Western and other cultures offered. And when it came to the recognition of cultural diversity within India, Ray's delicate portrayal of the varieties of people that make us what we are as a nation cannot be outmatched. (138)

There are indeed many differences between the West and the East. Such differences led to the dissimilarity of perceptions of Westerners regarding interpretations of India. Inclusiveness and cultural diversity are the main characteristics of the Indian community which serve as a unifying bond among Indians across the world. Thus, the grand contrast between 'our culture' and 'their culture' is the colossal variety within each of these cultures. Mahatma Gandhi expresses his views on the issue of cultural divisions in India:

India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation; they merge into it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. That country must have a faculty for assimilation. India has ever been such a country. (*Hind Swaraj*, 44)

## Conclusion:

Cultural growth is possible when people are aware of the possibilities of growth which are available outside the limited boundaries. They should appreciate and adapt the elements to make their culture better. In this process, the proponents of one culture are accumulated and passed from one generation to another. While accepting new elements from other cultures, India has always maintained its distinctiveness. AK Ramanujan succinctly expresses it, "When Indians learn, quite expertly, modern science, business or technology, they 'compartmentalize' these interests the new ways of thought and behavior do not replace but live along with older religious ways" (Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay 57). One should treat failures and shortcomings as critical opportunities for learning, individually and collectively. Thus, cultural growth will be the result of treating traditions not as a liability but as an asset.

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