

VALEDICTORY SPEECH
BY
DR. KARAN SINGH, PRESIDENT, ICCR
ON
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AT THE CONFERENCE
“THE RELEVANCE OF THE TRADITIONAL CULTURES
FOR THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE”
AT INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE, NEW DELHI.

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, President of the IIC Asia Project which we began about 20 years ago, Amb. Nalin Surie, Amb. Satish Mehta, Dr. Kavita Sharma, Director of the India International Centre, and very distinguished delegates around this table.

After the brilliant encapsulation by Ambassador Surie, I really do not feel there is very much left to say. I agree wholeheartedly with almost all the conclusions that you have reached. It is a great privilege to have such a distinguished group of academicians and intellectuals here in India International Centre, which has become one of the major intellectual hubs in Asia, if not in the world. My only regret is that due to other commitments I could not spend any length of time with you, and I was not able to learn first hand from so many distinguished people around the table. I have not had time to prepare a paper, but I would like to share with you some general views on this whole question of tradition and modernity. If I recall correctly, Kapilaji, 50 years ago when IIC was created, there was a UNESCO project on Tradition and Modernity which was undertaken by Dr. C.D. Deshmukh in IIC many years ago. “Tradition and Modernity” remains a perpetual question.

We live in an age of great turbulence and turmoil, where the past is disappearing and the future is struggling to be born, and we find ourselves precariously poised between a vanishing past and an indeterminate future. At a time like this there is a quest for cultural certitudes, for cultural personalities, for cultural ideas, a quest which often takes us back into the past. Unfortunately this

often derails of our thinking and regresses into fanaticism and terrorism.

As Kapilaji said, culture is an essential ingredient of the human race. The human race as it has developed over the last half a million years has involved gradually the development of various cultures. Now the question that you have raised in your seminar about relevance or otherwise of traditional cultures also raises a semantic problem. What is it traditional culture? I begin my prayers in the morning by reciting some verses from the Rig-Veda which are 5000 years old. Would you call that an indigenous culture, or would you call it a traditional culture still alive. These are the same verses that were chanted 5000 years ago in the same accent, because they have come down by oral traditions to the present day. So a lot of what we do is based upon what we could call tradition. But I do not see how that in any way prevents me from enjoying rock-and-roll which I listen to for an hour or so everyday. The point is, whether there is necessarily a conflict between traditional Vedic chanting and postmodern music.

The question therefore is how do we define tradition and what particular problems arise. Many of them were encapsulated by the Rapporteur. Let me just say two or three things. First of all it is useful to remember the so called Global South was not always poor. In fact it is estimated that sometime, perhaps in the 14th century, China and India between them produced 40 per cent of the world's GDP. It is our riches not our poverty that attracted the unwelcome attention of free-booters, fanatics and iconoclasts, and finally colonialism. This is tremendously important, because as a result of four centuries of colonialism the whole area has been impoverished. The great Latin American empires, the great culture of the Mayas and the Incas were full of gold, they were not poor. India was a rich country.

So I think first of all we have to get rid of this concept that we are poor, third world countries. I dislike the term "third world". Who are the Westerners to assume to themselves the first world, push all the former Communist countries into the second world, and we were all given a third class certificate, as it were, of the third

world. In fact we were building great temples when the Europeans were cautiously emerging from their caves.

I am glad nobody used the word "third world" in front of me because I get very angry at that. (One participant: it was not used at all) Yes, I am very glad. One of the traditions we set up in our IIC Asia Project was that we invited only Asian scholars. Western scholarship is outstanding, in fact in many ways it is more effective and more comprehensive than modern Eastern scholarship. But we did this because we wanted Asians to meet each other. Many delegates who came here to this room said that this was the first time they had met a delegate from another country which was next door to them. I am glad that the bulk of the participants are from Asia, Africa and Latin America. This is not, as I have said, to denigrate the scholarship of the West, but simply to stress the fact that we have got to develop our own perceptions now, and we must be able to articulate our cultures in such a manner that it adds to the richness of the emerging global society.

Whether we like it or not we are moving into a global society. Science and Technology is shooting us into the global society, shouting and screaming as we may be, and therefore we have got to see that in the emerging global society the formerly suppressed peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America are able to make their due contribution to the new society that is developing. Let it also be remembered that colonialism not only suppressed many of the traditional cultures, it also shattered the links between the countries. For example, Indian influence spread to South and South East Asia two thousand years ago. Angkor Vat, the greatest temple in the world, was built a thousand years ago at the same time our Rajarajachola Temple was being built in Tanjavoor; built by Indian inspiration, may be Indian artisans along with local artisans. Hinduism spread throughout South and South East Asia as did Buddhism. But as a result of colonialism we got cut off. Therefore our relations with Myanmar, our relationship with Thailand, our relationship with Cambodia were shattered.

The same thing must have happened in Latin America and in Africa. So that is something we must now re-establish. And this

whole IIC Asia Project, which Kapilaji is now so brilliantly leading, is designed to re-establish the links, the intellectual links, the cultural links, the spiritual links between the peoples of Asia, and in this conference we have added Africa and Latin America. All three, although they are very different, have nonetheless been through the same sort of experience and therefore we have a lot in common. Our cultural heritage is largely based upon oral traditions which are tremendously important. The oral tradition in India, particularly, has been central to our persistence as a civilization because all our sacred texts have come down to us orally. The Vedas were reduced to writing only by Prof. Max Mueller in Oxford in the 19th Century. Before that thousands and thousands of verses with their correct pronunciation and intonation came down by memory. So the importance of the oral tradition in our cultures should never be under-estimated.

There have been astounding scientific developments in our own life times. We have seen the world transformed by this, whether in sub nuclear particles or space travel or instant communication. Everything has changed and is changing. If there is one certainty in the world today, it is that change is going to speed up with each technological generation. But despite all the improvements done for the human race, the world is full of tension and turmoil, of inter-religious and intra-religious strife, of wide spread poverty and deprivation. While the very rich live in great luxury, the very poor live on the verge of starvation. There are still millions people, may be two billion people, on planet earth who live on or below the poverty line. Is it not a shame and a disgrace to the human race that when there is so much material wealth going around, there are still people who are denied the minimum inputs necessary for a decent civilized existence?

Look at what is happening in environmental destruction, manmade global warming, the rising oceans, melting of the ice caps, species extinction, arms trafficking, drug trafficking, human trafficking which is most shameful of all. So we have all these very negative factors before us along with all those unparalleled achievements of science and technology, unprecedented levels of well being for huge numbers of people.

In this situation how are the traditional cultures relevant? This is the point that you have raised and I think that I would answer that in this way. I would say that there is a lot that is of value in our traditional cultures, and that should remain with us. If we lose it, if we lose our language for example or if we lose some of our noble traditions, the world will be very much poorer. On the other hand an uncritical glorification of our past cultures is also not acceptable. For example, if a culture teaches untouchability, are we going to accept that? If a culture supports slavery, are we going to accept that? If a culture practices human sacrifice, are we going to accept that? If a culture imposes female circumcision and puts women in a subordinate position, are we going to accept that? We are not. We cannot say that because these are part of our traditional cultures therefore we are going to accept them.

This is a significant point. We must realize because very often people swing into this glorifying the past without realizing the terrible weaknesses that it had. But on the other hand our traditional cultures if they teach us to respect elders, if they teach us to honour the earth and the environment, if they teach us human brotherhood, if they teach us love for our neighbours, if they teach us unity of all religions, these are all positive which we should certainly adopt. In other words, what is needed is a critical re-assessment and a re-appraisal of traditional cultures so that we can move towards a creative symbiosis between tradition and modernity. That is how I would sum up my reaction, my response to this seminar.

There was a seminar on Asian Values and I give an example. I recalled that on one occasion I was in New York and my good friend Carl Sagan, the great Cosmologist, said to me, Karan I am teaching in Ithaca, would you like to come to one of my classes? I went with him and I noticed that at the end of the class, two boys were sitting with their legs up on the table in front. Now nobody thought that it was strange or that they were misbehaving. But I was shocked beyond belief, because for us for children to sit in a classroom with their legs on the front table is unthinkable. Now you can call that an Asian value, if you like, or you can call it old fashioned, but you

know there is something in it. I mean, if you see a teacher, you cannot point your leg at him and sit there with legs on the table.

Again I went to an international students' function where there was a musical performance and a harmonium had to be brought onto the stage. One boy was pushing the harmonium with his foot onto the stage, and a girl suddenly ran up and immediately picked it up, because for us to put a foot on a musical instrument would be a sort of sacrilege. It is not superstition but because music is such a glorious gift to humanity it has to be treated with respect. I am just mentioning these examples to say that there are certain attitudes, there are certain Asian, may be African, Latin American attitudes and customs which perhaps can teach us a lot. On the other hand we have a great deal to learn from the West. Therefore this will always have to be a continuous two-way dialogue.

Before I close, I want to say a few words on the interfaith movement, a movement designed to bring together people of different religious persuasions in a harmonious dialogue, not to prove the superiority of any other one religion or the other. It can be said to have begun in 1893 with the first Parliament of the World Religions in Chicago where 6000 delegates from around the world assembled and where Swami Vivekananda, who was a powerful advocate of Vedanta, made a very dramatic impact. Then in the 20th Century a large number of interfaith organizations came into being including one which I head worldwide called the Temple of Understanding. In 1993, a hundred years after the first Parliament, the Second Parliament was again held in Chicago, and in the same hall where the first one had been held. In 1999 the Third Parliament was held in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2004 in Barcelona, Spain and in 2009 in Melbourne, Australia.

The movement is designed, as I have said, to try and get people to understand each other because there are stereo-types in our minds with regard to other religions. Many of the religions, in the Jungian sense, are looked upon as "the other", as hostile and therefore something to be feared or hated. It is true that religion based terrorism and fundamentalism have created havoc in the last 40 years, but we should be careful that we do not fall into a

situation where Samuel P Huntington's brilliantly argued thesis of a Clash of Civilization becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We must move towards a Confluence of Civilizations rather than a Clash of Civilizations.

It is my belief that until there is harmony between and within the great religions of the world, there will never be peace on earth. However regretfully, the interfaith movement is still peripheral unlike the environmental movement, which moved rapidly into the centre of human consciousness. I was at Stockholm at the first UN Conference on Human Environment in 1972 as part of the Indian delegation led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In that conference there were only Olof Palme and Indira Gandhi, two Heads of State. In Rio, twenty years later, there were over a hundred Heads of State. They talk of Rio plus 20. That is incorrect. Rio was Stockholm plus 20, and that is now forgotten and everybody starts with Rio.

The basic thesis of the interfaith movement is the acceptance of multiple paths to the divine. We are tiny creatures on a speck of dust in the illimitable cosmos around us with billions and billions of galaxies '*anantakoti brahmanda*' (infinite number of galaxies). Who are we to lay down that the illimitable splendor of the divine can appear only at this time, and at this place, and in this form? This is prima facie unacceptable. I can say that for me, my religion is the best and my formulation of that religion is the best. But I cannot say that because you do not follow that religion, you can be persecuted or blown up or killed or tortured.

Religion has had a mixed record in human history. Much that is great and noble human civilization - music, dance, art and architecture, the glorious temples, and the Cathedrals and scriptures can all be traced back to one or other great religions of the world. At the same time more people have been killed and murdered and tortured in the name of religion than in any other name. And the irony is that each religion looks upon 'its' god as being very compassionate. I worship *Lord Shiva - karunavataaram* (the incarnation of compassion). The Muslims start their prayer with Bismillah Rahman e Rahim (the Lord, the Merciful, the Compassionate). The Christians believe that Jesus Christ mounted

the cross in order to expiate the sins of humanity. But in the name of religion the most terrible events happen. We have to get over this in the 21st Century. We can no longer afford the luxury of fanaticism, and that is why I feel that when we talk about culture, this is one point which should be stressed. There is one line in the Rig-Veda. *Ekam sadvipra bahudha vadanti* (The Truth is one, the wise call it by many names). Once this is accepted, we will find a great change in attitudes.

One can go on for a long time, but let me simply end by saying that the deeper the roots of a tree, the taller it grows. So we need to be rooted in the best of our traditional cultures but our branches must reach out. We are living in a moment of great change, of great possibilities. It is an exciting time to be alive because we are witnessing these extraordinary changes. The latest concept I learnt ten days ago was Neuro-plasticity. Neuro-plasticity implies something we have known for thousands of years that through certain practices including yoga and breathing you can actually modify the neurotic structure of the brain. This is now being proved by the scientific experiments. Is that not exciting? Because we have known all these thousands of years by certain breathing exercises, certain practices you can actually come to new stages of consciousness. Consciousness research is the cutting edge of science today. So there are all sorts of exciting possibilities. The question is , will we blow ourselves up before we get there or will be in fact gradually integrate all these great discoveries, integrate all the great religions, integrate great cultures and move into a sane and harmonious global society . That is the question before us, that is the challenge before us all.

I am going to end with a quotation again from the Vedas which exhorts us to work together, to achieve together, to think together and to work harmoniously. May there be no hatred between us.

Saha navavatu saha nau bhunaktu

Saha viryam karavaavahai

Tejasvinawadhitam astu

Ma vidvisha vahai

- End -