

PERCEPTION & THE SELF

By Shanta Acharya

In Oxford I attended a poetry reading by Allen Ginsberg where he spoke at length about India. *His* India was quite different from *my* India. By then I had learnt there were several 'Indias' just as there were several versions of 'England', 'the West' or '*Vilayat*' that had been depicted to me, unsolicited, by various well-wishers and friends before I left India in 1979. Most of these individuals had never left India. In Oxford, I discovered my 'West' along with other people's 'East' and their 'Indias' as they attempted to establish a means of communication with me, though they too had never been to India! Ginsberg had at least spent some time in India.

There are several ways in which such encounters can be interpreted; understanding the limits of our perception is one. What I am referring to of course is a variation of the fable of the blind men and the elephant. Each of us is privy to a part of the whole; our perception of reality mostly defines *us*. What seems like the whole truth is a fallacy due to the partial, fragmentary if not deceptive nature of individual perception. The story of the blind men and the elephant originated in India; Advaita Vedanta, non-duality of the universe and the concept of Brahman, was appreciated by Hindus centuries ago.

The concept of 'Know Thyself' evolved in response to the dilemma posed by Life itself—how to lead a life that is good, harmonious, self-aware? It was no mean achievement that Hindus grasped this fundamental need and appreciated the sheer diversity of human nature. This is best illustrated in their definition of God, Divinity, Reality—'*neti, neti*'. Such an idea is liberating; the infinite variety of Reality enables us to posit as many gods to suit our individual preferences because in the final analysis God is without attributes. To live and let live is 'to see as God sees.' (John Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion*).

Following this line of reasoning in many late-night discussions on the nature of God, as a doctoral student in Oxford, I had argued it was possible to believe in Christ, Mohammad, Krishna or Shiva and be a Hindu. Equally, it was possible to not believe in any of these incarnations of the Divine and still be a Hindu. However, it was not possible to not believe in Christ or Mohammad and be a Christian or a Muslim. To set the record straight, I added that despite the openness of Hinduism, non-Hindus are not allowed inside temples while I a Hindu can freely attend church services and be blessed by the priest if I wished. Any idea is only as good as the person/s interpreting it.

Living within an imposed identity

Looking back on *my* India, I feel immensely privileged growing up in a world where one read the St James' version of *The Bible*, *The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Koran* or any other sacred text in the normal course of life. It was a gift as not only did it help me in my understanding of other cultures but also of their literatures, histories, beliefs and practices. We were multicultural, multi-faith, international etc before these words became fashionable and acquired connotations that today seem limiting. Being multicultural in the UK today could deny me the possibility of blending in; one is condemned to live within identities defined by others—for example, being referred to as an Indian or Black British poet or published in anthologies dedicated to writers classified similarly.

I see no reason to think it to be a UK phenomenon; it's a human predilection. The cultural imperialism, for example,

of the Bengalis is well known. The Oriya language was at one point threatened with oblivion. Brahmins have been responsible for many injustices over the centuries. The dogmatism of multiculturalism can be as alienating as imperialism or any other 'ism.' One of India's greatest assets used to be its broad-church mentality, its open, pluralistic, my-father's-house-has-many-rooms approach to life, its acceptance of diversity and its intrinsic tolerance of different viewpoints. Jews and gypsies, persecuted in Europe, took refuge in India. This is not to imply India did not have its limitations, its own set of practices that denied human rights.

In acknowledging the multiple simultaneity of existence along with the limits of human perception, we prepare ourselves for the unexpected—the sort of evolutionary surprise that Charles Darwin discovered when he landed on the Galapagos



Islands. Scientists today are still struggling with the mystery of how such a large diversity of species could develop in a remote location like these islands. What nature achieved would not have survived without conservation; in 1959, the Ecuadorian government declared the islands a national park. We need to create a similarly benign environment for human diversity to flourish across the globe—a bill of rights for all nations.

As our understanding of the world changes, so must we. We must remain open to change. In his essay, *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "What we are, that only can we see...Build, therefore, your own world." Such realization can be enormously liberating. It could also lead to existential angst when the burden of building your own world falls on you. Sometimes, it is easier to be someone else than one self. In *The American Scholar*, an oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1837, while urging young Americans to "Know thyself," Emerson referred to an old fable "that there is One Man—present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man." He was not referring to a monolithic Self, but one that is kaleidoscopic, inclusive. No one person and of no one age can be expected to represent that Self. Like nations that carry an inventory of their past, individuals are also repositories of their ancestral experiences.

Seeing the world through eyes of others

The idea that our perception of reality reflects us more than Reality *per se* confirms the extent to which we create our own reality. This by no means implies that two plus two does not equal four; only that there may be times when individuals fail to think so. If we perceive a rope to be a snake in the dark or vice versa, it affects the way we might respond to the perceived reality of the situation. The 'weapons of mass destruction' argument advocated in the 2003 war with Iraq is one example. One can argue that George Bush and Tony Blair knew what they were doing, though that is not a given. It would certainly be naïve to suggest that all politicians in the US and UK were similarly inclined. There were many who simply did not know what to think, and some genuinely believed the threat was real.

The recent financial crisis is another example of human failure. Driven by greed, bankers struck a blow to the very foundations of capitalism; regulators, lawyers, accountants, politicians all failed or chose not to see the emperor had no clothes. As Warren Buffet pointed out, it was credit derivatives that became the real weapons of mass destruction and not the perceived threat from Saddam Hussein. If bankers' bonuses were linked to the eradication of poverty, clean environment, universal education, global peace, democratic institutions and the greater common good would it have worked? Well, the communist experiment failed, and it would be short-sighted to think democracy and capitalism is the same thing. The fault lies in us. It is up to each individual to define who we are, the kind of society we want to live in and act in ways to make that happen. Our identity is determined the way we relate to the world; each thought, action has an effect.

The self is multiple, diverse, infinitely changing, it is not a fixed identity; our looking at something changes it including ourselves. Trying to negotiate one's way through this hall of mirrors is one way of finding oneself. The way we perceive reality so we shape it. Far too often our reality is usurped if not invaded by others' whose views are utterly alien to ours. That is the challenge we face—to be able to see the world through the eyes of others, particularly others whose views we fail to understand or disagree with, and to what extent we are prepared to defend their rights. Not long ago, a British judge ruled that two Pakistani students posed a serious threat to national security; yet they could not be deported because of the risk they would be tortured or killed in their own country. How such a judgment is received by us can provide clues to our selves. One can only wish such legal and humane principles were applied evenly in all cases.

How do we live diverse, fulfilling lives?

In the final analysis, a high degree of open-mindedness is vital to our own survival. Our closed-mindedness has created havoc in many aspects of our lives from biodiversity to climate change, from the death of languages, cultures, tribes and whole eco-systems. We really have no idea of the extent of our loss. The more we learn about the universe, the more we realize how little we know. With greater awareness of our limitations, hopefully there is greater willingness to share and learn from each other. This involves mutual respect, humility, a willingness to learn from others.

Even this wide-eyed consciousness may not always protect us from falling into the heffalump trap where we could meet our critics/enemies. The strength of a human being's achievement lies in the fact that s/he remains open to the limits of human

possibilities. This is particularly revealed in the radical readjustments and revaluations we are willing to make in our conception of the Other, which is always with reference to the self, usually oneself. Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" not only celebrated himself, but the 'I' of his poem "contains multitudes." The majesty of such a point of view is its open-endedness, the willingness to embrace contradictions.

The key to knowing oneself is willingness to see ourselves as others perceive us while acknowledging our own self-perception and that of others are both incomplete. To that extent every representation is limited—merely a point of view. And who is to decide which view-point is more valid than another? Self-preservation is a strong impulse, but like most human instincts it can be a force for good or ill. The question we all face is—how do we live diverse, fulfilling lives in a world where resources are finite yet human demands infinite? And to achieve this within the context of human nature; not forgetting the issue of intergenerational equity—i.e. the future of our children and grandchildren.

Despite the huge developments in science, technology, medicine, trade etc, our record in securing a basic common humanity, let alone an ideal one, globally remains seriously flawed. The answer has to be in recognizing that 'no man is an island' and how each man's suffering, injustice diminishes me for 'I am involved in mankind.' Such knowledge is neither new nor original. I quote John Donne from his *Meditations* written in 1624. The great religions have advocated such a world view. However, the record of wars, executions, *fatwabs*, riots and honour killings conducted in the name of religion belies that fact. The awareness of our interconnectedness and mutual dependence is being increasingly recognized; yet individuals and nations persist in 'holier-than-thou attitudes' that do not assist in establishing equilibrium among individuals or nations.

The interconnectedness of the human race has never been appreciated more—from scientific discoveries, climate issues, trade and economic development to terrorism we learn every day a little bit more about it. It is undeniably true each generation needs to define that universal consciousness individually, see the world afresh. Every human being must have "an original relation to the universe," as Emerson put it. This transcendence from the individual to the universal arises not just from a selfish instinct to survive but also a generous one in fulfilling oneself. **C**

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Every century, according to BF Skinner the noted behavioral psychologist in his book *Freedom and Dignity*, may be characterized by its own set of problems. In our current century of technology and gender rights, the issue of vocational parity between the sexes is becoming a rallying cry. But it is happening within a context that essentially has not changed. So while our call to have women better represented in the working world is setting new precedents, we are doing so in a time warp of old fashioned values where women are still expected to bear the brunt of domesticity while competing with her male counterpart outside of the home. In addition there is no governmental legislation that helps her with child rearing, no real assistance in the work place with crèches and child minding facilities. We are offering women little or no support. Essentially the working woman has to perform like a man and adopt the persona of a free individual with no family encumbrances. Juggling a hectic day has become a part of her life style and magazines tell us how to "simplify," "streamline," and "manage" our time, implying that this is normal and something we should proudly embrace?

On account of this, research shows that working women experience more stress than their male counterparts which results in poor mental health. There is ample evidence that psycho somatic illnesses are on the increase among working women in SA. In addition women's physiological health patterns are appropriating that of men such as an increase in heart attacks, migraine and cluster headaches. The fertility rate of working women is also on the decrease causing women to seek specialist gynecological treatment in this regard.

Contrary to Buckminster Fuller's prediction that the future will provide us with more leisure time, the opposite has actually happened. Over the years,

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there has been a substantial increase in work which is felt to be due, in part, by information technology and by an intense, competitive work environment. Many experts predicted that technology would eliminate most household chores and provide people with much more time to enjoy leisure activities. But this hasn't been the case on account of the fact that people tend to be encouraged by a high consumerist culture and work ethic, and a low value and worth attached to parenting. The feeling that simply working hard is not enough anymore is acknowledged by

need to balance the high demands of work with their personal aspirations for marriage and family. Marriage and family life have profoundly different implications for men and women. For as long as traditional notions of family exists where the woman is still the chief care giver, women will be shortchanged in the long run. An American journalist sums up the problem succinctly when she compares her life with that of Dutch women in the Netherlands and raises the question who is smarter?

Dutch women are not like me. I worry about my career incessantly. I take daily

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many workers who now have to think not in seconds but in nanoseconds. To get ahead, an eighty- to ninety hour work week is the new standard. What little time is left is often divided up among relationships, children, and sleep. This increase in work hours over the past two decades means that less time will be spent with family, friends, and community as well as pursuing activities that one enjoys and taking the time to grow personally and spiritually.

Each time I hear the call for more women to be represented in high profile positions such as on the bench, in politics and in government; I am filled with a sense of a double avoidance approach conflict. The nature of this conflict is characterized by a positive and negative valence that pulls and propels at the same time. When women accept high profile positions they invariably have a high price to pay in terms of their personal lives as wives, mothers and home makers. If they choose to give up high powered vocational opportunities in deference to marriage and child rearing, they will be faced with feelings of loss and lowered self esteem. Historically, professional women chose careers such as teaching which provided them with better working hours so as to accommodate their domestic duties. This gave rise to the concept of work- life balance so necessary for personal happiness and domestic harmony. Young working women today are really affected by the

stock of its trajectory and make vicious mental critiques of my endeavors. And I know—based on weekly phone conversations with friends in the United States—that my masochistic drive for success is widely shared among my female friends. Meanwhile, the Dutch women around me take a lackadaisical approach to their careers. They work half days, meet their friends for coffee at 2 p.m., and pity their male colleagues who are stuck in the office all day.

In direct contrast to this are American women closely followed by SA women whose race for equality has gone mostly in one direction. Women are expected by new societal expectations and pressure to shatter the glass ceiling, reach the top spots in the hierarchy, and earn the same respect and salaries as men do. But perhaps this situation is setting women up for a hapless world devoid of peace and fun. In fact studies of female happiness in the U.S. have found that even though women have become financially more independent than in any previous time in history, women as a whole are not getting any happier. Perhaps it is time for SA women to take stock and make demands that take into account their special needs and not pander to the plea made by Professor Higgins in the musical *My Fair Lady*: Why cant a woman be more like a man? **C**

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