

Comment

East is East...

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We are presently very much concerned with two questions. The one that boggles the minds is that while the West has made tremendous progress, the East has been lagging far behind. The other question is whether the difference between the East and the West is that of capability or mentality. The examples of Japan, China and Korea are evidence enough that the difference is not that of capability, though this is also a fact that all the advancement made by these aforesaid eastern countries is a borrowed one. It is rather reactive and imitative. Their advancement is not indigenous. They have borrowed technology from the West. But this does show a difference of mentality. Then, it is also a fact that when industrial revolution started in the West, most of the eastern countries were bound in the chains of slavery. Therefore they could not benefit from this wave of progress. And when these countries got independence, the West had already gone so far ahead that it was not possible for the East to catch up with it. This restricted their freedom to compete.

However, the greatest reason for this difference is that the approach of the West has been wholly materialistic while the East has been very particular about its customs, traditions and humanitarian values. Thus, when Akbar the great was presented a printing machine, he rejected it by saying that the introduction of it will throw thousands of calligraphists out of job. A similar example has been cited by Maulana Muhammad Husain Azad about Iran. Some two hundred years ago, a European firm offered to the Shah to start a railway project there. The *ulema* opposed the project by saying that it would be harmful for their culture. When the foreign company would come there, the families of the workers would also accompany them. They would mix up with their women which would corrupt their way of life. When the *ulema* were told that the railway would facilitate their journeys for Hajj and *ziarat*, they replied that their forefathers had been doing that on the backs of camels and mules and they would continue doing the same.

Quratul Ain Haider also made similar observation while flying through Iran in a helicopter accompanied with Shah and Shah Bano. She saw caravans of pilgrims moving on camels and mules with the ladies wrapped up in sheets. Thus, the East did want progress, but not at the cost of its values. Christopher Marlowe had also warned his people as early as 16th century that progress at the cost of values was disastrous. His warning was not heeded.

Unfortunately same Muslim clerics thought that since the progress is made by those whose creed and values are opposed to ours they rejected progress itself. Progress is never wrong. It is attitude to progress that may be wrong.

A European scholar has observed that all the prophets have come in the East while all the philosophers have belonged to the West. And this is quite plausible. This difference may be explained in this way. Nature has always been kind to man in the East. Here the land is soft and fertile. Water and food are no problem. Fruit laden trees grow wild everywhere. Water is only a few feet deep in most places. The climate is moderate. A small loin cloth is enough for the dress. Also manpower is not lacking. On the other hand, nature has been very hard on man in the West. The earth is hard. Most of the year, it is covered with snow. Manpower is scanty. There were few working hands. Therefore the West has been largely concerned with struggle for survival. They were mainly concerned with the problems of living. The situation in the East was just the opposite. While the West was concerned with the acquisition of power to control the forces of nature, the East was more concerned with the meaning and purpose of life. Here machine was seen as enemy of man. People feared that machine may replace man. It was because of it that the printing machine and the railway system were rejected. Such a problem appeared in Lahore also a few decades ago, when mechanical sweepers were introduced here. It was feared that many scavengers will be thrown out of job.

The West also realized the dominance of machine in the lives of men who are now reduced only to robots. Dickens' novels portray this fear in his *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations* etc. He observed that machine was more important, since man was cheap while machine was costly. Similarly we see that in the West even worship was materialistic. All the fine arts in the West found their origin in practical need rather than in aesthetic or devotional urge.

Herbert Reed suggests the origin of art in man's struggle for survival. In the south of France some caves have been discovered which are supposed to date back to 20,000 BC. Sketches of bison are found on the walls and roofs of the rocks which are so perfectly drawn that they

show a long association of these artists with the bison. The conjecture that when the young men of the tribe went out to hunt the bison, the older people left behind drew the sketches of the bisons and so arrested their spirits in their bodies. In this way they helped the young hunters in overpowering strong and fierce bisons. Similarly drama had its origin in religious ritual. Music, poetry, sculpture, architecture, songs and dances were meant to appease the gods and to keep the evil spirits away. Thus, struggle for survival was the main concern for the West, and survival was seen in power.

Here, in the East, survival was not the problem. Their concern with livelihood was just the minimum. The problem, from the very beginning, was the meaning and purpose of life. Sauda, an Urdu classic, says that running after the world is absurd, since man's life is too short.

On the other hand, the West did not get any time to think of civilization and culture. While coming out of the primitive world, as they emerged from primitive life, industrial revolution greeted them. They had no time to create and consolidate the values of civilization. They were directly thrown into a mechanistic civilization. When the kings of India and China slept on beds of silk, the European kings slept on straw beds. Then machine came into their life, and things started changing.

A very good example of this difference can be seen in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Civilization is a regulation of relationships while the West had little regard for the sanctity of relationships, particularly of those between father and daughter, and between man and wife. This created lots of misunderstandings between Othello and Desdemona. In the West man and wife are equal partners in the matrimonial bond while in the East man is the master. As Iago says,

I know our country disposition well,
In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands, their best conscience
Is not to leave undone, but keep unknown (III 205-28)

Venetian women do not regard adultery so seriously, as Othello does. Even today there is no regard for relationships. There is so much emphasis on individual freedom. It has even created a sense of alienation and isolation in the people. Even the marriage bond has lost all meaning. Individual liberty has gone to unbearable limits. In the big departmental stores you now see notices saying 'Shirts and shoes are required.'

The West is itself fed up with this anarchy and you may hear now people talking of the restoration of the family there. O'Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and after him Sartre in the *Prisoner of Altona* used the symbol of incest for this total disregard for the sanctity of relationships. This stagnation has now started stinking. A materialistic

mechanical life creates such stagnation. Thus, Desdemona does not have the concept of the sanctity of the conjugal bond as it works in Othello's mind. Desdemona's morality is individualistic. Othello's morality is conventional and social.

There is another question, whether the progress made by the West is real progress and are those people satisfied with it? Spengler's *Decline of the West*, Herman Hesse's *A Glimpse into Darkness* negate this. TS Eliot has called the western civilization a waste land. Iqbal echoes the same feelings when he says that the West is in a state of extreme chaos and that this civilization is marching on the way of suicide. Samuel Beckett has presented a naked picture of life in *Waiting for Godot*. He showed that in the beginning man was confronted with just four problems: nature, time, action and society. Man was not happy with this situation and he tried to improve it. He developed property which created thieves. He created nations and wars started. He made society that created the police. And as, after Beckett, Pinter showed in *Caretaker*, all progress resulted in reducing man to a few scraps of paper. Shadows became larger than man. Now man is not important. Identity card is important. Telecard, passport, ration card, roll number are important. Man has lost his identity in a few pieces of paper and his worth, according to Harry Bloom, is not more than scraps. Therefore even in the West, people have started wondering whether all this progress has not been an anti-progress. The West has so far taken power and wealth as the objects of life. But power makes a man weak. The most powerful are the most insecure and cannot step out of their houses without commandos and guards. They become prisoners of power. Similarly wealth makes man poor. A man having 10 rupees in his pocket will give 5 to a needy friend. But one with a million will not part with five for a friend in dire need. Wealth is like that food which, according to some religious traditions, will be given to those condemned to Hell. This will only enhance their appetite instead of satisfying their hunger.

Thus, the West is now trying to come to the understanding which the East always had. Peace movements throughout the world are an evidence that man has realized that the power and wealth cannot be the objects of life. There is now a general feeling everywhere that the aims and objects of life need to be redefined.