India - Multiple Dialogues

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Abstract

The paper explores the origin of the dialogue form in India and its roots in traditional knowledge, discusses the meaning of dialogue and its role in the making of India today, and notes that longitudinal thinking could prove an effective mechanism for discussing and understanding differences. Dialogues when suspended may escalate conflict to irreversible levels, yet India's multiple diversities have managed to co-exist because a unity has been created through this tradition of dialoguing, and its success as a nation, at various levels, has lied in its ability to adapt its rich tradition of dialoguing to contemporary challenges.

Key words: Dialogue, legacy, co-existence, diversity, longitudinal thinking,

India: Diálogos múltiples

Resumen

Este trabajo discute el origen del diálogo en India y sus raíces en el conocimiento tradicional, discute el significado del diálogo y su rol en la construcción de India hoy, y señala que el pensamiento longitudinal puede resultar un mecanismo efectivo para discutir y entender las diferencias. La falta de diálogo puede incrementar los conflictos a niveles irreversibles; sin embargo, las múltiples diversidades de India han logrado coexistir porque usando esta tradición de diálogo se ha creado una unidad, y su éxito como nación, en varios niveles, ha radicado en su capacidad de adaptar su tradición a los retos contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: Diálogo, legado, coexistencia, diversidad, pensamiento longitudinal.

Introduction

The intellectual traditions of India are unfathomably old. Be it grammar, aesthetics, mathematics, linguistics, surgery, philosophy, astronomy or health sciences, the refinement of thought mainly preserved through its Sanskrit texts is awesome and seminal.

The unifying theme amongst all these explorations and inquiries, if captured in one word is search for *tatva* (i.e. essence). The Indian intellect was forever focussing on the essence of the matter. The method of arriving at the "essence" was dialogue. This is best epitomized in the statement "*Vade Vade Jayeta Tatva Bodhah* i.e. through continuous dialoguing the inquiry arrives at the core truth.

Put simply it shows a live philosophy of respecting others and respecting oneself. This is where the origins of India´s philosophy of coexistence lie. In the marrow of his bones the Indian realizes and practices a simple law of life: there are many facets to truth. *Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti* – "the truth is one. The knowledgeable speak of it in different ways".

Vedas, as per Indian traditions, are supposed to be the foundation of much of Indian culture. They are believed to be the source of all forms of knowledge. Almost every *Mantra* (the grammatical form in which Vedas are composed is called, *Mantra*) of the Vedas emphasizes collective action. Thus it is natural that Vedas contain much wisdom on directions with regards to organization, its development, concerns therein and ways to mitigate or manage risks facing an organization.

Most of the works in the field of organization management has been led by modern western scholars. Now, indigenous scholars in growing numbers are doing a commendable job in adapting these concepts (dialoguing?) to the current challenges of India.

Since Vedas form the core foundation of the culture and ways of living of this land, a system of organizational thinking and risk management derived from Vedas would be more suited to the requirements of this country. Further, Vedas exhibiting an holistic or global approach in its *mantras*, the lessons therein should have similar benefits for the entire world.

In the conventional learning of India there are many lessons of organizational development and management of risks. Dialoguing, however, is not unique or exclusive to India, even though it may have, possibly, the oldest traditions.

1.- Dialogue at the beginning

The word "dialogue" derives from two roots: "dia" which means "through" and "logos" which means "the word". Put together - "through the word."

The oriental tradition in dialogue is found in almost a parallel mode to the Indian one in the Sumerian dialogues as well as disputations (preserved in copies from the second millennium BC). The classical example of the Indian tradition of dialoguing is of course the *Bhagawad Gita*.

Plato (c.427 BC - c.347 BC) is credited with originating the systematic use of dialogue as an independent vertical in knowledge management, which in turn was rooted in the artefact of performing arts called "mime". The Sicilian poets Sophron and Epicharmus are popularly credited with having originated in the occidental tradition in this regard.

Plato's dialogues mostly between Socrates, his teacher, and some other persons are the major source of his fame. The deliverables of the dialogues are mostly through honest expression of disagreement and a joint endeavour to resolve the same by getting both to first state their core beliefs and their truths and then look for convergence. Inquiry and scrutiny are the essence of dialoguing (Maranhão, Tullio, 1990).

It is obvious that dialogue is the methodology for consensus building in diversity.

This may not be the fit place to walk through the subsequent history of dialoguing over the remaining millennia because the purpose of this text is to look at India today and to explore the multiple dialogues which are needed.

2.- India today: Multiple dialogues

It is not new to flag India's diversity. India is the geographical, ethnical and cultural name of a territory which is planetary in its range and depth.

Each of the four climates is available in some part of India at any time of the year. Oldest types of rock structures, river valleys from the most ancient ones to the most recent formations are available in the geographic entity called India. Ethnically, many different human groups from the Mongoloid to the Dravidians are present in India. If India is a living reality today it is because these diversities have been dialoguing

with each other as a way of life. Dialogue may be a caption only to sum up the essential characteristics of Indianness.

Any civilization or culture having an uninterrupted record of continuous vibrancy over ten thousand years it would have, at least, learned how to live with itself. In the ultimate analysis the major questions of the day have to do mainly with what you do with yourself and what you do with others. This is true of individuals as well as social aggregations including civilizations. It is a moot point to the knowledgeable in organization management that collective entities of an organized variety take on the characteristics of individuals.

This is true of India also. India has the oldest living city called Varanasi in its fold. It is not so because of technological greatness or comforts (important as they may be).

It is because of a frame of mind and it is because of its frames of reference. Varanasi is known as a city of pilgrimage for the Hindus. It is celebrated as the home of followers of many religions including Muslims.

Kabir, a medieval Muslim poet, was a resident of Varanasi like many other Muslims, but, his name stands out for his pithy expressions of feelings about the city. They have a literary value which has survived many centuries. There is an incident related to the life of a gentleman called Bismillah Khan who was a consummate artist of the instrument called *Shehnai* (a flute like instrument). He was offered several times a home in some of the prosperous countries in the West and each time he turned it down saying he would shift if "Varanasi-ism" could be transplanted.

Bismillah Khan was the perfect outcome of a latent dialogue in lifestyles of an integrated civilization.

David Bohm along with Donald Factor and Peter Garrett (1991) has described dialogue as:

> ... a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations and even different parts of the same organization.

This definition of dialogue has a point of view. However, it is prescriptive. In India, dialogue is a way of life and there are various formats of its expression from music to lifestyles.

It would not help to see dialogue as the opposite of conflict. Dialogue is when you respect yourself and somebody else enough as to interrupt your way with an attempt to understand the other person's thoughts and then move forward in unison.

Dialogue has to do with a worldview which incorporates theories of power and ownership. Dialogue is necessary not only between religions and civilizations but between homo- sapiens and environment (Laterfield, M. , 1999).

In India, the word *jungle* is not a pejorative word. The traditional word for jungle, in India is *aranaya*. Places are named according to the kind of *jungle* (?) or *aranaya* existing there. Illustratively the word C*hamparan* is C*hampa-aranaya* i.e. the woods where C*hampa* (a flowering tree) were in abundance. There is another place called *Saran* which means *Sarang* "*aranaya*, the woods of the deer, is what it literally means. The examples can be multiplied to explain the thesis that India is multiple dialogues.

These multiple dialogues have to do with what an Indian worships. When he does ablution from the pot filled with water, he desires that it be populated with the waters of the rivers –Ganga, Godavari, Krishna, Kaveri. Geographically these rivers can be seen as one travels from North to South in India. A cursory *glance at* India´s geography, therefore, would show the pan-Indian character of India that is a dialogue.

Shakaracharya, the Indian seer of the 8th century, originating from the peninsular Indian state Kerala, when less than 30 years old, charted a trek through the country. He walked from Kerala to Gujarat, Gujarat to Kashmir, Kashmir to Puri and via Kamkoti back to peninsular India. The four *mathas* (religious seats)[1] established by him are alive till today and that is how the Indian mind works.

Such an approach is clearly rooted in dialogues which the modern argot verbalizes as intra-faith dialogues. In such a background, inter-faith dialogue is easy.

Swami Vivekananda's address to the parliament of religions in Chicago in the last decade of the 19th century, the 14th Dalai Lama's essay in *Religious Dialogue and Symphony*, could be replicated with Indian dialogues amongst regions. It is the incoming of the distorted version of the modern political processes that has contributed, perhaps, as the largest single factor, to the expression of violence, that one sometimes hears of.

Diversity of faith in India has created a rapport which arises out of the iterative process and shared living. It is dialoguing in action. Enormous distances have been covered and more needs to be done to consolidate the unity. Something deeply sacred and "true" for one faith might be in stark contrast with what is "true" in another religious tradition (Kappan, n.d.).

John H. Hick (1990), in his work *Philosophy of Religions* comments:

> In an interfaith context, the term dialogue acquires the meaning of a discussion between representatives of parties to conflict that is aimed at resolution. Conflict, whether we take the word in a weak sense or a strong sense, involves differences (…) we may distinguish three aspects of this question: differences in modes of experiencing divine reality; differences of philosophical and theological theory concerning that reality or the implications of religious experience; and differences in the key or revelatory experiences that unify a stream of religious life.

Some of the inter and intra-faith issues that need to be discussed in the Indian context, today, would include:

· The Ram Mandir Issue
· The low education levels and status of women amongst Muslims
· Religious Fundamentalism
· Religious References in Educational Texts
· Areas of Hindu-Muslim Strife
· Areas of Hindu-Christian Strife
· Intra Muslim Stife between Shias and Sunnis
· Latent antagonism among several Christian sects
· The possible role of 'madrasa's (Islamic religious schools)
   in encouraging a narrow world view

Multiple religions have co-exited in India over various millennia and today if one nation has practitioners from all major religions in its fold it is India. The existence of Islam and Hinduism in India dates back at least a thousand years. During this time there have been numerous occasions to experience religious bigotry and attempts to establish a meaningful stable social structure.

Post the attacks of 9/11, some of the Islamic religious groups of the West have stressed the need for inter-faith dialogue. The idea is to acclimatize persons from different faiths with their places and beliefs of worship. One also needs to appreciate how the various religious organisations function. While such initiatives would very likely promote the understanding of the religions involved and cleanse uninformed perceptions on any religion, "their long-term impact on improving inter-faith relations needs to be seen" (The Institute of Interfaith, n.d.).

As a pre-dominantly Hindu nation, there is also a need to examine the issue of Hindu fundamentalists. François Gautier (2008, November 1), who is the editor-in-chief of the Paris-based *La Revue de l'Inde*, in one of his columns writing under the title *The Hindu Rate of Wrath When the Mahatma's cowards erupt in fury, is hurt. It isn't terror,* has asked:

> Is there such a thing as "Hindu terrorism"?
> In the early 1980s, when I started freelancing in South India, doing photo features on *kalaripayattu*, the *Ayyappa* festival, or the *Ayyanars*, I slowly realised that the genius of this country lies in its Hindu ethos, in the true spirituality behind Hinduism. The average Hindu you meet in a million villages possesses this simple, innate spirituality and accepts your diversity, whether you are Christian or Muslim, Jain or Arab, French or Chinese. It is this Hinduness that makes the Indian Christian different from, say, a French Christian, or the Indian Muslim unlike a Saudi Muslim. I also learnt that Hindus not only believed that the divine could manifest itself at different times, under different names, using different scriptures (not to mention the wonderful avatar concept, the perfect answer to 21st century religious strife) but that they had also given refuge to persecuted minorities from across the world—Syrian, Christians, Parsis, Jews, Armenians, and today, Tibetans. In 3,500 years of existence, Hindus have never militarily invaded another country, never tried to impose their religion on others by force or induced conversions.
> You cannot find anybody less fundamentalist than a Hindu in the world

However, real understanding of the basic tenets of Hinduism is limited, not withstanding the serious efforts of persons such as Aurobindo to interpret its true meaning. The Western mind often sees image worship

as its defining characteristic, thereby causing a fundamental hiatus which
often would demand herculean efforts to bridge. Grasping the nature of
Hinduism, Gautier goes on to say in the same text:

> Let me then be straightforward about this so-called Hindu terror.
> Hindus, since the first Arab invasions, have been at the receiving
> end of terrorism, whether it was by Timor, who killed 100,000
> Hindus in a single day in 1399, or by the Portuguese Inquisition
> which crucified Brahmins in Goa. Today, Hindus are still being
> targeted: there were one million Hindus in the Kashmir valley in
> 1900; only a few hundred remain, the rest having fled in terror.
> Blasts after blasts have killed hundreds of innocent Hindus all over
> India in the last four years.
> There are about a billion Hindus, one in every six persons on this
> planet. They form one of the most successful, law-abiding and
> integrated communities in the world today. Can you call them
> terrorists?

Methodologically the solutions are obvious. There must be an
exchange of information and one must be willing to listen "a difficult
art, which nevertheless may be put into practice. Continuous self-
development is the way forward. Growing together is the essence of any
partnership and this holds true of societies at local, regional, national
and international level.

India, as indicated earlier, is a multiplicity of ethnicities. It is
inhabited by people who are different from one another in many respects,
yet they represent a common identity – Indians. The provinces under
British rule were formed on administrative basis, and then there were
the princely state. These territories were organised on the basis of
languages after independence. Indians of Kashmir have their own
customs and traditions that are quite different in many ways from Indians
of Tamil Nadu. People from Gujarat have their own way of life which is
not like those from North Eastern States (Das, Pushpita, I., 2008, June
12). India presents a picture of extreme regional variations, in terms of
per capita income, the proportion of population living below the poverty
line, working population in agriculture and percentage of population
residing in urban areas. Some states are economically more advanced
than others. For example, Bihar and Orissa are underdeveloped, while

Punjab is economically better-off. Moreover, within each state, some regions are more developed than other regions.

These regional imbalances can create problems in different ways. Difference in technological capabilities and in the quality of life can cause resentment and gives opportunities to those among politicians who are unscrupulous to exploit the ignorance and backwardness of people living in underdeveloped regions. They sometimes offer fantasy promises to them and convince them that people of developed regions are discriminating against them and this way try to create their vote banks. *All this can and sometimes does foster convoluted regional loyalties amongst people that can be detrimental to the cause of national integration*. Interstate disputes and occasionally separatism is the manifestation of such tendencies.

The coping mechanisms and intervention strategies, so far have included:

1. Not necessarily responding to the violence of the separatist groups with violence, but respond to the fundamental causative factors. Here again "dialoguing" has been of tremendous help.
2. Much effort is being made to get the economically backward regions more involved in the process of development. Serious effort is being made to give to the people from these regions an honest feeling that they are not being neglected. Special incentives are being offered to industries being established in these regions (e.g. through tax concessions etc.). This would, hopefully, further attract investments in these regions.
3. Better and continuously improving of transportation, electrification and communication is extremely important for the development of these areas.

The Indian governance system works in reinforcing dialogues through equity and distributive justice. Economic equality, operationally, implies the absence of any exploitative system. It means that there is equality in the realm of economic power and there should be no concentration of political power in the hands of a select few. Distribution of opportunities and wealth should be such that no section of the people becomes overaffluent and capable of misusing its economic might. Economic equality can exist, only, when all people have reasonable economic opportunities to develop themselves. Adequate scope for

employment, reasonable wages, adequate leisure and other economic rights create economic equality. Dialogues are helping in fashioning the delivery mechanism

The flow of foreign direct investment and growth of the economy has been able to resolve the issue of poverty to some extent.

The process of globalization has, however, made the poor poorer and the rich richer. Huge inflow of funds have aided the growth of the prominent Indian companies and helped the middle classes to earn a lucrative salary. Therefore, the purchasing power has increased in such a way as to encourage the rise in the prices of commodities affecting the poor.

The poor are sometimes left with nothing to save and reinvest, and are also not in a position to provide education to their children so that at least they can earn substantially and eradicate poverty. Universal education is seen as the remedy, and sincere efforts are being made to create the necessary infrastructure. It seems that some classes of poor have fallen into a vicious circle which is restricting their growth. Globalization, income inequalities and regional disparities in India have contributed to this state of affairs, making income inequalities directly proportional to poverty. According to the assumption of some analysts, the globalization process has aided in the worsening of the condition of the poor classes in India (Kurien, N.J., 2007, September 3). They also believe that the progress of globalization accompanied with the increase in the price index has aided in the rise of income but has not brought rationalisation in the income rise.

According to a study, the distribution of income among the people in Kerala showed wide disparities in 2006. The study, done by the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP), showed that while the affluent 10 per cent of the population accounted for as much as 41.2 per cent of the total domestic income, the bottom 10 per cent got to enjoy a pathetic 1.3 per cent. This income disparity in the State was the highest in the country.

As said by Naik, S.D., I. (2003. Aug 16), the economic disparities can have the following possible effects:

1. A system emerges in which the economically backward have no real political power. People are sovereign, but the power is exercised by those who are privileged.
2. The economically weaker section becomes alienated from the society and become indifferent.

3. The widening gulf between the haves and have-nots leads to an increase in tension among different classes. People are discontent in general.
4. The economically discounted people, faced with injustices, get frustrated and get compelled to resort to violence, agitations, strikes.
5. Economic disparity may even lead to corruption and adoption of unfair means to earn money. Hundreds of crores of rupees are lost in bribes and scams in a country where people die of starvation.

To meet the situation, analysts have recommended various measures which include:

1. Giving priority to protecting the interest of people engaged in agriculture. They need better seeds, fertilizers and irrigation facilities. The farmers must be provided with credits and loans on easy terms and government should help them in the procurement of their outputs at competitive prices.
2. There is an urgent need to extend credit to educated unemployed youth, small farmers and artisans, so as to enable them to undertake self employment ventures.
3. Schemes to remove poverty such as Minimum Needs Program and Integrated Rural Development Program need to be implemented still more effectively.
4. The Public distribution system has to be strengthened.

Final remarcks

Longitudinal thinking is a powerful tool for understanding traditions, creative wisdom and insights of others. It can be used to understand oneself better. To understand others, one must first understand oneself.

Towards this end, the old and the new media technologies can be of great help. There is a value in tradition and legacy constructs which has to be understood and woven together in an integrated whole. India gives some interesting applications.

Many debates to understand dialogues are necessary. Some issues remain to be resolved including the best method of sustaining cultural

and ethnic integration. There is need to know where socio-economic factors are causing dissonance and where ethnicity and culture have come into play.

Whenever a society has even temporarily suspended multiple levels of dialogue among social groups, seed beds of conflict have been greatly enriched to a point where antagonistic processes almost become irreversible. India is an example of many successes and a few failures in multiple dialoguing and perhaps the biggest challenge is progressively becoming that of technological subversion of established methods of living together. When this would threaten the frames of reference of integrative dialoguing the danger would be very real. As of today it seems manageable provided multiple dialogues are converted into a contemporary idiom of decision making.

Dialogues to survive and grow must have the pre-requisite of mutual respect and need to be carried out amongst equal partners. The partners should be able to manage the propensity and temptation for immediate gains.

Inquiry into the methods of creating and strengthening an understanding among stake holders in the success of a given community is a must. Public exploration to evaluate and creatively test the solutions recommended is a consequence of dialogue. India seems to have the template and its continuing success will be a factor of its ability to adapt its coping mechanisms to contemporary idioms. Towards that end the portents are bright.

Notes

[1] Shankaracharya established four *'Peethas'* which literally means "seats of learning", in four geographical regions of India, in course of his travels, to cover the entire country.These were in Sringeri, Dwarka, Badrinath, Puri in the Southern, Western, Northern, Eastern part of India respectively.They were supposed to be centres for learning and dessimination of his philosophy of *Advaitvad* (non-dualism).In very day language of use they are also referred to as *Mathas.*

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