

Our relation with others

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Abstract

Rationality Paradigm of Philosophy is quite ineffective to solve the problem, how to establish our amiable relation with others, which now is haunted by hatred, contempt and malice. We have already witnessed the barbarism of Serbs, Nazis, and Hindu- Muslim riot. Even now the media spread news and information about different incidents of rape and murder. Under the circumstances, our suggestion is, it is only *sentimentality*, which is the prerogative of *Literature*, that can help us in establishing our nicer relation with others.

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I

Our relation with others is not always happy: it is often poisoned by killing, raping and hatred. To explicate this Rorty referred to the report from Bosnia, by David Rieff which tells us : ‘To the Serbs, the Muslims are no longer human....Muslim prisoners ,lying on the ground in rows, awaiting interrogation, were driven over by a Serb guard in a small delivery van.¹ This dehumanization went on :

A Muslim man in Bosansi Petrovac (was) forced to bite off the penis of fellow –Muslim....if you say that a man is not a human, but the man looks like you and the only way to identify this devil is to make him drop his trousers. Muslim men are circumcised and Serbs are not—it is probably a only a short step ,psychologically , to cut off his prick.....There has never been a campaign of ethnic cleansing from which sexual sadism has gone missing .²

The moral is : Serbian murderers did not feel any remorse in doing this inhuman activity : for they thought that all these cruel activities were not to human beings, but to non-human Muslims. In fact, what they were doing was very much like treating those who are not humans but ‘infidel dogs’. Similarly in 1946 Calcutta riot, Muslims treated Hindus as *kafers*, and not as one of us, and so they did not hesitate to kill them mercilessly.

On the contrary, we have distinction between man and man, when Rabindranath narrates his experience when he found that, in his estates office, Muslims were not allowed to sit on the same mattress as Hindus. This brought home to him how the Hindus regarded people of other faiths as outsiders, as profane,. Prohibition and refusal constituted the driving force of Hindu religion, at the cost of warm human relationships and harmony. In ‘Samasya’ or ‘Problem’³, he recognizes that it is very difficult to solve the Hindu-Muslim divide because both the communities remain firm within the boundaries of their respective religions, It is religion that divides their human worlds and isolates them from one another. In this connection , Tagore holds that the Hindu-Muslim condition is analogous to that of a primitive Bushman tribe. People belonging to the Bushman tribe instantly kill others not belonging to their tribe. This shows that they were confined to extreme barbarism, since they did not realize that one’s expansion lies in unity, and not in enmity with others. Similarly , Rabindranath holds that the Hindus and the Muslims keep themselves separate from one another, and it is religion that has enabled this. Little matters to them that is not visibly connected with their own religion. It is this religion by which they shield themselves from all others in the world. And this sense of difference due to religion has built up such a strong wall between them that they forget that human expansion consists in a harmonious bond with others, that the identity of man is above creed and religion. It is really unfortunate, according to Rabindranath as he says in “Hindu Muslim”, to make religion the only basis on which to bind people together. For religion can easily add fuel to an already dangerous tendency towards discrimination. The need of the day is free and varied intermixing which alone can thwart our feeling of hatred: ‘we should all meet and talk to each other on different occasions. If we go side by side, come closer, it will be easy for us to accept and respect each other as human beings, not as Hindus or Muslims.....That’s why when the Muslim teachers and students used to visit Shantiniketan, we could not feel any difference from them, nor was there anything that could obstruct our relation of love , affection and friendship.⁴In fact, Rabindranath was rudely shocked by the politics of hate, and thought seriously about how to remove it. We shall now ponder how traditional philosophy, particularly philosophers like Plato and Kant can help us in ironing out the dismal wrinkle in our relation with others which worried Rorty. David Rieff as well as Rabindranath very much.

II

According to Plato, there is a crucial difference between man and animals. Human beings have a special element 'that puts them in a different ontological category than brutes'. It is the element (rationality) that provides the reason why man should be cordial to one another. But our point is, it is not rationality that distinguishes man from animals except that human beings, unlike animals, belong to different socio-cultural milieu.

Traditionally, Plato and Kant appealed to rationality as the ground of morality. Any talk of culture, according to them, will end in relativism, and, therefore, will become irrational. But we see no point in denying that we make our cultures, enrich them, and we do not confront anything trans-cultural. We need not 'dig behind' this historical fact to discover non-historical facts about what we are, like Plato and Kant. In the present age, we have learned, human beings are not rigid rational beings, but 'far more malleable' than Plato and Kant had dreamed. We have learned to make distinction between human beings and animals not on the ground that we can know, but they can only feel. This will mean that our moral obligation 'has nothing to do with love, friendship, trust or social solidarity'. But why we cannot extend this feeling also to ourselves! Why we can not emphasise love for our fellow-beings as opposed to neo-Platonic suggestion, knowledge of the truth or power of reason matters, and also makes us free. If we are not nicer to each other, and instead behave like Serbs and Nazis, what sort of world then we shall leave for our future generation!

III

Plato thought that because human beings have a common core viz, rationality, this provides the key of their bond with one another. But things were not so smooth. The Serb sees Muslims as 'circumcised', and think of Muslim women as whores, and it is useless to tell them that many Muslims were profoundly learned. Young Nazis were quite aware that many Jews were clever, and talented, and were highly proficient in different academic spheres, yet they took immense pleasure in sending them to Gas Chamber. Kant's contention that one should not treat rational beings as mere means produced little effect on them. For everything depends on whether the human beings they treated are members of their moral community. For white people, black people did not so count, for the Nazis, the Jews did not so count. The mandate of Kant of people being nicer to each other because of what they have in common, and to ignore their differences as trivial. But for the people like Serbs or Nazis to whom we are trying to convince their affinity with others, they will find nothing of the sort. They will reject this sort of advice. They will resent the idea that to be cordial to black Muslim males and females, is what is needed following the advice of Kant.

In this context, what is urgently needed is to insist on Sentiment (which Kant will not approve of), and to teach the students that prejudice against racial and religious things, as Tagore insists on all throughout his life, is a terrible thing. It is only this sentimental education that will produce generations of tolerant, other-respecting students in all parts of the world. It will be crucial, as Rorty says, to tolerate trouble-making bad people on the ground that these people are no less rational or intelligent than good people like us who respect others. "The bad peoples' problem", in the words of Rorty, "is that they were not as lucky in the circumstances of their upbringing as we were. Instead of treating all those people out there who are trying to find and kill Salmon Rushdie as irrational, we should treat them as deprived".⁵

Here Rorty refers to Baier (*A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991*) who emphasises on trust and sentimental education that will lead to progress of sentiments.⁶ This progress consists in an increasing ability to see the similarities between ourselves and peoples unlike us, ignoring the differences. We shall have to accept the fact that the fate of women of Bosnia will depend on the television journalists who just like what Harriet Beecher Stowe did for the blacks will be able to show and feel that these women are just like us; real beings that the Serbs denied. The Serbs did not realize that just as, as Tagore observes, the strings of a musical instrument produce music not in isolation, but together in a harmonious relation with one another, so it is only in harmonious relations that human beings produce music of the spirit. The human world is a with-world, within which it only through proper attunement to others that any individual may realize himself. The harmonious relation that Tagore envisages are not applicable to only one society.

Actually speaking, cultures are different. What is needed is eagerness of heart for

a fruitful communication between different cultures. Anything prevents this is barbarism.⁷

In this context, Tagore's concept of love is very much rewarding. We have greatest delight when we realize ourselves in others and this is love. Love involves an appropriate stance towards other human beings, as creatures who are not objects but other subjects intimately involved in one another's identity. Other people belong among 'us', not 'them'. To be sure, the truth that is contained in love is not what we can realize through detached intellectual reasoning. As the Buddha too appreciated, it is only through affective experiences as love and compassion that one can fully appreciate the error of regarding people as distinct, as 'hermetically sealed selves'.

To rely on the command of sentiments rather than that of reason will gradually enable powerful people to see the evil of oppressing others, to prevent those who try to oppress them, to entertain the spirit of cordiality to others rather

than obedience to the moral law. Preference for sentimentality will also be able to resist the idea that we shall have to rely on the 'piggy little eyes' of the strong for opening to the weak. It will resist the desperate hope that there is something stronger and powerful like God who will hurt the strong, if they do not so open up, for then they have violated the human core. This desperate hope for a non-contingent power that constituted the hope of Plato and Kant is now almost outdated. Thus Swami Vivekananda emphasizes that it is useless to search for any transcendental God ;he belongs to all the creatures in the world, and to serve them is the best religion .Similarly, Tagore insists that the deity is not in the temple, he is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking stones . He is with them in sun and shower, and his garment is covered with dust'.⁸ So the idea of a non-contingent, transcendent power has no place in Vivekananda or Tagore's thought.

We are now in a good position to resent the idea of Kant that the speciality of human beings is their ability to know than feel. If we learn from sentimentality, we shall be able to appreciate that human beings are distinguished by their capacity for love and friendship, rather than for their rationality .If we are faithful to Baier's advice, we shall avoid the rational egoist's theory 'Why should I be moral' and ask instead , in the words of Rorty, 'Why should I care about a stranger, a person who is not kin, a person whose habits I find disgusting?'"⁹ Further this will make the traditional universalistic notion innocuous.

A better way is to appeal to sentimental stories e.g. of Rabindranath which will make us feel that a girl far away from her home might have been my daughter, or feel sympathy for a servant who belongs to a different caste or tribe for his coming late due to illness of his son, because I feel, he is a father like me. All these things will make us one with those who do not belong to our caste or tribe. In other words, if we learn from Baier, the question, 'Am I under any obligation to a person who is not a kin to me'?' is a mark of intellectual immaturity.

Now it is the just time to conclude with Rorty, 'I think....Baier has the history of the past two hundred years of moral progress on her side. These two centuries are most easily understood not as period of deepening understood as the nature of reality or of morality, but of sentiment, in which it has become much easier for us to be moved to action by sad and sentimental stories'.¹⁰

IV

Let us now put the foregoing in a nutshell. Remember the torture of the Jews in the 1930's by the Nazis. Remember the report of David Reiff which tells us how the Muslims were treated by the Serbs as animals, how the Muslim women were gang-raped, and how in Bengal (before partition) during the riot of 1946, Muslims and Hindus killed each other. All such reveal how our relation with others is poisoned by hatred, contempt and malice.

It is crucial in this context to determine how traditional moral philosophers can help us in having nicer relation with others. Indeed they have tried to do that. Pat and Kant suggested that human beings have a common core, viz., rationality that can provide the reason for people to be amiable to each other.

But this view of Plato and Kant had no impact on the Serbs, or the young Nazis ,or Hindu-Muslims. They knew that many Muslims or Jews were great intellectuals; yet that did not prevent them to be merciless towards the Muslims or the Jews. Nor did Kant's teaching that one should not treat a rational agent as a mere means make any impact on the Serbs and Jews. For everything depends on who would count as a fellow human being, or as rational agent , where rational agency is synonymous with membership in their moral community. For most white people, black people did not so count; for the Nazis did not count as members of their moral community.

Under the circumstances, contemporary thinkers like Annette Baier would not entertain Kant's view that it is rational to be moral. What is more crucial, according to them, is not to fulfill the requirements of moral law but to cultivate sentiments which will increase our ability to see more similarities between ourselves and people unlike us, than difference.

Notes and References :

1. Cited from Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and sentimentality' in *Truth and Progress*, p.197. I am specially indebted to this essay of Rorty in writing my paper.
2. Ibid.
3. 'Samasya', *Kalantar*, pp.316ff.
4. 'Hindu-Musalman', *Kalantar*, p.367.
5. 'Human Rights , Rationality and Sentimentality', p.180.
6. Ibid., p.181
7. *Rabindra Rachanabali*, eds. Probodh Chandra Sen, Pramathanath Bisi, etc., Calcutta : West Bengal Government, 1961, Vol II, P.1094.
8. *Gitanjali*, poem XI, Calcutta.
9. Rorty ,op.cit. 10. Rorty, op.cit, p.185