

**Being Different: An Indian Challenge to  
Western Universalism  
Rajiv Malhotra**

In 'Being Different' Mr Rajiv Malhotra presents his own lived experience or purvapaksha and his study of American ideas. It is done by reversing the gaze by making East the adjudicator in our understanding of the West. He lives there and confronts both friendly and not-so-friendly and sometimes volatile non-friendly opposition to his purvapaksha or Indian dharmic tradition. But the book does not show anywhere his apathy or anger towards those critics of India or Indian dharmic tradition.

By the way this coinage of the term dharmic tradition in place of Hindu religion or Hinduism or Indian religion shows his deep understanding of Indian ethos which is further reflected in his definition of Hinduism that 'Hinduism see humanity as a manifestation of God'. It is a path of knowing the self, aatmanam biddhi. With the help of different embodied approaches like yoga, meditation or bhakti, as Rajiv says, with the sublime idea that humankind is divine, one starts moving on the path of embodied knowing.

It is a book of comparative religion where the gaze is reversed from Western Judeo-Christian faiths to Eastern dharmic traditions and makes it the focal point to his assessment of the Abrahamic religions and very forcefully denounces the notion of Western universalism.

But any effort of contrasting the Western and the Indian views are generally done with a hidden intention, to prove the superiority of one's own philosophical or religious tradition and is mostly spurious. Indian or Western philosophies are simply not the same sorts of enterprise. Each has its own standards of logical and rational assessment.

However, comparative philosophy reveals that both traditions supply viable alternative answers to certain questions, just as thinkers belonging to one tradition may very well learn from those belonging to the other how not to make certain mistakes and how to avoid certain conceptual muddles and how to ask certain questions more perspicuously.

Comparative philosophy in a certain sense is unavoidable for one who writes about Indian philosophy or dharmic tradition in English and creates a space for a common discourse in which they can participate – a conversation of (hu) mankind not a conversation of the West or of the East by itself.

Rajiv Malhotra's book on 'Being Different' is such a book where he like a garland maker creates a garland with flowers of many colours and forms and strings them harmoniously to give a most pleasing effect of wonderful diversity with which we live in this world. It is a metaphor for him to prove the dharmic diversity or sapekesta which means 'engagement with reciprocity and mutual respect'.

He goes on referring to various Western texts which are highly critical of Indian culture, religion or civilizational values of life but he does not get worked up.

However, he takes, some time, extreme position so took Mahatma Gandhi in his Hind Swaraj. It is a kind of position only a great poet or a visionary is capable of taking. Poet Blake once said that all extremes open the gates of heaven. Truth is not revealed through liberal views, but with extreme views. Gandhi criticized the railways and called parliament sterile. In fact on one side he was deglamorizing his opponents by talking like this, even his bare body and a half dhoti over his knees was to deglamorize the West and on the other side the sterility of the parliament could be realized by the fact that in spite of the abolition of untouchability, dowry and many other ills of the society by the parliament bye-laws they are still very much continuing in the society.

The book does not make any attempt to subordinate the uniqueness of Indian dharmic or Western Judeo-Christian religious traditions either by a hegemonic construction, nor by the imposition of 'values' claimed to be exclusively Indian or Western.

What I have immensely liked that it recognizes the methodological necessity of the plurality of thought but does not forcefully contest the idea of 'heterogeneity' which completely subordinates the commonalities of thought and the relationship between the self and the other. It avoids and I quote, the two extremes:

Incoherence of chaotic scattering of flowers,

and

Reductionist, homogenized universals.

After all any intellectual pursuit of such big dimension of thought, as done by Rajiv, though highlights the thinking patterns of the East and the West, it also tends to go beyond these confines of two parts of this earth and moves towards the total world, which is definitely one but we have divided it into fragments: first, second and the third world.

The use of non-translatable Sanskrit terms like ahimsa, satya, swadharma, satyagrah, swaraj, swadeshi by Gandhi inspired (p352) Rajiv to use such non-translatables as a strategic way to demonstrate how differences between two cultures can be asserted constructively while retaining respect for one's opponents at the same time.

Rajiv calls it an inter-civilizational encounter but encounters take place to demolish the opponent or conquering one and all. While in debates the focus remains in the establishment of one's own supremacy over the other and creates suicidal ego. It is in fact a dialogue or samvad which he holds in a spirit of reciprocity, mutual recognition and solidarity and also demonstrates cultural broadmindedness.

Rajiv uses certain untranslatable Sanskrit terms which are highly meaningful, for example,

- I. sapeksha dharma, adherence to purbapaksha of any religion just not Hinduism – an excellent conceptual term coined by Mr Malhotra. All paths are different, but at the same time they are the same, because one does not know from which path God's grace will come to one.

On this axis of one and many revolves the whole question of multifaith dialogue. Can we then use the often used metaphor in multifaith debates 'traveling together' to explain this term? It connotes a state of mind, it postulates mutual trust, respect and confidence among its exponents and adherents of different faiths and traditions, showing a vision of the world as a family. This exactly meant by this term 'sapeksha dharma'.

But if this diversity of religion does not open up the channels of understanding and communication, then this can prove to be calamitous and exactly that happened in the colonial period and even in the present post colonial period when the colonial rulers of the West went on hammering the differences in culture, civilization, literary thought and religions to prove their superior identity.

The idea of the East as some shadowy, threatening 'other' with which the West is in sharp conflict, and the essentialising of East and West into two simple and contrastive categories has a long history and can be traced back to the time of Herodotus but that history is now a past history.

Sartre's famous statement 'hell is the other' carries a strong echo of Hegel, who always defines one's identity as identity against the other either to be appropriated or to be destroyed. But the Western mind knows well that if he succeeds in completely subjugating the 'other', the identity of his own self becomes dubious. He wants to become whole by destroying the other but without the other, he becomes nothing.

The West suffers from difference anxiety and the manifestation of this anxiety is either he wants to i) destroy the other or to ii) isolate the other or else iii) through inculturation

dilute the difference and eventually assimilate the other into his own world or what is known as the American 'melting pot'.

For India the 'other' is never a source of reference to define one's own identity as it is for the Europeans. The self is always accepted as self-referential, the other is never a threat to their identity, nor a source of confirmation of their uniqueness.

Sapeksha dharma is consistent with the principle of bandhuta in the sense of intersubjectivity, solidarity and fraternity across paths and identities or what Rajiv calls 'positive pluralism' or 'unity in diversity'. It is not mere tolerance or indifference emanating from a position of assumed superiority.

ii) Another term is *purvapaksha* means a respectable confrontation with the opposite views in a debate where one first understands the *purva pakshin's* arguments and then refutes it and thereafter establishes his views or the *siddhanta* or *uttara paksha* – it is both understanding as well as a critique.

Understanding does not mean to tolerate. One should not be tolerant of another religion, because tolerance smacks of personal ego--tolerating their behaviour! On the contrary, accepting it and showing respect for it, that what they are saying is also true, is acceptance. This is intellectual and emotional welcoming--acceptance of diversity or mutual respect. It is not *nirpekshata* or passivity towards others but what Rajiv says, *sapekshata* or reciprocity and mutual respect. It facilitates *bandhuta* or responsiveness to the 'otherness' of the other..

It is just not paying lip service to the concept of 'many mansions' is still far from the willingness to enter into 'mansions' other than one's own. The view expressed in the slogan 'All religions are really one,' is an expression of an intellectual refusal to accept this diversity. However, it may also mean that the core structure is one. But accepting the diversity contributes to the multi-coloured fabric of human experience.

Rajiv's proposal for a reversal of gaze from West to East to Eastern gaze upon the West primarily to contest the western categories and its de facto status of an arbiter of what is considered universally true. In simple terms it is a challenge to Western universalism and an effort to understand the West on Indian terms or dharmic categories.

At least two meanings of universalism are in currency: one, which is a part of India's ethos of the continuity of thought and, another, which came into circulation since the colonial times.

The age old Indian conception of universality which Tagore describes is that for the sake of our humanity, for the full growth of our soul, that we must turn our mind towards the ideal of the spiritual unity of man.' ('The way to Unity', English Writings...vol iii.p. 465) or *vasudhaiva kutumbukam*.

In the meditative Upanishadic times we are told that this earth is a human family (*vasudhaiva kutumbukam*) and the divine spark is the guiding principle and we are the divine spark. Under this concept the whole world (consisting of Universal Self, Nature and the self) is a family and is very different than the cosmopolitan concept of Diogenes of Sinope 412BC, who said: "Asked where he came from, he answered: 'I am a citizen of the world (*kosmopolitês*).'"

This can be, if not narrow, but a broad view of particularism and does not in any way prove one's identity as a member of a family but just a citizen of the world (state).

The concept of the world as a family is also different from the present creation of the Western civilization of a global order or a global village, a point in the relentless process of westernization of the globe. The terms and conditions for living and participating in the life of this village are laid down by the west for their own benefit and if the terms and conditions are not followed one cannot stay in that village.

Tagore looks back to what he sees as the real tradition of India, which is to work for 'adjustments of races, to acknowledge real differences, between them, and yet seek some basis

of unity.’ The basis for this tradition has been built in India at the social level, not the political, through saints like Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, and others. It is this solution— unity through acknowledgement of differences— that India has to offer to the world.’ (Nationalism, 1985 p.64). This conception is the principal element of Tagore’s idea of cosmopolitan universality. Tagore always believed in the confluence of cultures and human unity. Where ever there is confluence either of rivers or of ideas India finds sacredness in that confluence. Tagore never believed in a monolithic structure of one culture or an alchemical unity of cultures but in the creation of bridges among cultures for better understanding of human beings so that an edifice of human unity could be established without devaluing their local origins, culture and traditions.

Tagore’s seminal statement in this respect is, ‘Perfection of unity is not in uniformity, but in harmony, (Creative Unity 171–72). Rajiv echoes this view in explaining Hinduism that tends to conceptualize universals as integral unities pregnant with particulars.

He further explains this so eloquently:

“The relationship between universals and particulars never collapses into either pole: neither towards the other worldly emphasis on transcendental universals, nor toward radical materialism of earthly particulars.”

A school of Vedanta philosophy which admits the truth of, or what is known as the principle of *bhedabheda*. It may generally be taken to indicate a belief that *bheda* or ‘distinction; and *abheda* or ‘unity’ can co-exist and be in intimate relation with each other. Substance and attribute, universal and particular, whole and parts may seem to be different from, or even opposed to, each other, but really there is no incompatibility between them, for they can be reconciled in a unity which pervades the difference and is its very being.

This view is sometimes described also as *parinama vada* or ‘theory of development’ implying that reality yet maintains its identity throughout. (M. Hiriyanna, Indian Philosophical Studies, 1 (1957), PP.95-96)

Amartya Sen has almost a similar idea that it is particular cultural traditions that can provide the bases for understanding and morally relating to others and ultimately for developing a vision of universality.

The second conception of universality is related to enlightenment. The emergence of enlightenment thought extolled reason and science as the best means of improving society and of ending political despotism and the tyranny of ‘blind faith and superstition.

There is no reason for anybody to belittle this complex intellectual enterprise but the post- structuralist theory developed an important critique of the coercive aspects of enlightenment thought but did not critically comment on its presumption that sacred is superstitions and regressive and that secular is progressive. The forking of sacred and secular, non-reason and reason, non-modern traditions and forward looking modernity, spirituality and materialism, though created a new meaning of western universalism, but at the same time brought a division between humanity that progressive west is civilized and regressive east is backward. Progressive west is universal and the regressive east is particular. The extended meaning of *purvapaksha* by Rajiv speaks against this kind of a notion of cultural uniqueness which goes against the concept of human unity so assiduously nurtured by India by introducing the notion of universal humanity Tagore says:

‘Oh my mind, awake heroically on the shores of the ocean of universal humanity.’

In order to contest the universalist boasts of Europe Tagore on February 10, 1937, composed his poem on another continent, “Africa”,

towards the end of his long and creative life in literature. Sugata Bose says that even more than the empathy for Africa’s history of ‘blood and tears’, what marked the poem was a searing sarcasm directed at the false universalist claims of an unnamed Europe. Even as the ‘barbaric greed of the civilized’ put on naked display their ‘shameless inhumanity’, church bells rang out in neighbourhoods

across the ocean in the name of a benign God, children played in their mother's laps, and poets sang paeans to beauty.'

The sanctimonious hypocrisy of the colonizer stood in stark opposition to the wretched abjection of the colonized.

This is what is known as homogenized universalism about which African writer Chinua Achebe in his essay on 'Colonialist Criticism' says that in the nature of things, the work of a western writer is automatically uniformed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it. Fredric Jameson's statement which is no doubt inadequate and slanted, describes the third world literary works as national allegories, which has nothing to do with universal cosmopolitanism. And so Chinua Achebe says that he should like the word "universal" banned altogether from the discussions on African or to add Indian literature until such time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world.

The colonizers did not simply erect walls around their notions of cultural difference, they were keen to be

players in broad arenas of cosmopolitan thought zones and wished to contribute to the shaping of a global future. Their universalism flowed from a sense of exclusiveness or exceptionalism resulted from Eurocentric interpretation of enlightenment where rationalism, science, equality, freedom, human rights and industrialism are accepted as the unique by-products of European civilization and which created a homogenised universalism which was very much different from Tagore's universalism which grew with its strong basis of particularism or with the help of knowledge and learning of one's own culture or a deep understanding of the tradition and a humanistic insight.

iii) Itihasa is another foundational term used by Mr Malhotra which is just not history in western terminology. The common meaning of history is that it is a narrative of past events and Bible is based on indisputable historical facts or Judeo-Christian religion is therefore history-centric whereas dharmic tradition is primarily a search for the Self in the self (atmanam biddhi) and is experiential or intuitive.

Itihasa, no doubt, as Amarkosha says, is puravritta, i.e. events of the past but the emphasis is not on the happenings, however true they may be, but on some teaching, on some ideal and for that itihasa is always coupled with purana. That which is old and is still new.' Purana or myth has a self-renewing, eternalizing aspect which appeals to the Indian mind. It has both episodical richness and the glow of the eternal reality (sruti jyotsna).

In the Indian context it is the myth-making function of history that underlies its dynamic force in moulding the social life, morality and culture of a people and hence Mahabharata is itihasapurana and accordingly the mutable man of history is called nara. When he moves from his physical self towards realization of the self he becomes narottama and stands between history and myth and when he moves from man to deity to the Universal Self he is the eternal man the narayana and there and then the history and myth become one and the same.

So Kalhana, the famous Indian historian, following the tradition of Indian historiography says that the historian resembling prajapati (creator) must possess the divine perception of the past. Here man moves out from time bound existence of history to freedom from history or from temporality to eternity or to decomposition of ego in Buddhistic term or in modern jargon the deconstruction of the self or what Rajiv says, embodied knowing. His actual words are that the path of embodied knowing begins with the sublime idea that humankind is divine, and this is one of India's greatest gifts.

This approach is variously received and criticized by the western moderners. They thought that this undue emphasis on search for inner reality and quietitude appear to be socially inactive, amoral and excessively world-negating - something that the action-oriented and

progress-motivated Western religious ethos finds revolting and wrong. Professor Harvey Cox of Harvard in his 'Turning Point' said that I had steered clear of any religion that seemed to give people an excuse from withdrawing from the pain and confusion of the world. Surprisingly Cox in spite of his prejudice turned East and by his own admission filled a previously unnoticed void in his life and similarly many did the same thing in the West.

iv) Aranya or vana in comparison to marubhumi is very meaningfully used by Rajiv. When Rajiv says Dharmic forest, I am reminded of Tagore who in his essay 'The Religion of the Forest' says that it is the source to realize one's soul beyond oneself. From its majestic mystery comes forth the constant revelation of the infinite in music, scent and colour, which brings awakening to the soul of man.

Tapovanas are the forest schools for spiritual training and realization of the Self and harmony between nature and man but West fails to recognize in them the truth of the interpenetration of human life and the cosmic life of the world.

Marubhumi or desert is unfriendly, lifeless and harsh and a place of extremes. The desert dweller needs a God from above for relief and which inspires awe and worship. Forest represents polycentricism whereas Desert craves for greenery, forest and wants to conquer alternative pastures and here comes the difference between dharmic tradition and Judeo-Christian religion civilizations.

In conclusion, may I say that in the 70s of the last century I had the opportunity to read 'The Speaking Tree' by R. Lannoy and now after a gap of almost 40 years I had the good fortune to go through another seminal book on Hindu dharmic tradition 'Being Indifferent' by Rajiv Malhotra.

Apparently it looks like a book where the judeo-christian tradition is critiqued with the help of an Indian dharmic perspective but in the process many are prone to think that Rajiv takes a slanted position and favours the dharmic tradition and does not take the role of a critical insider.

Rajiv, no doubt, does not lay bear the detrimental aspects of the dharmic tradition and gives any proposal as how to change it from within by creating new formulations. Rajiv draws great inspiration from Gandhi but does not like a critical insider which Gandhi was modifies, adapts and reconstructs the tradition to create better insights

But I feel Rajiv's objective was just to show the differences between two religious traditions and challenge the western notion of universalism which was in fact a show of particularism or even broad particularism.

In his long stay in America, I can assume, he had to face lots of opposition and almost like Raja Rammohan Roy, who objected about the ways of missionaries, their abusive language and support of the Government in their activities. Roy in his debate said that truth and virtue do not belong to wealth and power and then spoke of biblical criticism by Unitarians and free thinkers and hit hard at the doctrine of Trinity and said if miracles are to be accepted then how can native miracles of great saints be rejected. No doubt the dialogue got clouded by racial superiority and it became more an encounter than a dialogue.

It is true that there are ample signs of cultural conflicts between the traditional East and the West as well as among the three Abrahamic traditions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam and hence it has become all the more necessary to respond with renowned efforts to counter the clash of civilizations with a dialogue among civilizations. While the very idea of a clash of civilizations is wrong, a civilization of clashes is today's reality. That what makes dialogue among cultures and peoples an urgent matter of international politics and global ethics

In order to enter into a meaningful dialogue aimed at better understanding of the Eastern and the Western civilization, we have to be prepared to exercise tolerance towards people who base their daily lives on values and experiences other than our own. Let us

remember the well known quote by Einstein that, “a person starts to live when he can live outside himself”,

At a more philosophical level in Gandhi’s view every culture can and should learn from others. “Preservation of one’s own culture does not mean contempt for that of others, but require assimilation of the best that there may be in all the other cultures.”

There is much wisdom in the critical openness of Gandhi, which includes the valuing of a dynamic adaptable world, rather than one that is constantly policing external influences and fearing ‘invasion’ of ideas from elsewhere. But in the West one can still realize a persistent reluctance to accept that the West could have borrowed anything of significance from the East, or to see the place of eastern thought within the western tradition. This is what Rajiv calls, western anxiety.

The Taittiriya Upanishad explains that when one sees difference even to the smallest degree, there arises fear in mind. With fear you cannot have a dialogue. So long as there is another there is finitude, the condition of being finite which creates fear. When the notion of difference is transcended by the vision of underlying unity there is fearlessness. But in facing a position where the other is completely obliterated no dialogue is possible in that kind of a state of transcendentalism.

Rajiv Malhotra by highlighting the differences, in fact, created a space to demonstrate that differences can be asserted constructively to retrieve, rediscover and redefine elements of culture in a creative way, by a return of pride in one’s roots while looking ahead.