

Review of the Book ‘Being different’ For “Sanskrit Vimarsh”, journal of RSk S, New Delhi

***Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism*- Rajiv Malhotra, Harper Collins Publishers India, ISBN: 9789350291900, Hardback, Pages: 488, Price: Rs.599**

‘*Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism*’ by Rajiv Malhotra is a path breaking book filled with profound original insights on various subjects related to Indian religious, spiritual, cultural and historical traditions. It is a research-oriental reference volume for the intellectuals, philosophers, researchers, and general readers who are curious to know Indian thought and Identity. The book reverses the gaze to look at the West, repositioning *dharmic* civilization from being the observed to being the observer. Rajiv Malhotra, the author of famous book ‘*Breaking India*’ is an Indian-American researcher and thinker, writing and speaking on current affairs as they relate to civilizations, cross-cultural encounters, religion and science. He has done an extensive study of Indian culture and history, Western civilization and religion, and comparative philosophy and faith. He has been churning a wide range of issues and ideas related to his thesis from different sources for the past two decades, and to show this, his book’s cover has an attractive picture of the churning of the ocean by *Devas* and *Asuras*. ‘*Being Different*’ is the result of deep research on Indian and Western philosophical systems and histories, with especial focus on how India essentially differs from the West, in cultural, spiritual matrix and in world outlook.

In his introduction Rajiv Malhotra mentions his intention of the current research. To quote here in his own words ‘I am simply using the *dharmic* perspective to reverse the analytical gaze which normally goes from West to East and unconsciously privileges the former’. On the reason of the study he says, ‘this reversal evaluates Western problems in a unique way, sheds light on some of its blind spots, and shows how *dharmic* cultures can help alleviate and resolve some of the problems facing the world today’.

Rajiv Malhotra instigate a debate through this literary work on the following propositions: (1) Western claims of universalism are based on its own myth of history, as opposed to the multi-civilizational worldview needed today. (2) Historical revelations are the foundations of western religions, as opposed to *dharma*’s emphasis on individual self-realization in the body here and now. (3) The synthetic unity of western thought and history is in contrast with the integral unity that underpins *dharma*’s worldview. (4) The West’s anxiety over difference and need for order is unlike the *dharmic* embrace of the creative role of chaos. (5) Common translations of many Sanskrit words are seriously misleading because these words are non-translatable for sound and meaning.

In the Introduction the author explains that this book is about how India differs from the West. He challenges certain cherished notions, such as the assumptions that Western paradigms are universal and that the *dharmic* traditions teach ‘the same thing’ as Jewish and Christian ones. For while the Vedas say, ‘truth is one, paths are many’, the differences among those paths are not inconsequential. He argues that the *dharmic* traditions, while not perfect, offer perspectives and techniques for a genuinely pluralistic social order and a full integration of many different faiths, including atheism and science. They also offer models for environmental sustainability and education for the whole being that are invaluable to our emerging world.

The author states that the term *Dharma* is not easy to define because it has several dimensions, and its oft-used translations as ‘religion’, ‘path’, ‘law’, ‘ethics’ all fall short in substantial ways. In the book ‘*Dharma*’ is used to indicate a family of spiritual traditions originating in India which today are manifested as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. On page 5 he explains that ‘the *dharma* family has developed an extensive range of inner sciences and experiential technologies called ‘*adhyātma-vidya*’ to access divinity and higher states of consciousness. *Adhyātma-vidya* is a body of wisdom and techniques culled from centuries of first-person empirical inquiry into the nature of consciousness and undertaken by advanced practitioners. India’s spiritual traditions spring from *dharma* which has no exact equivalent in Western frameworks.

The first chapter entitled ‘the audacity of difference’ begins with the statement that ‘the cultural and spiritual matrix of *dharma* civilizations is distinct from that of the west. This distinctiveness is under siege, not only from unsustainable and inequitable development but also from something more insidious: the widespread dismantling, rearrangement and digestion of *dharmaic* culture into Western frameworks, disingenuously characterized as ‘universal’ (p.12).

Posting his comments online on ‘Being Different’ Prof. Don Wiebe, of Trinity College in the University of Toronto has said that “Malhotra espouses an ‘audacity of difference’ in any such enterprise that defends both the distinctiveness and the spiritual value of Indian thought and that effectively reveals the cultural chauvinism of much western thought in its encounters with other cultures”.

The chapter 2 deals with ‘Yoga: freedom from history’ and talks about two ways of knowing the divine. All civilizations ask existential questions such as: Who are we? Why are we here? What happens when we die? Can we transcend death and if so, how? What is the ultimate reality or truth, and how can we reach it? The approaches to these questions and the answers offered by the two civilizations differ profoundly. In the Judeo-Christian traditions, revelation comes ‘from above’, and its content is strictly God-given (p. 55). But according to the *dharmaic* traditions, man is not born into original sin, though he is burdened by his past conditioning, which makes him unaware of his true nature. Fortunately, he has the innate capacity to transcend this condition and achieve *sat-chit-ananda* in this life. Since the ultimate truth is attained experientially, and passed from practitioner to practitioner, it follows that knowledge of the divine is varied and that more than one lineage may be true. Author quotes Sri Aurobindo to explain several ideas; and talks about *Itihasa*, *Purāṇa*, *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* to present the Indian outlook on history, myth and knowledge etc. and thus gives authenticity to his propositions.

On ‘Integral unity versus synthetic unity’ an authentic discussion at length is done in the chapter 3 of the book. The various *dharmaic* schools, despite some profound differences in theory and practice, all attempt to account for some form of unity. The resources for its realization are built into the various spiritual disciplines. Unity is inherent in existence, according to all dharma systems. This sense of an underlying unity is strong and allows for a great deal of inventiveness and play in understanding its manifestations. As a result, there tends to be a great diversity of paths and philosophical understandings without fear of chaos. Western worldviews, where religious or secular, begin with the opposite premise: the cosmos is inherently an agglomeration of parts or separate essences. The debates on this subject are not about how and why multiplicity

emerges out of underlying unity, but about how unity can emerge out of multiplicity. Such a unity is not innate; it must be sought and justified again and again, and resulting synthesis is always unstable. The starting points and conclusions of Western religion and science are in even contradiction, which essentially makes Western civilization an uneasy and tentative synthesis of incompatible building blocks (p.7-8).

In the fourth Chapter author shows that 'people from *dharmic* cultures tend to be more accepting of difference, unpredictability and uncertainty than westerners. The *dharmic* view is that so-called 'chaos' is natural and normal; it needs, of course, to be balanced by order, but there is no compelling need to control or eliminate it entirely nor to force cohesion from outside. The West, conversely, sees chaos as a profound threat that needs to be eradicated either by destruction or by complete assimilation(P.168). Rajiv Malhotra proclaims further (p.177) with pride and confidence that 'Western scholars find it difficult to acknowledge fully the merits of Indian Systems of thought, even when the influence of these systems on West is irrefutable'. Chaos arises when one experiences phenomena which do not lie within one's psychological and cultural comfort zones. In this reference the author narrates immense Indian creativity, adaptability, and ability to absorb what's new. The example of Kumbha-mela is given to demonstrate self-organized diversity (p.179). The two opposite sides are needed for churning of the milky ocean in order to obtain nectar for eternal life(p.184). Thus classical Indian traditions are referred in the book to emphasize its conclusions and to find out the root causes of certain current problems.

The author eludes on several distortions in the western-mind created by their use of poor and faulty English equivalents of Sanskrit words, in the fifth chapter. Sanskrit is important for its profound creative potential. It unites the great and little traditions (p.240). The meanings of Sanskrit words are embedded in its cultural context and also in the history of how that word evolved over time. Malhotra is firm in his view that 'the unique experiences of different cultures are not always interchangeable, and the words used to refer to those experiences must remain intact. Many cultural artifacts have no equivalent in other cultures, and to force such artifacts into the moulds that the West finds acceptable or familiar – to appropriate them – is to distort them. This too is a form of colonization and cultural conquest' (p.221).

This chapter contains some excellent information on Sanskrit language, and its structure. It is also explain in brief why Sanskrit words are not easily translatable. Generally Sanskrit texts and words need context for their proper interpretation. Meaning changes many times. If a meaning is not taken correctly, it is not possible to understand the concept hidden in that word. Highlighting the richness of Sanskrit, the author emphasizes that the 'non-translatability of key Sanskrit words attests to the non-digestibility of many Indian traditions. Holding on to the Sanskrit terms and thereby preserving the complete range of their meanings becomes a way of resisting colonization and safeguarding *dharmic* knowledge'(p.249).

Many examples of popular Sanskrit translations into English, that are false or misleading, are mentioned in this context. The Sanskrit words Brahman, Ātman, Shiva, Vedas, Dharma, Jāti, Aum, Duḥkha, Avatāra, Śakti, Kundalinī, Guru, Devatā, Yajña, Karma, Mokṣa etc. are referred to and elaborated. Their common mis-translations are explained and criticized in detail. Great

emphasis is given on the use of original Sanskrit terms for the preservation of their uniqueness and understanding.

The Western claim of universalism is mainly refuted in the sixth and last chapter entitled 'Contesting Western Universalism'. According to such claims, the West is both the driver of history and its goal, providing the template into which all other civilizations and cultures must fit. This chauvinism is virtually invisible from within the Western perspective itself (p. 308). Such a universalism fails to address human needs; the most it can achieve is a kind of synthetic unity of civilizations under the rubric of the West. This concluding chapter is thought-provoking, innovative, and powerful in its arguments and projects Malhotra as a bold thinker and writer in the field of culture, history, and ideology. The volume concludes with a negation of Western claims of universalism, while recommending a multi-cultural worldview.

The last essay is in the form of conclusion which talks about *pūrva-pakṣa* and the way forward. One needs to engage in *purva paksha* or 'reversing the gaze', to shed light on how this leads to the misapprehension and denigration of India and *dharmic* traditions. *Pūrva-pakṣa*, the traditional technique of analysis encourages to become truly knowledgeable about alternative perspectives, and to approach the other side with respect. Using this ancient practice the author mentions the importance of 'difference', and thus criticizing the Western view of its own universalism as the only legitimate view. Rajiv Malhotra insists on preserving difference with mutual respect – not with mere 'tolerance'. The book addresses the challenge on differences, and talks about unexamined beliefs that both sides hold about themselves and each other. As Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, renowned scholar of our times has rightly said about the book, 'Through seven chapters Rajiv Malhotra pursues a central argument to highlight the imperative need to respect difference'. The learned author gives detailed endnotes and illustrative bibliography and two Appendices. His homage to Gandhi is admirable.

Finally, it can be said that '*Being Different- an Indian Challenge to Western Universalism*' is a book that every Indian should read to understand his or her true identity in the world. Also the non-Indians should read to know what truly India and Indians are like. It gives an opportunity to westerners to see themselves through the lens of another worldview. It dismantles many myths of false claim of a single universalism that is in the west's possession. It proves that India is distinct in its civilization and therefore, is able to manage intense differences on the planes of culture, philosophy, language, religion and thought. The book makes us proud of our great seers, thinkers and ancestors. It is a memorable book for critiquing Western systems of thought and highlighting Indian ideals of humanity. 'Being different' will certainly turn to be a milestone in the long intellectual corridor of the intercultural debates of our times.

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