



Research Paper

Cultural Identity and Beyond: Hybridization of Culture in Global Context: A Critical Analysis

Dr. Susmita Bhattacharya

Assistant Professor, Government General Degree College, Singur
Affiliated under the University of Burdwan

Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to address a few fundamental issues which seem to be pertinent at this time. These issues are related with culture and cultural identity: What does actually the identity of a culture mean? Does cultural identity always invoke a sense of uncontaminated or pure culture? The time has come to search for an answer. We are oscillating between two alternatives: either we believe in a strict, watertight cultural identity or we stand for an open invitation to other culture for mutual interaction and inter-dialogue? This invitation or openness is a crying need to expand our limited sense of nationality, religion and cultural-ownership. Any kind of intermixing does not alter or enrich the identity or uniformity of one culture. On the other hand, culture is a dynamic process; hence every culture has to face or bear the stress of other cultural influence. Thus cultural 'hybridization' should not abrogate the value of nationality or the national culture of one's own country. For a creative re-finding our culture does need an engagement with 'their culture', particularly in a globalised situation. In our country like India, the very definition of culture was defined at the colonial period by the colonizers as they understood it for their own purpose. In postcolonial discourse cultural hybridity tends to be seen as de-historizing and de-locating culture from their own temporal, spatial, geographical and linguistic contexts. Cultural identity seems to have been compromised by the effect of globalization, migration, war, natural calamities etc. This paper endeavors to address these issues not as a cultural theorist but as a contemporary individual who takes a close look, at this juncture, at the changing scenario of obscure sense of identity, may it be national or cultural or individual.

Received 01 July, 2022; Revised 08 July, 2022; Accepted 10 July, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

(1)

A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, ... [it] is that from which something begins its presencing. (Martin Heidegger, "Building, dwelling, thinking")¹

Every culture has a specific boundary and also a dimension of "beyond". It is important to understand these dimensions simultaneously in order to be able to respond to the contemporary predicament of culture of a particular Nation-State. So, every culture has and ought to develop and cultivate a "meta-culture" which can challenge the parochialism of constructed boundaries of a culture.

Culture can play a transformative role in overcoming the distinction between individual subject or agent and the other being and can also confront the challenge of fundamentalism associated with a spatio-temporal boundary of Nation-State. Whenever we proceed to take the challenge of transformative role of culture we should keep in mind that culture always has two meanings—culture as a lived practice or a pattern implicated in a field of power and culture as a domain of finding values. In the words of Edward Said:

First of all it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms. Second, and almost imperceptibly, culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best ...².

These two above stated meanings are not mutually exclusive. Every culture contains within it a dimension of self-realization through the modes of inter-subjective communion and ultimately it leads to the constitution of a good society. Keeping these premises in mind we have to face the challenge of other people and their cultures which may be radically different from our own.

Now, a question that becomes relevant at this point is: how is the idea of 'other' or foreign culture constituted? How do we recognize a culture as a foreign one? Every culture has self-defining intentional experiences, as well

as a meaning-giving inter-subjective world coupled with a generative history of their own, as we have of ours. In spite of acknowledging the difference, how do we find a common ground for understanding each other? Professor J.N.Mohanty very aptly reacts on this point:

.....one cannot know whether two cultures are radically different in order to conclude that they cannot understand each other.³

Actually there is a constructed narrative regarding cultural purity which is closely associated with our present day problem of cultural fundamentalism or idea of cultural purity. In the case of languages, even when they are spatially or temporally distant from each other, they are not without mutual influence. There is no doubt a superficial difference exists which may lead us to assume that the cultures under consideration are radically different. But the claim for a separate identity or purity of a certain culture presupposes that it has a unique historical development or a unique generative history. But how can one be so certain that A and B two different cultures have different historical paths and somewhere they have not crossed each other at the same time? Since we do not have this certainty, we can only maintain that two different cultures exhibit degrees of difference. Does foreign culture really signify anything? The Indian culture or even the Hindu culture is an admixture of quite different sub-cultures. So that the other or the foreign culture in some way or other is there within the presumed unity of a specific culture. One cannot find a totally homogeneous subculture either.⁴

Second, there is still another objection against the very possibility of understanding the other, as it has been found in Derrida in a conversation with Gadamer. Derrida believes that understanding the other is always a matter of power. When one claims to understand the other, one ends up both 'negating' the other's autonomy and dominating her/him by violence. Professor Mohanty also agreed with Derrida that power and domination are often unconscious but act as an unconscious influence on one's interpretation of the other.⁵

So, there is a large, common framework only within which one can endeavor to grasp the true aspect of the cultural differences. Thus, no culture can be *totally* different from our culture. Keeping this in mind we now move to the next section to discuss the issue of cultural identity and try to find out a 'third space' which lies beyond any kind of identity.

(2)

Before we proceed further, we would have a quick look at the idea of 'third space'. It is a postcolonial sociolinguistic theory which explains the theory of identity and community realized through language or education. Bhabha argues that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the 'third space of enunciation'. This theory explicates the uniqueness of each person or context as a "hybrid". It is attributed to post-colonial thinker and critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha(1949-).

Bhabha's concept of "Hybridity" carries a sense of "in-between" space that encapsulates the burden and meaning of culture. Usually hybridity in its most basic sense refers to any kind of mixture.

A critical discourse centering around the colonial encounter has come to fore over the years that the superior culture of white men takes up the mission to educate the native colonized people for their own purpose, i.e. to exploit the land, resource and market. Colonialism is constructed by the Europeans as civilizing nation in which the "superior culture" of the Metropolitan West comes in contact with the "inferior culture" of the colonized locale. This kind of superior-inferior binary indicates the separateness of the culture of Colonizer West and colonized East (in case of India).

In order to understand the particular concept of 'hybridity', it is important to note that for Bhabha, culture is not a static entity. No culture has any sort of specific 'essence' that can be fixed in time and space. In other words, there is no magic concoction that provides the readymade formula for every culture. For Bhabha, culture is fluid, dynamic and it is perpetually in motion. Hence the concept of cultural identity is being challenged by the several disparate elements which are coming and being added from outside every moment from time immemorial. So for Bhabha, it is absolutely meaningless to look for a pure Indian or African or British culture. Thus all culture is characterized by an admixture of different elements and this is what Bhabha calls "hybridity". For him, a pure, uncontaminated, unchanging, static culture is a myth or an illusion.

The idea of pure, uncontaminated culture is challenged in case of translation of language; as someone goes for a field study to a distant place, she/ he has to communicate with local inhabitants for the purpose of the study and it can be assumed easily that some sort of translation definitely takes place for day to day communication. As translation of language (verbal or body) develops the claim for pure, isolated cultural identity cannot be sustained. Through linguistic communication or translation another kind of cultural transformation may be initiated. In this context a comment of Salman Rushdie can be pertinent:

*The word 'Translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained.*⁶

Now one may raise the question: how does this notion of hybridity help us to understand cultural permeability? Let us consider the case of subjugated India under the British rule in the colonial period.

According to Bhabha then, cultures are crafted, sculpted or narrated objects. Like traditions, cultures are also invented. One might view this invention in a different way. Culture is an ongoing process. This is where Bhabha's idea of hybridity may be viewed in a different manner. He suggests that cultures come after the hybridizing process, rather than existing before.

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial and postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into the alien territory— May reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. To the end we should remember that it is the 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.⁷

Bhabha concentrates on describing and explaining the process of cultural discourse when two seemingly simple, opposing groups interact and articulate their differences with each other. The boundary where the two groups clash, the 'in-between spaces' is where and when 'new signs of identity', i.e. the culture as medium for societal meaning, is created, a culture which is a hybrid of the two opposing cultures. Bhabha speaks of the process of producing culture from the perspective of the in-between spaces, a liminal or "interstitial perspective".

Bhabha begins to describe the process of creating culture by debunking the idea of a nation or people as being holistic or pure. He is interested in the 'narrated' or 'imagined' qualities of nation. A national culture according to Bhabha, can never be holistic and pure because its meaning, like other products of language, is open to ambivalence, open to interpretations by the receptor which is different from the originator's intent. So, in the post-colonial discourse, the colonizer's culture, far from being the simple, oppressive force upon the colonized culture, is open to ambiguity.

If we accept the notion of cultural hybridity, then what kind of social organization other than nation-state can be conceived? One possible answer was offered by Salman Rushdie in his most acclaimed book, *Imaginary Homelands*. Rushdie has discussed the issue in his inimitable style and language by positing the idea that none of us belongs to any particular national culture. All of us happen to be actually displaced beings that are living the life of an exile. The world around us is filled up with human beings who are displaced for various reasons—war, natural calamity, political persecution, economic aspirations, so on and so forth. According to him, even if we are not physically displaced, all of us are displaced in time from our glorious national past. So for Rushdie, all of us are in exile if not spatially then at least temporally and in most cases both spatially and temporally. We may not cherish our national, glorious cultural identity but as displaced beings we can be more flexible to become a successful successor of all cultures of the world.⁸

So when Bhabha suggests that the identity of a nation is something narrated, the process is two-fold: there is a *pedagogical* dimension that foregrounds total sociological facts and there is a *performative* dimension reminding us that those total facts are always open, and in fact are being altered every day in a subtle way. We are taught what the nation and national culture is, but at the same time we are inventing the nation at every moment along with its social institutions. We can fashion our own cultural identity by mixing the different elements that the world as a whole offers to us and a cultural identity then becomes a dynamic process of transformation and gives us far more agency to shape ourselves than is offered in the strait jacket of a particular ideological and constructed national identity .

(3)

In this section we will focus on the writings of the great Indian philosopher Krishnachandra Bhattacharya, and the renowned Indian mystic Sri Aurobindo. Both of them had addressed the issue of hybridization and cultural identity in their own way.

Professor Krishnachandra Bhattacharya discussed this issue in his famous essay, 'Swaraj in Ideas' (1931). It was confluenced by the idea, 'Swaraj' as Gandhiji offered in his Hind Swarj. Professor Bhattacharya upholds the view that:

The hybridization of ideas brought about by our own education and the impact of western political, social and economic institutions on our daily life is one of the most distressing features of our present situations.⁹

He also very generously admits that all vital ideals are created from some theory or from an insight of life. Thought or reason may be universal but every culture is created with a different and unique undertone by the respective genius of that specific culture. Hence, no culture can translate the 'physiognomy' of another culture. The 'physiognomy' is an absolute reflection of unique ideas and ideals of each culture which no other culture can grasp or conceive from outside.¹⁰

At the same time he also concedes that life means adaptation to varying times and to varying ideals. Hence he admits that there must be some space for adjustment and synthesis of different elements of different culture to some extent but within limits of cultural ideals. It is true that we are not always aware and clear about this adaptation. As we have to live, we have to accept external waves and adapt our secular life and secular ideas to the times. We have to alter ourselves here to acclimatize to the global situation.¹¹

He admits the possibility of adjustment with different cultures without surrendering one's own cultural ideas and ideal absolutely. There are ideals of the West which we may respect from a distance without recognizing any specific appeal to ourselves. Again there are ideals that may have a partial appeal to us, since they have an affinity with our own ideals though still with a undertone of different complexion. He suggests therefore,

*The form of practical life in which an ideal has to be transformed, has to be decided by ourselves according to the genius of our own community. A synthesis of our ideals with western ideals is not demanded in every case. Where it is demanded, the foreign ideal has to be assimilated to our own ideal and not the other way. There is no demand for the surrender of our individuality in every case: Svadharme nidhanam sreyah paradharmo bhayavahah.*¹²

We would now discuss how Sri Aurobindo understands this question of hybridization. In the essay 'Indian Culture and External Influence' in the *Arya*, March, 1919, he came to grips with the knotty questions centering around the nation-soul and the cultural identity associated with it in relation to the idea-forces, cultural influences and other movements in the world. Here he poses the question: what is the meaning of nation-soul? Can cultural identity of a nation be fully itself without a process of interaction and assimilation of the influences of the external world?

For Sri Aurobindo, there is a double action in every individualized existence: a self-development from within and a reception of impacts from outside which it has to accommodate to its own individuality and make into material of self-growth and self-power. These two operations are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the reception of impacts from outside stimulates in a vigorous and healthy manner the self-development and is an aid to a greater and more pronouncedly characteristic self-determination. On the other hand, the man who most finds and lives from the inner self, can most embrace the universal and become one with it; the independent, self-possessed and self-ruler, can most be the possessor and shaper of the world in which she/he lives, she/ he can find One Absolute being or *Atman* in all. That is the truth this developing existence teaches us, and it is one of the greatest secrets of the old Indian spiritual knowledge.¹³

Sri Aurobindo also reminds us that in any age the growth of a nation or an individual cannot come into its full flowering without coming into contact with the external world. Particularly in this age of globalization any sort of strong separate aloofness or closed sense of identity is no longer possible; every individual or human race has come close to each other in a certain unavoidable life-unity. All of us, as the exile beings of Rushdie, are now living in the whirlpool of this greater unavoidable global interaction. We have to understand the concept of cultural identity under the situations created by globalization, war and many more factors.

The very word 'Identity' within itself carries immense suggestions. How can it be meaningfully understood or conveyed through a specific socio-economic or socio-political culture? Thus the words "cultural identity" or individuality of culture is a little bit difficult to explain or illustrate in a single definition. As Amartya Sen points out,

*The individuality of cultures is a big subject now a days, and the tendency towards homogenization of cultures, particularly in some uniform Western mode, or in the deceptive form of the "modernity" has been strongly challenged.*¹⁴

He goes on to make two other fundamental points,

First :

*Given the cultural and intellectual interactions, the question of what is 'western' and what is 'Eastern' (or 'Indian') is often hard to decide, and the issue can be discussed only in more dialectical terms. The diagnosis of a thought as 'purely Western' or 'purely Indian' can be very illusory. The origin of ideas is not the kind of thing to which 'purity' happens easily.*¹⁵

Second:

*There are indeed many differences between Europe and India, but there are sharp differences also within India itself, or within Europe. And there are also great differences between different parts of the Indian intellectual and cultural traditions. One thing that goes deeply wrong with grand contrasts between 'our culture' and 'their culture' is the tremendous variety within each of these cultures. My old teacher Joan Robinson used to say: "Whatever you can rightly say about India, the opposite is also true."*¹⁶

To grasp the concept "cultural identity", there are two associated concepts that need to be distinguished. One is the **concept of uniformity** and another is the **concept of unity**. When we feel different peoples along with their diverse cultural traditions are nothing but the variant life-forms of the common humanity, then we realize a sense of unity emerges that we are not really separate from all other existence, but related with all that surrounds us. Retaining our own special temperament, orientation, opinion and law of being could we easily arrive at the living oneness or follow **a sense of uniformity** with the people having different life style, culture etc? If so, then, uniformity is nothing but a pseudo notion of maintaining a unitary image of individuals owning

their own cultural tradition. Sri Aurobindo very aptly points out, ... *uniformity kills life while real unity, if well founded, becomes vigorous and fruitful by a rich energy of variation.*¹⁷

Secondly, in the context of inter-cultural exchange and interaction how do we distinguish between what is to be accepted and what is to be rejected i.e. what is good for a particular culture and what is bad? This rigid distinction cannot always be maintained scrupulously in the cultural context because to reject the bad and take the good sounds very well but in practice this bad and this good cannot be separated in a mechanical way. They are the inextricably mingled element contributing to the growth of one being. They are not separate blocks of a child's toy house set side by side and easily detachable whenever needed. For example, if we take over a western ideal, we take it over from a living form which strikes us, we can imitate that form, and at the same time may be subjugated by the spirit and natural tendencies of that ideal. Sri Aurobindo in his brilliant exposition puts this issue in this manner,

...obviously, if we "takeover" anything, the good and the bad in it will come in together pell-mell. If we take over for instance that terrible, monstrous and compelling thing,....European industrialism,--unfortunately we are being forced by circumstances to do it, whether we take it in its form or its principle, we may under more favourable conditions develop by our wealth and economic resources, but assuredly we shall get too its social discords and moral plagues and cruel problems,....¹⁸

Thus through the process of acceptance and rejection of external influences the individual also begins to grow within. The individuals will not be the same as they are after facing the powerful influences of other external forces. The external impact of idea or influence may act as an irritant awakening of the inner being of the individual. At first this impact may generate a sense of discomfort or discord, and struggle within the innermost being of the individual but gradually it may act as a stimulus, and helps to awaken a new action of self-consciousness, a sense of fresh possibility by comparison, suggestion, and by knocking at locked doors to release the slumbering energies within one's own being.¹⁹

Actually in practice, these terms 'good' and 'bad' carry no definite meaning in the inter-cultural or cross-cultural discourse. It is not a question of vague value judgment regarding any moral issue but of 'interaction between life and life'. According to Sri Aurobindo,

*I must give them this general significance that whatever helps me to find myself more intimately, nobly, with a greater and sounder possibility or self-expressive creation, is good; whatever carries me out of my orientation, whatever weakens and belittles my power, richness, breadth and height of self-being, is bad for me.*²⁰

So the question of cultural identity depends on the relative strength and the stages of the development of the nation/individual. When the self-development of the nation/individual is in the initial or formative stage, it is very difficult to maintain its own cultural identity. As Sri Aurobindo opines that when a culture has fallen into a state of comparative inactivity, sleep, contraction, is shocked when it has started interacting with a waking, active, tremendously creative civilization sees an immense succession and development of new ideas and formations. It is impelled by the very instinct of life to take over those new ideas and forms to enrich itself, even to imitate and reproduce, and in one way or in another take these new forces and opportunities for its own development. If there is only a mechanical *imitation* with an attitude of subordination and servitude, the inactive or weaker culture perishes, it is swallowed up by the invading leviathan.²¹

(4)

Hence, the issue of cultural identity as well as cultural influence or interaction becomes an intriguing issue in modern day cultural discourse. If we accept hybridity as Bhabha poses, then in a way we are compelled to challenge the integrity or pure essence of our own cultural tradition. In the world of 21st century any sort of closed sense of identity has to be minimized. Where should we ultimately arrive at, global culture or an indigenous culture narrated as the culture of a Nation-State? Should we reject any kind of interaction or acceptance of another culture for fear of diminution of one's cultural identity? This issue can be illuminated with another example given by Professor Amartya Sen in his *Satyajit Ray Memorial Lecture Our Culture, Their Culture* delivered at Nandan, Kolkata in 1996,

*(Satyajit) Ray did not hesitate to indicate how strongly his Pather Panchali – the profound movie that immediately made him a front-ranking film-maker in the world –was directly influenced by Vittorio De Sica's Bicycle Thieves.... Despite this influence, Pather Panchali is a quintessentially Indian film, both in subject matter and in the style of presentation, and yet a major inspiration for its exact organization came directly from an Italian film. The Italian influence did not make Pather Panchali anything other than an Indian film – it simply helped it to become a great Indian film.*²²

Partha Chatterjee in his famous work *The Nation and Its Fragments*, raises a significant question: when a nation has its different sub-groups of people each claiming to have its lifestyle, language and culture, can we meaningfully talk about 'the' cultural identity of a nation? This is indeed a deeply relevant question in view of the fact that the problems of national integration or identity have often surfaced with so many ugly manifestations. The answer to this question depends on a host of factors, largely historical as well as our own deliberate policies of Nation-State. It has been observed that somehow or other some groups owing to their

relative strength and positions for their class, caste, religion etc. followed brutal policies of dominations, exploitations and exclusions. For example people belonging to what is anthropologically called the 'little tradition' (say, the tribal people) were always excluded, ignored or brutally repressed by people belonging to the main stream.

In this context, what Professor Romila Thapar says in her book *Indian Cultures As Heritage* seems extremely relevant:*the culture of royalty of the upper castes and generally of the elite, was given priority as was the case in all concepts of civilization. The selection included some remarkable and varied cultural achievements that had survived many centuries. The imperial concern was also to direct its choice to the culture of the elite that it is now controlled. There were some controversies but these were subsumed in the debate on what was foreign and what was indigenous and therefore assumed to be national. What this undermined were the earlier dialogues and differences between various diverse social segments, who despite observing variant cultures, were ready to integrate cultural idioms.*²³

So the question will remain: can there really be any 'the' cultural identity apart from the 'dizzying contrasts' of our human life and civilization or are there really sharp distinctions between 'our culture' and 'their culture'? Or can hybridization of culture never be possible for the sake of maintaining our 'own identity'?

To conclude in the luminous words of Amartya Sen,

*The celebration of these differences—the 'dizzying contrasts'—is far from what can be found in the labored generalizations about "our culture", and the vigorous pleas, increasingly vocal, to keep "our culture", "our modernity" distinctly unique and immune from the influences of "their culture", "their modernity". In our heterogeneity and in our openness lies our pride, not our disgrace.... That lesson is profoundly important for India. And for Asia and for the World.*²⁴

Works Cited

- [1]. Bhava, H., Location of Culture, New York, Routledge, 1994, p.1
- [2]. Giri, A.K., Global Transformations Postmodernity and Beyond, New Delhi, Rawat Publications, p.276
- [3]. Mohanty, J.N., The Self and Its Other, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000 ,p. 119
- [4]. Ibid
- [5]. ibid
- [6]. Rushdie, S., Imaginary Homelands: Essay and Criticisms 1981-1991, United Kingdom, Penguin, 2010, p. 142
- [7]. Bhava, H. Location of Culture, New York, Routledge, 1994, p.38
- [8]. <https://youtu.be/bX6KtJVg7YM>, visited on January, 2020
- [9]. Indian Philosophy in English, Bhushan, N and Garfield Jay L. (ed.), New York, Oxford University Press , 2011,p.106
- [10]. ibid
- [11]. ibid
- [12]. ibid, p.109
- [13]. Aurobindo, Sri. , The Foundations of Indian Culture, Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1980
- [14]. Amartya Sen, A. The Argumentative India, England, Penguin, 2005, p.123
- [15]. ibid, p.132
- [16]. ibid, pp.136-137
- [17]. Aurobindo, 1980, p. 386
- [18]. ibid, p.388
- [19]. ibid
- [20]. ibid, pp.388-389
- [21]. ibid
- [22]. 22. Sen, 2005, p.131
- [23]. Thapar, R., Indian Cultures As Heritage, India, Aleph, 2018, p. xxxiii
- [24]. Sen, 2005, p.132

Further Reference

Chatterjee, P., The Nation and Its Fragments, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1993