

the reduction of gender inequity) makes them central concerns in development analysis. Also, social mores—what is taken to be “standard behavior”—are not independent of the understanding and appreciation of the nature of the problem. Public discussion can make a big difference.

Reducing fertility is important not only because of its consequences for economic prosperity, but also because of the impact of high fertility in diminishing the freedom of people—particularly of young women—to live the kind of lives they have reason to value. In fact, the lives that are most battered by the frequent bearing and rearing of children are those of young women who are reduced to being progeny-generating machines in many countries in the contemporary world. That “equilibrium” persists partly because of the low decisional power of young women in the family and also because of unexamined traditions that make frequent childbearing the uncritically accepted practice (as was the case even in Europe until the last century)—no injustice being seen there. The promotion of female literacy, of female work opportunities and of free, open and informed public discussion can bring about radical changes in the understanding of justice and injustice.

The view of “development as freedom” gets reinforced by these empirical connections, since—it turns out—the solution of the problem of population growth (like the solution of many other social and economic problems) can lie in expanding the freedom of the people whose interests are most directly affected by overfrequent childbearing and child rearing, viz., young women. The solution of the population problem calls for *more* freedom, not less.

Sen, Amartya
Development as Freedom (1999)

CHAPTER 10

CULTURE AND HUMAN RIGHTS



The idea of human rights has gained a great deal of ground in recent years, and it has acquired something of an official status in international discourse. Weighty committees meet regularly to talk about the fulfillment and violation of human rights in different countries in the world. Certainly the *rhetoric* of human rights is much more widely accepted today—indeed much more frequently invoked—than it has ever been in the past. At least the language of national and international communication seems to reflect a shift in priorities and emphasis, compared with the prevailing dialectical style even a few decades ago. Human rights have also become an important part of the literature on development.

And yet this apparent victory of the idea and use of human rights coexists with some real skepticism, in critically demanding circles, about the depth and coherence of this approach. The suspicion is that there is something a little simple-minded about the entire conceptual structure that underlies the oratory on human rights.

THREE CRITIQUES

What, then, appears to be the problem? I think there are three rather distinct concerns that critics tend to have about the intellectual edifice of human rights. There is, first, the worry that human rights con-found consequences of legal systems, which give people certain well-defined rights, with pre-legal principles that cannot really give one a justiciable right. This is the issue of the legitimacy of the demands of human rights: How can human rights have any real

status except through entitlements that are sanctioned by the state, as the ultimate legal authority? Human beings in nature are, in this view, no more born with human rights than they are born fully clothed; rights would have to be acquired through legislation, just as clothes are acquired through tailoring. There are no pre-tailoring clothes; nor any pre-legislation rights. I shall call this line of attack the *legitimacy critique*.

The second line of attack concerns the *form* that the ethics and politics of human rights takes. Rights are entitlements that require, in this view, correlated duties. If person A has a right to some *x*, then there has to be some agency, say B, that has a duty to provide A with *x*. If no such duty is recognized, then the alleged rights, in this view, cannot but be hollow. This is seen as posing a tremendous problem for taking human rights to be rights at all. It may be all very nice, so the argument runs, to say that every human being has a right to food or to medicine, but so long as no agency-specific duties have been characterized, these rights cannot really "mean" very much. Human rights, in this understanding, are heartwarming sentiments, but they are also, strictly speaking, incoherent. Thus viewed, these claims are best seen not so much as rights, but as lumps in the throat. I shall call this the *coherence critique*.

The third line of skepticism does not take quite such a legal and institutional form, but views human rights as being in the domain of social ethics. The moral authority of human rights, in this view, is conditional on the nature of acceptable ethics. But are such ethics really universal? What if some cultures do not regard rights as particularly valuable, compared to other prepossessing virtues or qualities? The disputation of the reach of human rights has often come from such cultural critiques; perhaps the most prominent of these is based on the idea of the alleged skepticism of Asian values toward human rights. Human rights, to justify that name, demand universality, but there are no such universal values, the critics claim. I shall call this the *cultural critique*.

THE LEGITIMACY CRITIQUE

The legitimacy critique has a long history. It has been aired, in different forms, by many skeptics of rights-based reasoning about ethical

issues. There are interesting similarities as well as differences between different variants of this criticism. There is, on the one hand, Karl Marx's insistence that rights cannot really *precede* (rather than follow) the institution of the state. This is spelled out in his combatively forceful pamphlet "On the Jewish Question." There are, on the other hand, the reasons that Jeremy Bentham gave for describing "natural rights" (as mentioned before) as "nonsense" and the concept of "natural and imprescriptible rights" as "nonsense on stilts." But common to these—and many other—lines of critique is an insistence that rights must be seen in postinstitutional terms as instruments, rather than as a prior ethical entitlement. This militates, in a rather fundamental way, against the basic idea of universal human rights.

Certainly, taken as aspiring legal entities, pre-legal moral claims can hardly be seen as giving justiciable rights in courts and other institutions of enforcement. But to reject human rights on this ground is to miss the point of the exercise. The demand for legality is no more than just that—a demand—which is justified by the ethical importance of acknowledging that certain rights are appropriate entitlements of all human beings. In this sense, human rights may stand for claims, powers and immunities (and other forms of warranty associated with the concept of rights) supported by ethical judgments, which attach intrinsic importance to these warranties.

In fact, human rights may also exceed the domain of *potential*, as opposed to *actual*, legal rights. A human right can be effectively invoked in contexts even where its *legal* enforcement would appear to be most inappropriate. The moral right of a wife to participate fully, as an equal, in serious family decisions—no matter how chauvinist her husband is—may be acknowledged by many who would nevertheless not want this requirement to be legalized and enforced by the police. The "right to respect" is another example in which legalization and attempted enforcement would be problematic, even bewildering.

Indeed, it is best to see human rights as a set of ethical claims, which must not be identified with legislated legal rights. But this normative interpretation need not obliterate the usefulness of the idea of human rights in the kind of context in which they are typically invoked. The freedoms that are associated with particular rights may be the appropriate focal point for debate. We have to judge the plausibility of

human rights as a system of ethical reasoning and as the basis of political demands.

THE COHERENCE CRITIQUE

I turn now to the second critique: whether we can coherently talk about rights without specifying whose duty it is to guarantee the fulfillment of the rights. There is indeed a mainstream approach to rights that takes the view that rights can be sensibly formulated only in combination with correlated duties. A person's right to something must, then, be coupled with another agent's duty to provide the first person with that something. Those who insist on that binary linkage tend to be very critical, in general, of invoking the rhetoric "rights" in "human rights" without exact specification of responsible agents and their duties to bring about the fulfillment of these rights. Demands for human rights are, then, seen just as loose talk.

A question that motivates some of this skepticism is: How can we be sure that rights are realizable unless they are matched by corresponding duties? Indeed, some do not see any sense in a right unless it is balanced by what Immanuel Kant called a "perfect obligation"—a specific duty of a particular agent for the realization of that right.¹

It is, however, possible to resist the claim that any use of rights except with co-linked perfect obligations must lack cogency. In many legal contexts that claim may indeed have some merit, but in normative discussions rights are often championed as entitlements or powers or immunities that it would be good for people to have. Human rights are seen as rights shared by all—irrespective of citizenship—the benefits of which everyone *should* have. While it is not the specific duty of any given individual to make sure that the person has her rights fulfilled, the claims can be generally addressed to all those who are in a position to help. Indeed, Immanuel Kant himself had characterized such general demands as "imperfect obligations" and had gone on to discuss their relevance for social living. The claims are addressed generally to anyone who can help, even though no particular person or agency may be charged to bring about the fulfillment of the rights involved.

It may of course be the case that rights, thus formulated, sometimes end up unfulfilled. But it is surely possible for us to distinguish

between a right that a person has which has not been fulfilled and a right that the person does not have. Ultimately, the ethical assertion of a right goes beyond the value of the corresponding freedom only to the extent that some demands are placed on others that they should try to help. While we may be able to manage well enough with the language of freedom rather than of rights (indeed it is the language of freedom that I have been mainly invoking in *Development as Freedom*), there may sometimes be a good case for suggesting—or demanding—that others help the person to achieve the freedom in question. The language of rights can supplement that of freedom.

THE CULTURAL CRITIQUE AND ASIAN VALUES

The third line of critique is perhaps more engaging, and has certainly received more attention. Is the idea of human rights really so universal? Are there not ethics, such as in the world of Confucian cultures, that tend to focus on discipline rather than on rights, on loyalty rather than on entitlement? Insofar as human rights include claims to political liberty and civil rights, alleged tensions have been identified particularly by some Asian theorists.

The nature of Asian values has often been invoked in recent years to provide justification for authoritarian political arrangements in Asia. These justifications of authoritarianism have typically come not from independent historians but from the authorities themselves (such as governmental officers or their spokesmen) or those close to people in power, but their views are obviously consequential in governing the states and also in influencing the relation between different countries.

Are Asian values opposed—or indifferent—to basic political rights? Such generalizations are often made, but are they well grounded? In fact, generalizations about Asia are not easy, given its size. Asia is where about 60 percent of the total world population live. What can we take to be the values of so vast a region, with such diversity? There are no quintessential values that apply to this immensely large and heterogeneous population, none that separate them out as a group from people in the rest of the world.

Sometimes the advocates of "Asian values" have tended to look primarily at East Asia as the region of particular applicability. The

generalization about the contrast between the West and Asia often concentrates on the land to the east of Thailand, even though there is a more ambitious claim that the rest of Asia is also rather "similar." For example, Lee Kuan Yew outlines "the fundamental difference between Western concepts of society and government and East Asian concepts" by explaining, "when I say East Asians, I mean Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, as distinct from Southeast Asia, which is a mix between the Sinic and the Indian, though Indian culture itself emphasizes similar values."²

In fact, however, even East Asia itself has much diversity, and there are many variations to be found among Japan and China and Korea and other parts of East Asia. Various cultural influences from within and outside the region have affected human lives over the history of this rather large territory. These influences still survive in a variety of ways. To illustrate, my copy of Houghton Mifflin's international *Almanac* describes the religion of the 124 million Japanese in the following way: 112 million Shintoist and 93 million Buddhist.³ Different cultural influences still color aspects of the identity of the contemporary Japanese, and the same person can be *both* Shintoist and Buddhist.

Cultures and traditions overlap over regions such as East Asia and even within countries such as Japan or China or Korea, and attempts at generalization about "Asian values" (with forceful—and often brutal—implications for masses of people in this region with diverse faiths, convictions and commitments) cannot but be extremely crude. Even the 2.8 million people of Singapore have vast variations of cultural and historical traditions. Indeed, Singapore has an admirable record in fostering intercommunity amity and friendly coexistence.

THE CONTEMPORARY WEST AND CLAIMS TO UNIQUENESS

Authoritarian lines of reasoning in Asia—and more generally in non-Western societies—often receive indirect backing from modes of thought in the West itself. There is clearly a tendency in America and Europe to assume, if only implicitly, the primacy of political freedom and democracy as a fundamental and ancient feature of Western

culture—one not to be easily found in Asia. It is, as it were, a contrast between the authoritarianism allegedly implicit in, say, Confucianism vis-à-vis the respect for individual liberty and autonomy allegedly deeply rooted in Western liberal culture. Western promoters of personal and political liberty in the non-Western world often see this as bringing Occidental values to Asia and Africa. The world is invited to join the club of "Western democracy" and to admire and endorse traditional "Western values."

In all this, there is a substantial tendency to extrapolate *backward* from the present. Values that European Enlightenment and other relatively recent developments have made common and widespread cannot really be seen as part of the long-run Western heritage—experienced in the West over millennia.⁴ What we do find in the writings by particular Western classical authors (for example, Aristotle) is support for selected *components* of the comprehensive notion that makes up the contemporary idea of political liberty. But support for such components can be found in many writings in Asian traditions as well.

To illustrate this point, consider the idea that personal freedom for all is important for a good society. This claim can be seen as being composed of two distinct components, to wit, (1) *the value of personal freedom*: that personal freedom is important and should be guaranteed for those who "matter" in a good society, and (2) *equality of freedom*: everyone matters and the freedom that is guaranteed for one must be guaranteed for all. The two together entail that personal freedom should be guaranteed, on a shared basis, for all. Aristotle wrote much in support of the former proposition, but in his exclusion of women and slaves did little to defend the latter. Indeed, the championing of equality in this form is of quite recent origin. Even in a society stratified according to class and caste, freedom could be seen to be of great value for the privileged few (such as the Mandarins or the Brahmins), in much the same way freedom is valued for nonslave men in corresponding Greek conceptions of a good society.

Another useful distinction is between (1) *the value of toleration*: that there must be toleration of diverse beliefs, commitments, and actions of different people; and (2) *equality of tolerance*: the toleration that is offered to some must be reasonably offered to all (except

when tolerance of some will lead to intolerance for others). Again, arguments for some tolerance can be seen plentifully in earlier Western writings, without that tolerance being supplemented by equality of tolerance. The roots of modern democratic and liberal ideas can be sought in terms of *constitutive* elements, rather than as a whole.

In doing a comparative scrutiny, the question has to be asked whether these constitutive components can be seen in Asian writings in the way they can be found in Western thought. The presence of these components must not be confused with the absence of the opposite, viz., of ideas and doctrines that clearly *do not* emphasize freedom and tolerance. Championing of order and discipline can be found in Western classics as well. Indeed, it is by no means clear to me that Confucius is more authoritarian in this respect than, say, Plato or St. Augustine. The real issue is not whether these nonfreedom perspectives are *present* in Asian traditions, but whether the freedom-oriented perspectives are *absent* there.

This is where the diversity of Asian value systems—which incorporates but transcends regional diversity—becomes quite central. An obvious example is the role of Buddhism as a form of thought. In Buddhist tradition, great importance is attached to freedom, and the part of the earlier Indian theorizing to which Buddhist thoughts relate has much room for volition and free choice. Nobility of conduct has to be achieved in freedom, and even the ideas of liberation (such as *moksha*) have this feature. The presence of these elements in Buddhist thought does not obliterate the importance for Asia of ordered discipline emphasized by Confucianism, but it would be a mistake to take Confucianism to be the only tradition in Asia—indeed even in China. Since so much of the contemporary authoritarian interpretation of Asian values concentrates on Confucianism, this diversity is particularly worth emphasizing.

INTERPRETATIONS OF CONFUCIUS

Indeed, the reading of Confucianism that is now standard among authoritarian champions of Asian values does less than justice to the variety within Confucius's own teachings.⁵ Confucius did not recommend blind allegiance to the state.⁶ When Zilu asks him "how to serve a prince," Confucius replies, "Tell him the truth even if it

offends him."⁷ Those in charge of censorship in Singapore or Beijing might take a very different view. Confucius is not averse to practical caution and tact, but does not forgo the recommendation to oppose a bad government. "When the [good] way prevails in the state, speak boldly and act boldly. When the state has lost the way, act boldly and speak softly."⁸

Indeed, Confucius provides a clear pointer to the fact that the two pillars of the imagined edifice of Asian values, namely loyalty to family and obedience to the state, can be in severe conflict with each other. Many advocates of the power of "Asian values" see the role of the state as an extension of the role of the family, but as Confucius noted, there can be tension between the two. The Governor of She told Confucius, "Among my people, there is a man of unbending integrity: when his father stole a sheep, he denounced him." To this Confucius replied, "Among my people, men of integrity do things differently: a father covers up for his son, a son covers up for his father—and there is integrity in what they do."⁹

ASHOKA AND KAUTILYA

Confucius's ideas were altogether more complex and sophisticated than the maxims that are frequently championed in his name. There is also a tendency to neglect other authors in the Chinese culture and to ignore other Asian cultures. If we turn to Indian traditions, we can, in fact, find a variety of views on freedom, tolerance, and equality. In many ways, the most interesting articulation of the need for tolerance on an egalitarian basis can be found in the writings of Emperor Ashoka, who in the third century B.C. commanded a larger Indian empire than any other Indian king (including the Mughals, and even the Raj, if we leave out the native states that the British let be). He turned his attention to public ethics and enlightened politics in a big way after being horrified by the carnage he saw in his own victorious battle against the kingdom of Kalinga (what is now Orissa). He converted to Buddhism, and not only helped to make it a world religion by sending emissaries abroad with the Buddhist message to east and west, but also covered the country with stone inscriptions describing forms of good life and the nature of good government.

The inscriptions give a special importance to tolerance of diversity. For example, the edict (now numbered XII) at Erragudi puts the issue thus:

... a man must not do reverence to his own sect or disparage that of another man without reason. Depreciation should be for specific reason only, because the sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another.

By thus acting, a man exalts his own sect, and at the same time does service to the sects of other people. By acting contrariwise, a man hurts his own sect, and does disservice to the sects of other people. For he who does reverence to his own sect while disparaging the sects of others wholly from attachment to his own, with intent to enhance the splendour of his own sect, in reality by such conduct inflicts the severest injury on his own sect.¹⁰

The importance of tolerance is emphasized in these edicts from the third century B.C., both for public policy by the government and as advice for behavior of citizens to one another.

On the domain and coverage of tolerance, Ashoka was a universalist, and demanded this for all, including those whom he described as "forest people," the tribal population living in preagricultural economic formations. Ashoka's championing of egalitarian and universal tolerance may appear un-Asian to some commentators, but his views are firmly rooted in lines of analysis already in vogue in intellectual circles in India in the preceding centuries.

It is, however, interesting to look in this context at another Indian author whose treatise on governance and political economy was also profoundly influential and important. I refer to Kautilya, the author of *Arthashastra*, which can be translated as "the economic science," though it is at least as much concerned with practical politics as with economics. Kautilya was a contemporary of Aristotle, in the fourth century B.C., and worked as a senior minister of Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, Emperor Ashoka's grandfather, who had established the large Maurya empire across the subcontinent.

Kautilya's writings are often cited as a proof that freedom and tolerance were not valued in the Indian classical tradition. There are

two aspects of the impressively detailed account of economics and politics to be found in *Arthashastra* that might tend to suggest such a diagnosis. First, Kautilya is a consequentialist of quite a narrow kind. While the objectives of promoting happiness of the subjects and order in the kingdom are strongly backed up by detailed policy advice, the king is seen as a benevolent autocrat, whose power, admittedly to do good, is to be maximized through good organization. Thus, *Arthashastra*, on the one hand, presents penetrating ideas and suggestions on such practical subjects as famine prevention and administrative effectiveness that remain relevant even today (more than two thousand years later),¹¹ and yet, on the other hand, its author is ready to advise the king about how to get his way, if necessary, through violating the freedom of his opponents and adversaries.

Second, Kautilya seems to attach little importance to political or economic equality, and his vision of good society is strongly stratified according to lines of class and caste. Even though the objective of promoting happiness, which is given an exalted position in the hierarchy of values, applies to all, the other objectives are clearly inegalitarian in form and content. There is the obligation to provide the less fortunate members of the society the support that they need for escaping misery and enjoying life, and Kautilya specifically identifies as the duty of the king to "provide the orphans, the aged, the infirm, the afflicted, and the helpless with maintenance," along with providing "subsistence to helpless women when they are carrying and also to the [newborn] children they give birth to."¹² But that obligation to support is very far from the valuing of these people's freedom to decide how to live—the tolerance of heterodoxy.

What, then, do we conclude from this? Certainly Kautilya is no democrat, no egalitarian, no general promoter of everyone's freedom. And yet, when it comes to characterizing what the most favored people—the upper classes—should get, freedom figures quite prominently. Denying personal liberty to the upper classes (the so-called Arya) is seen as unacceptable. Indeed, regular penalties, some of which are heavy, are specified for the taking of such adults or children in indenture, even though the slavery of the existing slaves is seen as perfectly acceptable.¹³ To be sure, we do not find in Kautilya anything like the clear articulation that Aristotle provides of the importance of free exercise of capability. But the focusing on freedom

is clear enough in Kautilya as far as the upper classes are concerned. It contrasts with the governmental duties to the lower orders, which take the paternalistic form of public attention and state assistance for the avoidance of acute deprivation and misery. However, insofar as a view of a good life emerges in all this, it is one that is entirely consistent with a freedom-valuing ethical system. The domain of that concern is, to be sure, confined to the upper groups of society, but this is not radically different from the Greek concern with free men as opposed to slaves or women. In respect to coverage, Kautilya differs from the universalist Ashoka, but not entirely from the particularist Aristotle.

ISLAMIC TOLERANCE

I have been discussing in some detail the political ideas and practical reason presented by two forceful, but very different, expositions in India respectively in the fourth and the third century B.C., because their ideas in turn have influenced later Indian writings. But we can look at many other authors as well. Among powerful expositors and practitioners of tolerance of diversity in India must of course be counted the great Moghul emperor Akbar, who reigned between 1556 and 1605. Again, we are not dealing with a democrat, but with a powerful king who emphasized the acceptability of diverse forms of social and religious behavior, and who accepted human rights of various kinds, including freedom of worship and religious practice, that would not have been so easily tolerated in parts of Europe in Akbar's time.

For example, as the year 1000 in the Muslim Hejira calendar was reached in 1591-1592, there was some excitement about it in Delhi and Agra (not unlike what is happening right now as the year 2000 in the Christian calendar approaches). Akbar issued various enactments at this juncture of history and these focused, *inter alia*, on religious tolerance, including the following:

No man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone [is] to be allowed to go over to a religion he pleased.

If a Hindu, when a child or otherwise, had been made a Muslim against his will, he is to be allowed, if he pleased, to go back to the religion of his fathers.¹⁴

Again, the domain of tolerance, while religion-neutral, was not universal in other respects, including in terms of gender equality, or equality between younger and older people. The enactment went on to argue for the forcible repatriation of a young Hindu woman to her father's family if she had abandoned it in pursuit of a Muslim lover. In the choice between supporting the young lovers and the young woman's Hindu father, old Akbar's sympathies are entirely with the father. Tolerance and equality at one level are combined with intolerance and inequality at another level, but the extent of general tolerance on matters of belief and practice is quite remarkable. It may not be irrelevant to note in this context, especially in the light of the hard sell of "Western liberalism," that while Akbar was making these pronouncements, the Inquisitions were in full bloom in Europe.

Because of the experience of contemporary political battles, especially in the Middle East, Islamic civilization is often portrayed as being fundamentally intolerant and hostile to individual freedom. But the presence of diversity and variety *within* a tradition applies very much to Islam as well. In India, Akbar and most of the other Moghuls provide good examples of both theory and practice of political and religious tolerance. Similar examples can be found in other parts of the Islamic culture. The Turkish emperors were often more tolerant than their European contemporaries. Abundant examples of this can be found also in Cairo and Baghdad. Indeed, even the great Jewish scholar Maimonides, in the twelfth century, had to run away from an intolerant Europe (where he was born) and from its persecution of Jews, to the security of a tolerant and urbane Cairo and the patronage of Sultan Saladin.

Similarly, Alberuni, the Iranian mathematician, who wrote the first general book on India in the early eleventh century (aside from translating Indian mathematical treatises into Arabic), was among the earliest of anthropological theorists in the world. He noted—and protested against—the fact that "depreciation of foreigners . . . is common to all nations towards each other." He devoted much of his life to fostering mutual understanding and tolerance in his eleventh-century world.

It is easy to multiply examples. The point to be seized is that the modern advocates of the authoritarian view of "Asian values" base

their reading on very arbitrary interpretations and extremely narrow selections of authors and traditions. The valuing of freedom is not confined to one culture only, and the Western traditions are not the only ones that prepare us for a freedom-based approach to social understanding.

GLOBALIZATION: ECONOMICS, CULTURE AND RIGHTS

The issue of democracy also has a close bearing on another cultural matter that has received some justified attention recently. This concerns the overwhelming power of Western culture and lifestyle in undermining traditional modes of living and social mores. For anyone concerned about the value of tradition and of indigenous cultural modes this is indeed a serious threat.

The contemporary world is dominated by the West, and even though the imperial authority of the erstwhile rulers of the world has declined, the dominance of the West remains as strong as ever—in some ways stronger than before, especially in cultural matters. The sun does not set on the empire of Coca-Cola or MTV.

The threat to native cultures in the globalizing world of today is, to a considerable extent, inescapable. The one solution that is not available is that of stopping globalization of trade and economies, since the forces of economic exchange and division of labor are hard to resist in a competitive world fueled by massive technological evolution that gives modern technology an economically competitive edge.

This is a problem, but not just a problem, since global trade and commerce can bring with it—as Adam Smith foresaw—greater economic prosperity for each nation. But there can be losers as well as gainers, even if in the net the aggregate figures move up rather than down. In the context of economic disparities, the appropriate response has to include concerted efforts to make the form of globalization less destructive of employment and traditional livelihood, and to achieve gradual transition. For smoothing the process of transition, there also have to be opportunities for retraining and acquiring of new skills (for people who would otherwise be displaced), in addition to providing social safety nets (in the form of social security

and other supportive arrangements) for those whose interests are harmed—at least in the short run—by the globalizing changes.

This class of responses will to some extent work for the cultural side as well. Skill in computer use and the harvesting of Internet and similar facilities transform not only economic possibilities, but also the lives of the people influenced by such technical change. Again, this is not necessarily regrettable. There remain, however, two problems—one shared with the world of economics and another quite different.¹⁵

First, the world of modern communication and interchange requires basic education and training. While some poor countries in the world have made excellent progress in this area (countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia are good examples of that), others (such as those in South Asia and Africa) have tended to lag behind. Equity in cultural as well as economic opportunities can be profoundly important in a globalizing world. This is a shared challenge for the economic and the cultural world.

The second issue is quite different and distances the cultural problem from the economic predicament. When an economic adjustment takes place, few tears are shed for the superseded methods of production and for the overtaken technology. There may be some nostalgia for specialized and elegant objects (such as an ancient steam engine or an old-fashioned clock), but in general old and discarded machinery is not particularly wanted. In the case of culture, however, lost traditions may be greatly missed. The demise of old ways of living can cause anguish, and a deep sense of loss. It is a little like the extinction of older species of animals. The elimination of old species in favor of “fitter” species that are “better” able to cope and multiply can be a source of regret, and the fact that the new species are “better” in the Darwinian system of comparison need not be seen as consolation enough.¹⁶

This is an issue of some seriousness, but it is up to the society to determine what, if anything, it wants to do to preserve old forms of living, perhaps even at significant economic cost. Ways of life can be preserved if the society decides to do just that, and it is a question of balancing the costs of such preservation with the value that the society attaches to the objects and the lifestyles preserved. There is, of course, no ready formula for this cost-benefit analysis, but

what is crucial for a rational assessment of such choices is the ability of the people to participate in public discussions on the subject. We come back again to the perspective of capabilities: that different sections of the society (and not just the socially privileged) should be able to be active in the decisions regarding what to preserve and what to let go. There is no compulsion to preserve every departing lifestyle even at heavy cost, but there is a real need—for social justice—for people to be able to take part in these social decisions, if they so choose.¹⁷ This gives further reason for attaching importance to such elementary capabilities as reading and writing (through basic education), being well informed and well briefed (through free media), and having realistic chances of participating freely (through elections, referendums and the general use of civil rights). Human rights in the broadest sense are involved in this exercise as well.

CULTURAL INTERCHANGE AND PERVASIVE INTERDEPENDENCE

On top of these basic recognitions, it is also necessary to note the fact that cross-cultural communication and appreciation need not necessarily be matters of shame and disgrace. We do have the capacity to enjoy things that have originated elsewhere, and cultural nationalism or chauvinism can be seriously debilitating as an approach to living. Rabindranath Tagore, the great Bengali poet, commented on this issue rather eloquently:

Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine.¹⁸

While there is some danger in ignoring uniqueness of cultures, there is also the possibility of being deceived by the presumption of ubiquitous insularity.

It is indeed possible to argue that there are more interrelations and more cross-cultural influences in the world than is typically

acknowledged by those alarmed by the prospect of cultural subversion.¹⁹ The culturally fearful often take a very fragile view of each culture and tend to underestimate our ability to learn from elsewhere without being overwhelmed by that experience. Indeed, the rhetoric of "national tradition" can help to hide the history of outside influences on the different traditions. For example, chili may be a central part of Indian cooking as we understand it (some even see it as something of a "signature tune" of Indian cooking), but it is also a fact that chili was unknown in India until the Portuguese brought it there only a few centuries ago. (Ancient Indian culinary art used pepper, but no chili.) Today's Indian curries are no less "Indian" for this reason.

Nor is there anything particularly shady in the fact that—given the blustering popularity of Indian food in contemporary Britain—the British Tourist Board describes curry as authentic "British fare." A couple of summers ago I even encountered in London a marvelous description of a person's incurable "Englishness": she was, we were informed, "as English as daffodils or chicken tikka masala."

The image of regional self-sufficiency in cultural matters is deeply misleading, and the value of keeping traditions pure and unpolluted is hard to sustain. Sometimes the intellectual influences from abroad may be more roundabout and many-sided. For example, some chauvinists in India have complained about the use of "Western" terminology in school curriculum, for example in modern mathematics. But the interrelations in the world of mathematics make it hard to know what is "Western" and what is not. To illustrate, consider the term "sine" used in trigonometry, which came to India straight through the British, and yet in its genesis there is a remarkable Indian component. Aryabhata, the great Indian mathematician of the fifth century, had discussed the concept of "sine" in his work, and had called it, in Sanskrit, *jya-ardha* ("half-chord"). From there the term moved on in an interesting migratory way, as Howard Eves describes:

Aryabhata called it *ardha-jya* ("half-chord") and *jya-ardha* ("chord-half"), and then abbreviated the term by simply using *jya* ("chord"). From *jya* the Arabs phonetically derived *jiba*, which, following Arabic practice of omitting vowels, was

written as *jb*. Now *jiba*, aside from its technical significance, is a meaningless word in Arabic. Later writers who came across *jb* as an abbreviation for the meaningless word *jiba* substituted *jaib* instead, which contains the same letters, and is a good Arabic word meaning "cove" or "bay." Still later, Gherardo of Cremona (ca. 1150), when he made his translations from the Arabic, replaced the Arabian *jaib* by its Latin equivalent, *sinus* [meaning a cove or a bay], from whence came our present word *sine*.²⁰

My point is not at all to argue against the unique importance of each culture, but rather to plead in favor of the need for some sophistication in understanding cross-cultural influences as well as our basic capability to enjoy products of other cultures and other lands. We must not lose our ability to understand one another and to enjoy the cultural products of different countries in the passionate advocacy of conservation and purity.

UNIVERSALIST PRESUMPTIONS

Before closing this chapter I must also consider a further issue related to the question of cultural separatism, given the general approach of this book. It will not have escaped the reader that this book is informed by a belief in the ability of different people from different cultures to share many common values and to agree on some common commitments. Indeed, the overriding value of freedom as the organizing principle of this work has this feature of a strong universalist presumption.

The claim that "Asian values" are particularly indifferent to freedom, or that attaching importance to freedom is quintessentially a "Western" value, has been disputed already, earlier on in this chapter. The point, however, is sometimes made that the tolerance of heterodoxy in matters of religion, in particular, is historically a very special "Western" phenomenon. When I published a paper in an American magazine disputing the authoritarian interpretation of "Asian values" ("Human Rights and Asian Values," *The New Republic*, July 14 and 21, 1997), the responses that I got typically included some support for my disputation of the alleged specialness of "Asian

values" (as being generally authoritarian), but then they went on to argue that the West, on the other hand, was really quite special—in terms of tolerance.

It was claimed that the tolerance of *religious* skepticism and heterodoxy was a specifically "Western" virtue. One commentator proceeded to outline his understanding that "Western tradition" is absolutely unique in its "acceptance of religious tolerance at a sufficient level that even atheism is permitted as a principled rejection of beliefs." The commentator is certainly right to claim that religious tolerance, including the tolerance of skepticism and atheism, is a central aspect of social freedom (as John Stuart Mill also explained persuasively).²¹ The disputant went on to remark: "Where in Asian history, one asks, can Amartya Sen find anything equivalent to this remarkable history of skepticism, atheism and free thought?"²²

This is indeed a fine question, but the answer is not hard to find. In fact, there is some embarrassment of riches in deciding which part of Asian history to concentrate on, since the answer could come from many different components of that history. For example, in the context of India in particular, one could point to the importance of the atheistic schools of Carvaka and Lokayata, which originated well before the Christian era, and produced a durable, influential and vast atheistic literature.²³ Aside from intellectual documents arguing for atheistic beliefs, heterodox views can be found in many orthodox documents as well. Indeed, even the ancient epic *Ramayana*, which is often cited by Hindu political activists as the holy book of the divine Rama's life, contains sharply dissenting views. For example, the *Ramayana* relates the occasion when Rama is lectured by a worldly pundit called Javali on the folly of religious beliefs: "O Ramā, be wise, there exists no world but this, that is certain! Enjoy that which is present and cast behind thee that which is unpleasant."²⁴

It is also relevant to reflect on the fact that the only world religion that is firmly agnostic, viz., Buddhism, is Asian in origin. Indeed, it originated in India in the sixth century B.C., around the time when the atheistic writings of the Carvaka and Lokayata schools were particularly active. Even the Upanishads (a significant component of the Hindu scriptures that originated a little earlier—from which I have already quoted in citing Maitreyee's question) discussed, with evident respect, the view that thought and intelligence are the results of mate-

As far as the authoritarian claims about "Asian values" are concerned, it has to be recognized that values that have been championed in the past of Asian countries—in East Asia as well as elsewhere in Asia—include an enormous variety.³⁰ Indeed, in many ways they are similar to substantial variations that are often seen in the history of ideas in the West also. To see Asian history in terms of a narrow category of authoritarian values does little justice to the rich varieties of thought in Asian intellectual traditions. Dubious history does nothing to vindicate dubious politics.

CHAPTER I I

SOCIAL CHOICE AND
INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR

The idea of using reason to identify and promote better and more acceptable societies has powerfully moved people in the past and continues to do so now. Aristotle agreed with Agathon that even God could not change the past. But he also thought that the future was ours to make. This could be done by basing our choices on reason.¹ For this we need an appropriate evaluative framework; we also need institutions that work to promote our goals and valuational commitments, and furthermore we need behavioral norms and reasoning that allow us to achieve what we try to achieve.

Before I proceed further along this line, I must also discuss some grounds for skepticism of the possibility of reasoned progress, which can be found in the literature. If these grounds are compelling, then they may indeed be devastating for the approach pursued in this book. It would be silly to build an ambitious structure on the foundations of quicksand.

I would like to identify three distinct lines of skepticism that seem to demand particular attention. First, the point is sometimes made that given the heterogeneity of preferences and values that different people have, even in a given society, it is not possible to have a coherent framework for reasoned social assessment. There can be, in this view, no such thing as a rational and coherent social evaluation. Kenneth Arrow's famous "impossibility theorem" is sometimes invoked in this context to drive the point home.² That remarkable theorem is typically interpreted as proving the impossibility of rationally deriving

