

Many Voices, Still Many Worlds

K. M. SEETHI



GSC COLLECTIVE



Mumbai
2020

Many Voices, Still Many Worlds

K.M. SEETHI

Writing on the feats and flaws of modern science way back in 1951, humanist writer and literary genius M. Govindan (1919-1989) brought in the story of al-Hameed—a landlord in Hyderabad who, over years, lost interest in agriculture, but developed a penchant for diamond trade. al-Hameed thought he could fetch both fame and fortunes from buying and selling valuable diamonds. He thus sold out his estates in search of diamonds and travelled far and away. But al-Hameed could not make any ready fortunes out of the diamond trade. In sheer frustration he ended his life in Spain by jumping into the sea. Years went by. One day, the person who bought al-Hameed's estate was helping his cattle drink water in a canal. Suddenly he saw a glittering exotic object. It sparkled oddly. Having kept it safely, he started ploughing the entire land in search of the stones. He got several diamonds and gems from the place, which later became famous for exotic diamonds like Kohinoor—Golconda thus emerged as the diamond mine. The moral of the story is crystal clear. al-Hameed lost his life as a disgruntled man in search of diamonds—without knowing that his own estate was the treasure house of such precious stones.

Govindan writes that al-Hameed's story is a mere bagatelle compared to the exploration of modern science. We have witnessed rapid strides in the expansion of knowledge across disciplines—from Geology, Biology and Cosmology to Physics, Mathematics, Astronomy etc. Yet, the scientists who have invested a lot of time and energy in their respective fields have not been able to draw up the potential resources

within their own vast stretches of estates for the best use of human beings, Govindan reminded. Keeping the cold war ‘imperatives’ of the time in mind, he also pointed out that scientific and technological resources were massively used to produce atomic and hydrogen bombs against humanity.

Has the situation changed for better after 69 years? The answer is yet to be affirmative!

Govindan believed that instead of placing man as the entry-point for the modern scientific explorations, we have somehow put science as the point of entry in our understanding of human relations. This ill-fated transposition—typical of an era hegemonized by science and technology—has caused disproportionate forms of knowledge in the contemporary societies across the world. For the most people, the values of human being are at stake—they are often disdained as immaterial stuffs as against the power of science and its technological expansion. The situations in both high-income and low-income countries do not make a difference. Perhaps the reason why the most essential payoffs of scientific endeavours now seem to challenge is that science has disentangled itself from man and his values. This has been addressed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the scholars and intellectuals associated with it from time to time.

Writing for the UNESCO volume on *Problems of Culture and Cultural Values in the Contemporary World* (1983), Rene Habachi observes:

The hungry denounce the betrayal of the pact of human fellowship and point a helpless finger at those responsible. The world with its folds and hollows, in its network of international relations as much as in its geographical physiognomy, is the reflection of man himself. It simply spreads the internal disequilibrium of man beyond him. And

this results from the dialectic between man and his societies, societies and nature. The moralist rushes straight to remedies—if it is not too late or too ambitious to consider treatment. Before him, it would be up to the sociologist to draw up an account of the full extent of the damage. But ethics will seem arbitrary and unconnected to the facts, sociology complacent and ineffective, unless both are accompanied by a philosophy which, connecting the remedy to the sickness and the sickness to its deepest cause, indicts man above all. Northern man and southern man. Man of the industrialized cultures and equally man of the other cultures (UNESCO 1983: 37-50).

Habachi writes further:

A consideration of the function of science and technology in the 'leading cultures' requires us to deal with science first of all as a value, and then to describe the process by which it becomes an anti-value threatening the other values of the cultures in question. Works, taken as ready-made products, one is tempted to contrast them, because their results do indeed enter into conflictual relationships. Do we not have the atom putting the existence of humanity in peril, the genetic code opening the way to interventions affecting the human species and the mass media relentlessly pursuing man in his intimacy to the point of exhaustion? (Ibid).

According to him, there would be people “who turn against science and its offspring technologies as if one could stop their progress.” Others might recommend “a double reading of the world in the form of two cultures, scientific and humanist, thus sanctifying the split between them.” Yet another set of people hope, according to Habachi, that “after a period of scientific over-expansion the balance in our culture will restore itself, while in fact the springs of the human are already at breaking-point.” He then asks, “Why cast discredit on science and its technological derivatives? Have we not seen that all they do is to carry the search for a value over into time and space? Is the scientific 'true' not one aspect of the truth?”

Plausibly, this is a perennial question of universality of ‘truth’ and knowledge—frequently raised by scholars and even countries which lag behind in the ‘global’ exchange relations and development. They underlined the value of culture-specific knowledge, and even argued that such knowledges are basically geared to the socio-cultural and economic setting of each society, unlike modern scientific and technological savvy which condenses all to homogeneity and doffs the particular cultures of their distinct character.

Way back in 1976, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, who was the Director-General of UNESCO during 1974-87, observed:

Once it is seen as global, development can no longer be the direct extension to the whole world of the knowledge, ways of thought, lifestyles or experiences specific to a single region of the world; each local development must be related to its own values and culture. It is not enough to transfer the sum total of the knowledge available in developed countries to the developing countries; to do this excludes the possibility of any genuine implantation of science and technology in the countries at the receiving end. It favours the "brain drain" and even slows down the general advancement of knowledge by depriving the creative imagination of access to more varied sources than those on which the existing system drew! (UNESCO 1976).

UNESCO continued to argue that no development can be sustainable without a strong culture component. Its human-centred approach to development is entrenched in the logic of “mutual respect and open dialogue among cultures” which would “lead to lasting, inclusive and equitable results.” The world agency believes that “indigenous knowledge systems developed with long and close interaction with nature, complement knowledge systems based on modern science.” It also acknowledges that ethical choices are involved even as science and technology empower societies.

M. Govindan's essay was not aimed at underestimating sciences, but to make social sciences and humanities equal partners in the transformation of societies. According to him, History, Politics, Economics, Anthropology, Arts etc have a significant role to play in the development of societies.

Interestingly, Govindan concludes his short essay with a call for strengthening UNESCO as an agency which has great potential to maintain world peace. He also cites the much-celebrated section from the UNESCO Constitution: *Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.* Govindan strongly believed that knowledge should aim to achieve a harmonious synthesis of modern science and technology and the specific needs and characteristics of societies and human beings, which UNESCO is capable of doing.

UNESCO—which recently celebrated its 75th year—has had a troubled time since the 1970s when the voices of the Global South countries began to be heard. It all started when the organisation resolved to float the idea of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) which emerged from the debate over media representations of the Global South countries in UNESCO. The movement for a new information order also sought to address the global economic inequality which the Global North countries never took seriously. The MacBride Commission—a UNESCO panel led by Nobel laureate Seán MacBride—put in place an agenda and a set of recommendations to make the world information order more equitable. Though NWICO was on the agenda of the world agency for long, the forces of globalisation derailed the whole process of resetting the information order—for obvious reasons. Hence NWICO remained a non-starter. Another important area of dispute between the Global North countries and UNESCO was

the latter's position on Zionism and Israel's annexationist policy. Over years, UNESCO continued to face political highhandedness of the imperialist powers. For instance, in 1984, the Reagan administration decided to quit the agency—accusing it of following anti-US, pro-Soviet lines (it re-joined only in 2003).

We may recall, many intellectuals and writers in India (as elsewhere) were passionate champions of UNESCO at that time due to its progressive position and interventions. However, what surprised many was the stance of a well-known writer, O.V. Vijayan, who took a different route of criticism of UNESCO. In a weekly column (called *Indraprastham*) in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* in the 1980s, Vijayan wrote a very downbeat note on UNESCO. I did a rejoinder to his comments in the following week. Though he did not reply, it was quite obvious that his critical note on UNESCO had actually emerged from his perception of the world body's consistent position on Zionism and Israeli imperialist policies. Vijayan had never tried to hide his pro-Israeli position; nor did he show any interest in upholding the Palestinians' right to return to their homeland. This was in contrast to Govindan's criticism of theocratic-fascist states, including Israel. Interestingly, both Vijayan and Govindan were humanists of different orders which led to branding them as 'anti-communists' by traditional left parties!

However, Israel and the Palestine question continued to determine the contours of West-UNESCO relations. Meanwhile, the politics of bargain with the organisation took a bad turn since 2011 when UNESCO admitted the Palestinian territories as an independent member-state. This led to the US decision to cut off funding for any organization that recognized an independent Palestine. The Obama administration could not set right the damage. The Trump administration took a decisive step later by withdrawing

from UNESCO citing “anti-Israel bias” as one of its reasons (which effected on 31 December 2018).

Even as the world agency has been rocked by the politics of the Global North imperialist countries, it continued to uphold its mission objectives above everything. As the COVID-19 became a global public health crisis, UNESCO underlined the significance of scientific cooperation as the key in dealing with the global pandemic. Today, its basic mandate to reinforce the power of culture and knowledge has acquired a new meaning—to strengthen human fabric and solidarity—though millions of people around the world are still grappling with the consequences of the public health crisis on a universal scale. In fact, the global pandemic ultimately testified the agency’s central notion that human beings constitute the kernel of civilization—an idea which M. Govindan valued very much throughout his life.

References

- Govindan, M. (1986): “al-Hameedinte kadhayum Kure Karyangalum,” in *M. Govindante Upanyasangal*, Kottayam: National Book Stall.
- UNESCO (1976): *Moving towards change: some thoughts on the new international economic order*, Paris: Appendix, para. 15.
- UNESCO (1983): *Problems of Culture and Cultural Values in the Contemporary World*, Paris, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000054681>
- UNESCO (1981): *Many Voices, One World: Report by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems*, Paris: UNESCO, available at <https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/medium/pages/72/attachments/original/1516334503/040066eb2.pdf?1516334503>

The author is Director, Inter University Centre for Social Science Research and Extension (IUCSSRE), Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala. He also served as Dean of Social Sciences and Professor of International Relations and Politics, Mahatma Gandhi University. He writes in Global South Colloquy. Email: kmseethingu@gmail.com