

Culture-Classification, Heterodoxy and Religion as a Parable

The Argumentative Indian; Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity by Amartya Sen, Allen Lane-Penguin Books, 2005

The supreme purpose of the book is to argue for the present and past of India's understanding in various fields, viz. epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, religion, polity, economics, science, culture, and history, which seems to have twin aspects, i.e. first, to correct a biased interpretation of some Western scholars according to which Indian Philosophy is not more than a mere religious and metaphysical speculation, and second, to present in-depth analysis of India's current socio-political upheavals. These twin fold aspects of the book can be termed as the ethical constructivist and philosophical deconstructive theses respectively.¹ Amartya Sen quite clearly shows this in the preface: 'If the immediate motivation for this book is social and political understanding in India, it has, I believe, some relevance also for the way the classification of the cultures of the world has become cemented into a shape that pays little or no attention to a great deal of our past and present'. (p.xiv) Here, 'social and political understanding in India' is the deconstructivist thesis, whereas 'the classification of the cultures of the world' is the constructivist thesis. The book adopts its title from its first essay 'The Argumentative Indian', which prepares its philosophical foundation that has deconstructive methodology as it suggests an alternate reading of religious texts such as *Bhagwad Gita*, *Ramayana*, and *Vedas* etc. The book consists of four

sets of essays dealing with such a divergent range of issues that each set can be regarded as a book in itself. Each set contains four essays which deal with different but closely connected issues.

Let us begin with the constructionist thesis of the book which envelops it in such a way that all the arguments act as its premises. Through this thesis Sen exposes Western prejudiced classification of world cultures and tries to establish a rationalistic treatment of cultures which has no metaphysical commitment. Western cultural critiques such as Toynbee, Northrop, Huntington and others believe in the basic differences in the cultural values of the East and the West. On the basis of the presumptuous differences, thus, Toynbee divides world cultures into twenty-one classes whereas Northrop into nine.² Northrop in his *The Meeting of East and West* maintains that the West is rational and the East is spiritual. Likewise, Sen points out Samuel Huntington's division of world cultures, on the basis of religion, such as Buddhist civilization, Hindu civilization, Islamic civilization, Western civilization, etc. (p. 164) Sen criticizes supporters of such classification and calls them 'intellectual simplifiers'. (p. 54) Sen's analysis of such division in the section 'East and West' is quite refreshing. (pp. 93-96) The issue of the dichotomization of East and West has been discussed and debated throughout the book. In many contexts Sen argues against the classification of world cultures. In his essay 'The Reach of Reason' he says that in the cultural classification and colonization 'Values such as tolerance, liberty, and reciprocal respect have been described as "culture

specific" and basically confined to Western civilization. I shall call this the claim of "cultural boundary"'. (p. 280).

Thus, the classification of world cultures aims at dichotomization of Eastern and Western cultures and thereby showing that the East is spiritual and mystical whereas West is scientific and rational. This biased view altogether rejects the possibility of argumentation in Indian culture in general and Indian Philosophy in particular and tries to establish the hegemony of Western cultural values through the premise that the Western cultural values have universal relevance.

Such division of cultures ignores the basic structure of all the systems of Indian Philosophy which envisages that an argument cannot be regarded as complete unless its conclusion is based on a well-explained *purvapaksa* and *uttarpaksa*. In the *purvapaksa* of an argument the particular idea is criticized (*khandan*) and then there is the establishment of a new idea (*uttarpaksa*). Pointing out this Sen says, 'The nature and strength of the dialogic tradition in India is sometimes ignored because of the much championed belief that India is the land of religions, the country of uncritical faiths and unquestioned practices.' (p. viii-ix) On the basis of the alleged distinction among various cultures, attempts have been made to reconcile their differences. Thus, on the basis of his own classification of world cultures Northrop tries to build a world perspective of cultures.³ Sen is highly critical of such attempts of abridging the gaps among various cultures. Sen says, 'In this pre-selected 'East-West' contrast,

meetings are organized, as it were, between Aristotle and Euclid on the one hand, and wise and contented Indian peasants on the other. This is not, of course, an uninteresting exercise, but it is not pre-eminently a better way of understanding the 'East-West' cultural contrast than by arranging meetings between, say, Aryabhata (the mathematician) and Kautilya (the political economist) on the one hand, and happily determined Visigoths on the other.' (p.xiv)

Sen quite satirically brings out the ludicrousness of such attempts to abridge the difference among cultures, as they do not succeed in correcting the biased mindset. Pointing at his one such experience of the Western prejudiced mindset, he says, 'I was impressed to find, on arriving at Harvard in the late 1980s, that all books on India in the bookshop of the famous 'Harvard Coop' were kept in the section called 'Religious'.' (p.xiv) It is quite significant to analyze this remark of Sen not only for arriving at the proper sense of the book but also, for understanding the current debate in Comparative Philosophy which was initiated by PT Raju and S Radhakrishnan. The use of the word 'impressed' here, when taken in a proper context, connotes Sen's annoyance and disagreements with, rather than praise of, the Western scholars who interpret Indian Philosophy as essentially metaphysical and devoid of logic and epistemology. Such Western interpretation aimed at cultural colonization of Indian thinking by way of the presumption that the universal criterion of all that could possibly be said to be knowledge and scientific is being investigated only in the West.

In the fourth essay 'The Diaspora and the World', Sen once again, takes on the Western downgrading of India's heritage of achievements in the fields of science and technology, mathematics etc. For Sen such downgrading was essential for British to have their control and governance over India. So the classification of world cultures was a

conspiracy to establish cultural colonization based on financial and political hegemony. Revealing this, Sen points out: 'The colonial experience of India not only had the effect of undermining the intellectual self-confidence of Indians, it has also been especially hard on the type of recognition that Indians may standardly have given to the country's scientific and critical traditions. The comparative judgment that Macaulay made popular in the early nineteenth century ("a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia") was seen to apply particularly to Indian *analytical* work...' (p.77)

In fact, there are intense materialistic thoughts in Indian Philosophy, likewise Western Philosophy is full of spiritualistic and mystical thoughts. For Radhakrishnan, spiritual thoughts cannot survive without rational thoughts.⁴ On this issue, thoughts of PT Raju, Radhakrishnan and Sen converge at the same point. Raju points out that 'if intellect itself contains an intuitive factor and cannot work without it, it will not be a right procedure to separate intellect and intuition and to say that the procedure of Western philosophy is based on the former and that of India and China on the latter. Northrop oversimplified the difference between the Eastern and the Western philosophical traditions when he made such a division, which may hinder true appreciation. The Chinese philosophy is not intellectualistic and its epistemology is not well developed. We cannot for this reason generalize and say that it is intuitive in method. In that case, all undeveloped reason would be intuition.'⁵ Likewise Radhakrishnan maintains that 'the Vedic culture, which resembles that of the Homeric Greeks or the Celtic Irish at the beginning of the Christian era, or that of the pre-Christian Teutons and Slavs, becomes transformed in the Epics into the Hindu culture through the influence of the Dravidians'.⁶ Similarly, Western thinkers have also pointed out that 'one cannot

possibly say that there is any wide difference between the Brahmin, the Sufi or the Christian mystics at their best'.⁷

All those who argue against the classification of world cultures actually try to highlight the point that the fundamentals of human experience are same everywhere: 'the fundamentals of human experience, which are the data of philosophical reflection, are the same everywhere. The transitoriness of all things, the play of chance, the emotions of love and hate, fear and jealousy, the continual presence of death, the anxiety to overcome the corruptibility of things, to enjoy the fleeting moment—these have determined for each man his life's meaning and value.'⁸

The classification of world cultures has already been criticized by PT Raju, Radhakrishnan and others. So the question arises as to what is new in Sen's interpretation? A search to this question leads to a profound point which Sen has very briefly mentioned in the preface. While criticizing Western mindset about the rationalistic peculiarity of their own culture, Sen quite succinctly points out the similar prejudiced thought in some allegedly 'highly sympathetic' Eastern scholars who vehemently boast about the spiritual tradition of the East as compared to the 'shallow rationalism' of the West (p. xiv). This latter kind of prejudiced and highly sympathetic scholars advocate 'religious reductionism' (p.164). Thus, Sen's argument against classification of cultures actually moves on the edge of the blade, as on the one hand, it criticizes Western biased thought which regards East as devoid of argumentative thought, and at the same time denounces Eastern misplaced predication which sees greatness in being spiritual, on the other.

Notwithstanding Sen's highly debatable but profound views on the classification of cultures, one cannot help agreeing with the author that 'seeing Indian traditions as overwhelmingly religious, or deeply anti-scientific, or exclusively hierarchical, or fundamentally unscientific (to consider a set of diagnoses

that have received some championing in cultural categorizations) involves significant oversimplification of India's past and present. And in so far as traditions are important, these mischaracterizations tend to have a seriously diverting effect on the analysis of contemporary India as well as of its complex history'. (p.31) This is author's final remark on his getting 'impressed' on seeing books on India in the section meant for religious books at Harvard Coop, which is a critique of the Western view that tries to discount the role of logic and epistemology in Indian Philosophy.

As compared to the above-mentioned constructivist aspect of the book, its deconstructive implication is rather prominent. Here, it is to be kept in view that any writing on history and culture in particular is susceptible to be loaded with ideological preferences of the author. What is significant in any interpretation of culture and history is that the interpreter does not let himself get immersed in ideological biases and here what is inevitably difficult is to keep in pace with rational neutrality. This has been the inherent aspect of almost all the deduction of culture argument because nothing seems to be final in such interpretation. Such ideological preferences are clearly visible in Sen's unhesitant acknowledgement about himself that he is an atheist and sceptic: 'Since my childhood thoughts... did not attract me at all to religion, I asked my grandfather whether I should be concerned that religion did not appeal to me. He told me, "No, in fact there is no case for having religious convictions until you are able to think seriously for yourself - it will come with time." Since, in my case, it did not come at all (my skepticism seemed to mature with age), I told my grandfather, some years later, that he had been absolutely wrong. "Not at all," replied my grandfather, "you have addressed the religious question, and you have placed yourself, I see, in the atheistic - the Lokayata - part of the Hindu

spectrum!"' (p.46) So Sen's point of view is atheistic materialism or materialistic atheism.

As there are innumerable traits, events, aspects or peculiarities of any culture and history, an interpreter has to be selective. Author's selection of a particular theme depends subjectively on his choice. Therefore, the author needs to be very careful in his selection in order to be impartial. Apart from the selection of the particular aspect of the issues at hand, the interpretation, to the extent it is possible, has to be rational and devoid of ideological prejudices. Sen is mindful of this requirement and therefore categorically admits in the preface: 'Any attempt to talk about the culture of the country or about its past history or contemporary politics, must inescapably involve considerable selection. I need not, therefore, labour the point that the focus on the argumentative tradition in this work is also a result of choice. It does not reflect a belief that this is the only reasonable way of thinking about the history or culture or politics of India. I am very aware that there are other ways of proceeding.' (p.ix) What applies to an author applies in *toto* to the reader of the interpretation as every one is guided by subjective choice of liking or disliking something. Nonetheless, without indulging in any ideological discussion, it can be said that the book argues for all that which is heterodox in Indian Culture, History, Metaphysics, Epistemology, Cosmology, Ethics, Religion and Polity. Sen himself accepts that 'the reach of heterodoxy is remarkably extensive and ubiquitous' (p.ix). And from this point of view, it presents a counter perspective to the orthodox or theistic argumentation of Indian understanding in the above-described fields.

Following issues of the above-mentioned deconstructive aspect of the book seem to be debatable:

- (i) Krishna's argument of 'duty for duty sake' versus Sen's support of Arjuna's argument for the emphasis

on both duty as well as the consequence of the action.

- (ii) Should religious facts be taken as historical truths or as parables?
- (iii) Heterodox and Orthodox systems in Indian philosophy and India's heritage of logic, mathematics, epistemology and science.

(i) The book begins with a new interpretation of *Bhagwad Gita's* basic teaching/motto. Sen's interpretation of *Gita* as a moral debate between deontological and consequentialist arguments, is quite mythical. It's true that Krishna, like Bradley and Kant in the West, insists on the 'duty for duty sake' and therefore denounces an action based on the desire for some kind of fruit. The core issue of *Gita* is the debate between Lord Krishna and Arjuna about the relevance of war, i.e. *Mahabharata*. Sen begins his analysis with argumentation of Krishna's morally deontological and Arjuna's consequentialist viewpoints. *Gita*, according to Sen, 'presents a tussle between two contrary moral positions - Krishna's emphasis on doing one's duty, on one side, and Arjuna's focus on avoiding bad consequences (and generating good ones), on the other... Arjuna's questions whether it is right to be concerned only with one's duty to promote a just cause and be indifferent to the misery and the slaughter - even of one's kin - that the war itself would undoubtedly cause. Krishna, a divine incarnation in the form of a human being (in fact, he is also Arjuna's charioteer), argues against Arjuna. His response takes the form of articulating principles of action - based on the priority of doing one's duty - which have been repeated again and again in Indian Philosophy. Krishna insists on Arjuna's duty to fight, irrespective of his evaluation of the consequences. It is a just cause, and, as a warrior and a general on whom his side must rely, Arjuna cannot waver from his obligations, no matter what the consequences are.' (pp.3-4)

In this context, before going into an

analysis of Sen's position, it is significant to note that *Gita* is known as a religious and ethical text basically for Krishna's teachings. It establishes the supremacy of one's actions performed as a duty over the results of those actions. In some instances, action and its results are inseparable, e.g. an artist, while performing, cannot be concerned with the result. However, in other instances of action, the forecast of the result, to a great extent, is possible, e.g. a soldier can foresee that he will either kill the enemy or will be killed in his attempt to perform his duty. Based on such distinctions between two kinds of actions *vis-à-vis* their results, Sen holds that 'the case for doing what one sees as one's duty must be strong, but how can we be indifferent to the consequences that may follow from our doing what we take to be our duty? As we reflect on the manifest problems of our global world (from terrorism, wars and violence to epidemics, insecurity and grueling poverty), or on India's special concerns (such as economic development, nuclear confrontation or regional peace), it is important to take on board Arjuna's consequential analysis, in addition to considering Krishna's arguments for doing one's duty. The univocal "message of the *Gita*" requires supplementation by the broader argumentative wisdom of the *Mahabharata*, of which the *Gita* is only one small part'. (pp.5-6) But the basic flaw in such approach lies in its premise which holds that results of actions can well be foreseen. Even a slightest review of the above distinction between actions of known and unknown results reveals that a duty cannot be separated from its positive and negative consequences. It is this reason that the subject has no choice between the action of duty and its consequence. There is a distinction between an action and its compatible or incompatible results on the one hand, and two alternate actions, on the other. For example, my choice to become a soldier and then face the possible consequence, i.e. to kill or get killed, is

different from my choice to be or not to be a soldier. In the first case, one cannot possibly have an option between fight or not to fight whereas in the second case, one is free to choose any alternative. It is this reason that *Gita* advocates for *Niskamkarma*, i.e. an action devoid of the desire for any fruit. One possible objection of this notion is that the *Niskamkarma* is a psychological impossibility and hence Sen's position is vindicated. But the issue of the impossibility of *Niskamkarma* does not infringe on the sacredness of the duty as even in the West, where there is no such concept, Kant regards duty as end in itself. Whatever be the case, here, Sen's argument that one cannot ignore result of one's action while performing one's duty, is fraught with problems precisely because it presupposes that it is clearly possible to draw the consequence of an action even prior to the performance of the action and also because it presupposes a perfect compatibility between duty and its consequence.

Further, in order to support his thesis that for the special context of India's current concerns, Arjuna's pacifist position suits better than that of Krishna who instigates Arjuna for war, Sen says, 'Like the advise that Arjuna had received about his duty as a warrior fighting for a just cause, Oppenheimer the physicist could well find justification in his technical commitment to develop a bomb for what was clearly the right side...there was reason also for reflecting on Arjuna's concerns: How can good come from killing so many people? And why should I seek victory, kingdom or happiness for my own side?' (p.5) Sen points out that at the occasion of the test of the first atomic bomb in United States on 16 July 1945, Oppenheimer proudly quoted Krishna: 'the radiance of a thousand suns...burst into the sky' and 'I am become death, the destroyer of worlds'. (p.255) Sen's comparison of Krishna's arguments for the performance of one's duty with that of Oppenheimer's for making of the Bomb aims at showing

that Arjuna's argument about the concern for the consequence holds much water. But Sen's comparison fails due to several reasons: (i) Krishna is not only a destroyer but also protector and saviour of Pandavas and defender of justice. So the comparison between Krishna and the physicist does not stand. (ii) Arjuna is in a state of mind which is termed by the existentialist Jean Paul Sartre as 'Bad Faith', i.e. the indecisiveness. His state of mind is improper. His state of mind is like that of a confused policeman who has been given the duty to arrest his own relative, guilty of committing a crime. If he follows Sen's argument that while performing one's duty one cannot remain mute expectant of the consequence of the action, then going through his pragmatic consideration, he will have no other alternative but to let his relative go scot-free. (iii) Krishna is selfless. He does not do anything for his own advantage whereas the physicist Oppenheimer's actions are *Sakamkarma*, i.e. aimed to get something. (iv) Krishna preaches for deontological evaluation of the performance of a duty whereas the concern of Arjuna, Oppenheimer and Sen is consequential. (v) Krishna's ultimate concern is not the destruction of the world but the destruction of the evil inflicted world. (vi) Krishna's position is unaffected by the vagaries of the world. No one can deny that 'one must perform one's duty'. It is what Kant calls 'Universalisability' criterion for an action to be moral whereas Oppenheimer's view cannot be universalized as by holding this an immoral action cannot be denounced, e.g. if the consequence of an action is the criterion for its morality then even a thief can very easily get away by saying that he is performing his duty. (vii) Unlike the action of the physicist the actions of Lord Krishna are supposedly never evil-ridden. So, what Oppenheimer considers as 'technologically sweet' (p.5) are, in fact, poisonous acts. (viii) Arjuna's argument does not come at the right time. There was no occasion for argumentation but

to take action. As against this, there is no compulsion for the physicist to make the bomb. Thus, it is not that *Gita* says, as against Sen's interpretation of *Gita*, that every one could subjectively decide something as one's duty and then proceed to do whatever one wishes to do. It is so precisely because *Gita*'s 'duty for duty sake' does not ignore *Loksamgraha* (welfare of humanity). For *Gita*, performance of one's duty inevitably brings welfare of the society as a whole. *Gita* has been revered, not only as a religious book but also, as an authority source on moral code of conduct and ways to live a happy life. It is so regarded because Krishna's position has been hailed throughout the world. Now, in order to appreciate Arjuna's position, as Sen sees that it is inevitable in the current scenario of the world in general and India in particular, an upside down reading of *Gita* is required. As we have seen that such reading will not only be illogical but also be the cause of chaos in the society where every one will do his duty only after the consideration of its result from the point of view of one's own advantage. As interests of an individual and the society might clash with each other, the subjective decision of the individual, based on his own evaluation of the teleological value of the action, will probably infringe on the way which leads to the development of the organic goodness of the society.

The above duty and consequent argument can be seen in the context of much debated moral argument: whether end justifies means or not. Karl Marx's view that end justifies means was rejected by Gandhi who advocated for the piousness of both end as well as means. The above debate between Krishna and Arjuna is, in fact, a debate between Marx and Gandhi. Krishna seems to hold Marx's position whereas Arjuna that of Gandhi. Sen seems to endorse Arjuna, i.e. Gandhian principle of Ahimsa (non-violence).⁹

(ii) Closely connected with the above

religious and moral debate is the issue of the historicity of religious facts. The significant questions related to the historicity of religious facts are: should religious facts be taken as historical truths or as parables? Are fundamentalist and secular treatments of religious facts different? There is a viewpoint which maintains that for fundamentalists there is no distinction between religious and historical facts whereas in a rational treatment religion is regarded as a parable. Sen upholds this view. For him: 'The problem with invoking the *Ramayana* to propagate a reductionist account of Hindu religiosity lies in the way the epic is deployed for this purpose – as a document of supernatural veracity, rather than as "a marvelous parable" (as Rabin'dranath Tagore describes it) and a widely enjoyed part of India's cultural heritage.' (p.xii)

However, neither the relationships between the religious fundamentalism and historical view of religion nor the relationship between rationalistic approach to religion and the treatment of religion as a parable, is indispensable. There is no such clear-cut relationship. Some treatments of religion as a parable appear to be much more religious than what religious fundamentalism aims at. Thus, Wittgenstein's account of treating religion not as a mere historical fact but as a parable, in fact, works in favour of the acceptance of religion with intense religiosity. In the *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein says, 'Christianity is not based on a historical truth, but presents us with a (historical) narrative & says: now believe! But not believe this report with the belief that is appropriate to a historical report, – but rather: believe, through thick & thin & you can do this only as the outcome of a life. *Here you have a message! – don't treat it as you would another historical message!* Make a *quite different* place for it in your life. – There is no *paradox* about that!'¹⁰ Thus, Wittgenstein's endorsement of the thesis of not treating religion as a historical event but something more than that

shows that treating religion as a parable is in tune with living an intense religious belief. It is so because 'Religion says: *Do this! – Think like that!* but it cannot justify this and it only need try to do so to become repugnant; since for every reason it gives, there is a cogent counter-reason. It is more convincing to say: "Think like this! – however strange it may seem. –" Or: "Won't you do this? – repugnant as it is. –"'.¹¹ Like Wittgenstein, Gandhi also regarded religion as a parable and treated *Ramayana* as a love story.¹² Vivekananda, whom Sen mentions as a 'non-aggressive Hindu leader' (p.49) treated religious rituals as symbols. Although Wittgenstein, Gandhi and Vivekananda, like Sen, endorse the treatment of religion as a parable, they neither hold atheistic materialism nor materialistic atheism.

So the treatment of religion as parable is, in fact, more religious as compared to treating it as a historical event. Thus, Sen's attack on Hindutva Movement on the ground that it treats religion as a historical fact, although factually correct, is not devoid of difficulties of comprehension. It is so because Sen, on the one hand, treats Hindutva as fanatical ideology which brings religion in all types of discourses as a recluse and treats them as the one who believes solely in historicity of religious facts, on the other. Here lies the paradox as both of these may not be true together. As we have seen through Wittgenstein's account about Christianity, Gandhi's treatment of *Ramayana* and Vivekananda's view about Hinduism, the one who treats religion as parable, is in fact religious in true sense of the term. However, there is an escape for Sen here. In his favour it can be argued that as compared to orthodox Hindutva beholder, a heterodox (intergrationist) is more religious. Such kind of standpoint seems to envelop the entire book as it often stresses on the secular treatment of every phenomena. We shall discuss Sen's argument on secular versus religious in the next section. However, to what extent one can agree with Sen's interpretation of

'religious', is another point of debate which is beyond the scope of this book.

(iii) Another idea which revolves almost through the entire book is Sen's distinction between orthodox and heterodox (integrationist) systems and its relevance in India's socio-political understanding. The integrationists, in Sen's scheme of analysis, are those who are against the East-West division of cultures, uphold Arjuna's point of view of reviewing action's consequences, treat religious narratives as parables and not as historical facts, and have a preference for logic, epistemology, materialistic and scientific temper. As against this, orthodoxy consists in upholding the dichotomy of East and West, honouring Krishna's viewpoint of 'duty for duty sake', treating religion as a historical fact, and have a religious and metaphysical mindset.

The above analysis of orthodoxy and heterodoxy is quite profound as it is not completely based on the traditional division of the systems of Indian Philosophy, according to which, those who believe in the authority of *Vedas* as a source of knowledge are orthodox or theists, whereas other systems who do not hold such beliefs are heterodox or atheists. So the materialists (Charvaka), Buddhists, and Jainas are atheists, not because they do not believe in the existence of God but, because of their denial of the authority of the *Vedas*. Among the orthodox schools, earlier Sankhya and Mimamsa do not believe in the existence of God, still as different from Western tradition, they are regarded as theists. Thus, the distinction between theism/atheism or orthodox/heterodox is not the belief in the existence of God but in the authority of *Vedas*. Sen's distinction between orthodox and heterodox trends, in the context of current Indian thinking, is slightly different. For him, the Hindutva movement is orthodox, which in his words, promotes 'a narrowly Hindu view of Indian Civilisation'. (p.ix-x) As

opposed to the orthodoxy, integrationists have 'tended to see the *Vedas* and the *Ramayana* as unwelcome intrusion of some specific Hindu beliefs into the contemporary life of secular India'. (p.x)

Sen's usage of the terminology 'integrationists' in place of 'heterodox' is objectionable as it can be asked whether Sen's 'orthodoxy' is 'disintegrationist'? Sen's reply to such a question can be that so far as orthodoxy acts as a catalyst to the inhibitions of the inter-faith dialog, it is a hurdle in building up the cohesion among the followers of various faiths.

There is no doubt that atheistic, agnostic and sceptic views can be found in Indian culture ever since its inception. These views have assisted the development of secular Indian culture. Sen quite elaborately interprets sceptical elements of *Vedas* (p. 22-23). However, there is a lacuna. Sen seems to endorse Western concept of atheism as disbelief in God which is different from Indian concept of atheism as the rejection of the authority of the *Vedas* as a source of knowledge. He does not differentiate between Indian and Western conception of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Such errors of omission hamper the basic premise of Sen's entire framework of argumentation which concentrates on the heterodoxies of India's culture in general, and philosophy in particular.

Further, it is curious to note that under the title 'Sceptics, Agnosts and Atheists' (pp. 21-25), Sen describes materialism of Charvaka, agnosticism of Buddhism and skepticism of Vedas. One wonders as to why there is no mention of the atheistic tradition of Jainism. Moreover, in the footnote on page 23 Gautama Buddha has been mentioned as Gautama, which is quite unique kind of reference as in Indian Philosophy generally he is quoted as Buddha, and not as Gautama which stands for the founder of Nyaya system.

However, Sen is quite right in his conclusion that a neglect of the above described heterodox tendencies has led to the underestimation of Indian science

and mathematics. (p.25) Not only this, such neglect has been the cause of the misinterpretation of Indian culture as basically devoid of materialism. But this is not the explanation which Sen aims at. Instead of concentrating on the neglect of materialistic metaphysics and ethics, he tries to glean the elements of materialistic theory of knowledge. He does not differentiate between the epistemological positions of crude and refined materialists, and prefers to take Charvaka as the one who believes perception as the only source of valid knowledge. He stresses on the epistemic position of materialist Javali in *Ramayana* as the one who advised Rama to ignore 'what lies beyond the province of human experience'. (p.xi-xii) The position of the crude materialist of *Ramayana* who believes only in perception or experience and rejects other *pramanas*, is in tune with the Charvaka system.

Charvaka's epistemological view that perception is the only *pramana*, has been severely criticized by both heterodox and orthodox schools of Indian Philosophy. The basic criticism is that the rejection of inference as a source of knowledge makes life impossible and Charvaka's own position, i.e. perception is the only means of valid knowledge, which is itself a kind of inference, gets demolished. Notwithstanding this universally accepted criticism of Charvaka epistemology, Sen, while appreciating it says, 'If the Lokayata approach comes through as being intensely argumentative and very dedicated to raising methodological doubts (going well beyond merely disputing the basis of religious knowledge), that is probably a just conclusion.' (p. 27) It is all right to question the veracity of any kind of knowledge, including religious knowledge, but the rejection of even the possibility of inference as a genuine source of knowledge leaves no room for any kind of epistemology or scientific knowledge. Science cannot move forward without inductive inference. Karl Popper very rightly points out that human knowledge

moves forward through a process of conjecture and refutation. In the course of the development of human knowledge, some hypotheses of science as well as common sense did work quite genuinely through a passage of time until they were proved redundant

As against this, Sen establishes that 'epistemological departures from orthodoxy provided methodological help for the cultivation of observational science'. (p. 28) Here, Sen seems to designate all those epistemological systems of Indian Philosophy, including Buddhists and Jainas, as epistemological orthodoxies which actually believe not only perception as a source of knowledge but also inference etc. However, ironically for Sen, only Charvaka symbolizes as the real heterodox system, although its epistemological presuppositions are against the fundamental presuppositions of science.

In this context another significant point is that Sen's comparison between heterodox Charvaka's scepticism with that of Bacon is not only irrelevant but also misplaced. (pp. 27-28) What is even more objectionable is that it is not clear as to what Sen tries to achieve through such comparisons? Does the comparison try to endorse Charvaka's position through a similar kind of epistemological position in the modern Western philosophy? If Sen's position is an affirmation to this question then the misconceptions of such comparisons become clear and distinct as there are fundamental differences between the epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions of Bacon and Charvaka.

As different from orthodoxies, for Sen, heterodoxies are rational and, therefore, assist in the development of democratic institutions and secular thinking. Sen argues that the Indian tradition of public reasoning has been responsible for the adoption of democratic form of governance when it got freedom from the British rule. Leaving aside as to what is so peculiar about the relationship between the tradition of public reasoning

and the adoption of democracy, he attempts to search for the threads of democracy in Buddhist councils and in the rule of Ashoka and Akbar. Here, if one expects for the linguistic analysis of the genesis of such terms as *Sabha* and *Samiti* whose origin goes back well beyond Buddha and is actually traceable in the *Rgvedic* period, such expectations will not be fulfilled. It seems here that, according to Sen's interpretation, the tradition of the democratic institutions begins with Buddhist councils and Ashoka.

For Sen, there is a correlation between public reasoning and democracy on the one hand, and public reasoning and secularism on the other. He says, 'The form as well as the interpretation and understanding of secularism in India can be linked to the history of the acceptance of heterodoxy.' (p. 21) Sen points out that Indian secularism emphasizes more on government's neutral attitude towards all religions than any kind of 'prohibition'. (pp. 19-20) Two points need mention here: (i) the essence of Indian secularism is not 'neutrality' as assumed by Sen but, in fact, is 'equal respect to all religions' as Gandhiji rightly points out. There comes a stage when a secular and democratic government is coerced to resort to certain prohibitions which act as catalyst to the growth of secular thoughts and institutions. In this context on page 20, Sen appears to draw two apparently contradictory conclusions. He takes up the issue of the French government's ban on women headscarves. For Sen, whereas such bans cannot be justifiable in the manner in which French government tried to justify its ban on the ground of secular argument, they can be justifiable on the ground that they protect women's equality in the society. Taking clue from the former, i.e. banning of women's headscarves cannot be justifiable on the ground of secular argument of the government, he criticizes the demand for the uniform civil code by some sections of Indian polity. Sen's acceptance of French government's ban on women

headscarves and at the same time rejection of the demand for the uniform civil code, without analyzing the rationale behind such demands, is like frying the half portion of an egg and keeping the other half for becoming hen in future. The question is: if the French ban on women headscarves can be supported from non-secular considerations such as on the basis of the argument from women's equality, cannot the demand for 'uniform civil code' be justifiable on such grounds as gender equality and promotion of national integrity? Sen does not find worth his while even to mention the arguments of the supporters of the uniform civil code. Moreover, taking into account Sen's presumption of the inevitable relationship between public reasoning and the adoptions of democracy and secularism, another question which has been left unanswered is: Did non-democratic and non-secular countries not have an argumentative tradition? An implication of Sen's above position reveals the ludicrous affirmation as an answer to this question.

Another very relevant question, in this context, can be raised: Does the nadir of the tradition of secularism in India not go beyond Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya and others? Was there no such tradition earlier? These questions arise because Sen traces the origin of secularism in the writings of these thinkers. (p.287) Moreover, Sen's own interpretation holds that the *Vedas* contain sceptical (rational) thoughts, as we have described above, his neglect of *vedic* secular thoughts and institutions is an issue which owes his explanation.

Further, it is significant to note the implication of Sen's view that various Indian Calendars were not correct due to the unavailability of scientific instruments and understanding at that time. To question the accuracy of India's calendars on the basis of Varahmihira's calculation of a year's actual number of days to be 365.25875 as compared to presently established calculation

365.24220 on page 329, is to argue against Popper's falsification thesis. Actually knowledge proceeds through various stages, therefore, in each stage of the growth of knowledge, the previous stage has to be given due recognition and should not be used as a premise of the critique of the culture itself. Actually appreciation and condemnation of a cultural heritage should go hand in hand.

In fact, it's simplistic to assign rationality (therefore, democracy and secularism) to heterodoxies and find the source of everything which is superstitious, irrational, and metaphysical in orthodoxies. However, once Sen's assignments of values to heterodox and orthodox systems have been understood, there lies no problem in understanding his viewpoints, though one may disagree with him.

In spite of the above limitations arising basically due to the profundity of Sen's interpretation of heterodoxy and orthodoxy, his interpretation of the nature and genesis of democracy and secularism in India, his critique of our cultural heritage from a particular point of view, and his notion of heterodoxy (to the extent it stands for the development of rationality), can be endorsed with certain precautions.

As this anthology consists of essays written for various occasions and during a decade, its basic ideas keep on running prominently through each set of essays and to some extent succeed in attaching various themes with each other so as to produce an organic unity. To say that it's a festschrift and therefore disconnectedness among various ideas and some repetitions were bound to be (as Sen himself concedes in the preface that there might be some repetitions), is superfluous. In fact, the book is such a synthesis of ideas on diverse subjects that for the proper assessment of the recurrence of the same idea in a different context and

form, one has to reorient oneself towards not only the context of the analysis but also the structure of the idea of the book itself.

The book definitely presents an analysis of various issues in Indian culture and civilization and succeeds in correcting the erroneous Western biases against Indian argumentative tradition. It is not only an encounter of orthodoxies but also brings out certain 'integrationalistic' features of Indian culture which had been quite essential. The book can be regarded as an in-depth cultural critique of the classification of world cultures, Western cultural colonization, and exclusivism in religion, and an exponent of pluralist tradition of India, although in its several interpretations and explanations, it seems to transgress the neutral position.

NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion on ethical constructivism and philosophical deconstructionism, please refer to Ted Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, New Edition, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 168-9 and p.193. These aspects of the book have the element of John Rawls' ethical constructivism and Derrida's deconstructionism. John Rawls' term 'ethical constructivism' stands for an ethical theory which holds that a system of moral obligations, which has no metaphysical commitments and is rational, can be constructed using an uncontroversial procedure and starting from uncontroversial premises about human nature. Sen's critique of the classification of world cultures into rational and spiritual, is a constructivist's outcry of the West's colonization of Eastern cultural values. Further, his new interpretation of religious texts, reinterpretation of the division between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, religion as parable, and the role of reason vis a vis democracy and secular values etc., can be regarded as a deconstruction of Indian understanding.
2. Quoted in Kali Charan Pandey (ed.),

Tulanatmak Darshan, Sagar: Vishvavidyalaya Prakashan, 2005, p.110.

3. P.T. Raju, *Introduction to Comparative Philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas Publishers Private Ltd., 1992, p.301.
4. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 268.
5. P.T. Raju, *op. cit.*, p. 279.
6. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India Pvt. Ltd., 2000, p.27.
7. Evelyn Underhill, quoted in *Ibid.*, p.21.
8. S. Radhakrishnan, quoted in P.T. Raju, *op. cit.*, p. 286.
9. A heated discussion ensued on my comparison of Krishna's position with Karl Marx and Arjuna's position with Gandhi at the National Seminar, held on the occasion of the annual conference of Indian Social Science Congress, in the Department of Philosophy, University of Lucknow, during December 28-29, 2005. I'm thankful to Professor Srinivas Rao, Professor Bijoy H. Boruah, Professor Nirupama Shrivastava, Dr. Rakesh Chandra, Professor H.N. Mishra, Dr. Kanchan Saxena and others for putting me in the debate which I enjoyed thoroughly. In order to save my position from any misinterpretation, let me reassert that my both analogies, i.e. Krishna with Marx, and Arjuna with Gandhi are limited to the 'end justifies means' and 'duty for duty sake' maxims.
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, George Henrich von Wright (ed.), Peter Winch (tr.) Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1998, p.37.
11. *Ibid.* p. 34. For Wittgenstein, the treatment of religion not as a historical event but as a parable is in tune with the sense of religious faith as no reason can be given for such a faith. It is so because religion has its own form of life and language game. The criterion of rationality of scientific beliefs cannot be applicable to religious beliefs.
12. C. Rajgopalachari, *Ramayana*, Bombay: Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1989, p. 309. Rajgopalachari quite elaborately describes Gandhi's treatment of Ramayana as a parable. For him, Gandhi's treatment of *Ramayana* as a love story is profound.

KALI CHARAN PANDEY
Senior Lecturer in Philosophy
Government College, Dharamshala,
(H.P.)