The Lotus and the Robot:
A Critique of Dualities
Raja Mohanty

Introduction

The lotus flower in full bloom is a breath-taking sight and is regarded by certain cultures, as nature's symbol of perfection; the robot often typifies the pinnacle of human intelligence and is a symbol of human ingenuity.

Living as we do, in times characterized by environmental degradation, by conflicts between people and between nations, a question that is asked is - do we regard humankind and all its actions as inseparable from nature? In other words, do we regard inequities, wars and conflicts as 'natural' as phenomena like floods and earthquakes? Are human outbursts an unavoidable aspect of our own nature, or are they aberrations of human intelligence?

Bertrand Russel, in his essay, 'A Free Man's Worship' observes that 'nature in her secular hurryings through the abysses of space, had brought forth at last a child, subject still to her power, but gifted with sight and the capacity of judging all the works of its unthinking mother.' Plato regarded the manifest reality as a crude approximation of an invisible principle. In Hindu philosophy, the Upanishads, are meant to be instructions from a teacher to a listener, and suggest that it is the interaction between a passive principle - the '*Purusha*', and an active principle - '*Prakriti*', that gives rise to the manifest reality.

Animistic communities and pagan worshippers stood in awe and reverence of natural forces over which they had little control. As our understanding of these forces improved, there appears to have crept in a dualism that viewed humankind in opposition to nature. With the growth of science, the distance between the two grew progressively wider as humans increasingly sought control over every aspect that governed their destinies.

The anxiety that underlies human effort

One can get a sense of how the human mind has changed, by visiting a tribal community who till this day, practice hunting, gathering and agriculture in a manner that appears primitive and then visiting a contemporary society. Juxtaposing these experiences, one may infer that the adaptation observed in contemporary societies, would be its overwhelming obsession with control - control over nature, control over the future, control over death itself! A tribal society appears to have evolved through a deep understanding of connections between themselves and nature, a way of life that generates far less waste than contemporary societies. It also appears to have an innate respect for the environment that are often echoed by various 'green movements' in present times.

The inexorable movement towards organized life, from the development of the plough for organized agriculture to the design of space programs for exploring extra-terrestrial possibilities may be regarded as arising out of a seemingly endless human curiosity. Is it likely that underlying the age of enlightenment was a similar anxiety that fuelled the charting of the oceans and the mapping of lands, near and far. The British Museum, bears testimony to the patient classification of flora and fauna, undertaken by intrepid voyagers. Does such an insatiable curiosity also betray humankind's anxiety about an uncertain future?
The industrialization that followed the age of enlightenment was symbolic of the triumph of a rational scientific approach towards the betterment of human life. However, the two Wars that shook up the naive belief of the modern world in 'Reason' as the organizing principle of human life. The rational extermination of an ethnic group during the Second World War, and the devastation that was witnessed after the deployment of nuclear weapons, led to a critique of modernism. Political leaders and leading scientists joined pacifists in their appeal to rethink notions of progress.

If the post-War existentialism in Europe was a critique of reason, the post-information alienation will need to go beyond reason and thought. The triumph over matter brought back the focus to the mind and artificial intelligence, and this in turn gave us the age of computing and communications. We now have nano-level integrated chips that could control the flight of heavier than air spacecrafts; and nano-level molecules that can intelligently repair tissues and organs; and yet our communication networks are often abuzz with news about disasters and conflicts, wars and brutality.

While prophecies of doomsday might be misplaced in their sombre predictions, what is certainly at stake is the quality of life of generations ahead, as also the quality of life of our own generation. The centralization of responsibility that is a feature of modern leadership is resulting in new patterns of slavery. In order to develop a perspective that can engender solutions to many of our crisis, one needs to rid oneself of self-love through a process of self-discipline. Only when this is done does one attain a professional responsibility towards all of humanity and not just some particular interest-group. Without such a fellow feeling, any attempt to solve problems will only change things in an adverse way.

The Limits of Thought

How does thought arise in the human mind? Once a thought has arisen, on what lines does it proceed? How does one describe the state of mind between two thoughts? Given a problem, how does our thinking proceed towards a solution? Einstein observed that we cannot solve a problem with the same tools that gave birth to the problem. What if thinking itself is the problem?

Jiddu Krishnamurti, a late twentieth century teacher, suggests that thought in its essence is divisive - it begins to work by dividing and separating and then proceeds to analyze what it has divided. Hence, Krishnamurti postulates that we cannot perhaps solve a problem by thinking about it. Confronted with a problem, it is perhaps helpful to understand it - and it is Krishnamurti's view that the freedom for the desire for an answer or a solution, is crucial to the understanding of any problem. The human mind, he believes is so conditioned by all its past experiences and influences, that a thought in our minds proceeds along established grooves, shaped by our conditioning. Such though leads predictably to answers that are incomplete.

In this regard Krishnamurti echoes religious practices that suggest that the illumined mind is a silent mind. Meditative states of awareness bring us in contact with realities that are quite different from the realities that are apparent to the thinking mind. In a series of conversations with the physicist David Bohm, Krishnamurti explores the limits of thought.

Duality and Advaita

'When a tree falls in a forest, who hears?'

This Japanese koan suggests that without a listener or an observer, there is no tree and no forest. Koestler in his observations on Japanese society mentions how it is caught between what he calls as 'Lotusland' and 'Robotland'. Such a fragmented view, is apparent in almost all contemporary societies. Duality is an outcome of observation that results in a separation between the observer and the observed. While such an act of observation is fundamental to notions of the self (a child learns soon enough that it is not the same as its mother and father) - the very notion of the self as being different from the other leads to conflicts and violence. Unless the self that is born out of a sense of separateness is also capable of seeing a fundamental similarity with the other, it is bound to be in conflict.

In Jain philosophy, the term *syadvad* suggests a duality that is relative; that is to say that what is apparently different, is not actually so. There is indeed a difference between hot and cold, but one could regard both as energy. Hindu philosophy speaks of *Advaita*, which again suggests a principle that permeates all that is manifest. The Buddha, by refusing to get into a metaphysical debate on the existence of the soul, seemed to suggest that such a duality prevented us from seeing things as they are.

During a recent visit to Santiniketan - the place where Tagore envisaged as a world university, I had the privilege of meeting Gaur Khepa - a Baul singer. The Bauls are a community of wandering minstrels who have a unique manner of singing and dancing. During our conversation, which took place in his humble abode, I was surprised to hear a growl from underneath a blanket. It turned out to be a dog, old and skinny, and almost blind. As I stepped back in caution, Gaur embraced the dog and explained that the Baul sees the dog as no different. Those who are sensitive to animals and those with a sense of closeness to all human life, are reminders of outlooks that transcend the dualistic notions that permeate apparently 'educated' outlooks.

Integral Education

In his work,' The Human Cycle ', Sri Aurobindo presents his analysis of human life, traces the formation of nation-states, and suggests that we shall witness a decline of reason as the basis of life. Human life, he suggests will begin to be governed by forces far more potent than the rational basis that permeates contemporary life. He outlines the conditions for the coming of the spiritual age, observes that humankind seeks for the Divine everywhere but "erects and worships images of only his own mind-ego and life-ego.

He suggests that it is only when the ego is abandoned do we get a chance of achieving spirituality in his inner and outer life. Such a spiritualised society would live in the spirit, not as the collective ego, but as the collective soul. This freedom from the egoistic standpoint would be its first and the most prominent characteristic."

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is reflected in his attempt to evolve an integral education that addresses the current needs of humanity. The excerpt from 'The Human Cycle' given below provides a glimpse of his vision.

"A spiritualized society would treat in its sociology the individual, from the saint to the criminal, not as units of social problem to be passed through some skillfully devised machinery but as souls suffering and entangled in a net and to be rescued, souls growing and to be encouraged

to grow, souls grown and from whom help and power can be drawn by the lesser spirits who are not yet adult. The aim of its economics would be not to create a huge engine of production, whether of the competitive or the co-operative kind, but to give to men - not only to some but to all men each in his highest possible measure - the joy of work according to their own nature and free leisure to grow inwardly, as well as a simply rich and beautiful life for all."

Conclusions

Design as a conscious force in shaping human effort has a history as old as the history of humankind. As a specialized field of study in contemporary times, it has sought to bridge human knowledge in the sciences and the arts and deploy technologies by placing human needs as its focus. Our understanding today enables us to address material needs for certain sections of society; yet large numbers of people continue to live in abysmal ignorance and poverty.

The crisis that faces humankind has several faces. One is the crisis of unevenly distributed resources and economies that give rise to a chain of conflicts. The other, less visible but equally potent is the inner crisis - the baffling ignorance about what constitutes our inner worlds.

The proclivity to think in dualities has not served us in addressing areas of darkness that lie embedded within human nature. The efforts of leading scientists, thinkers and mystics, suggest that the limitation has perhaps been within the very tools with which we seek to address the complexities and conflicts that face us today. In this sense, in spite of tremendous strides in science and technology, we continue to dwell as pygmies in Plato's cave. This paper points to the work of two contemporary minds - Jiddu Krishnamurti and Sri Aurobindo, and provides a glimpse of their view of humanity. It suggests that the practice of design would stand to gain much through an engagement with integral education.

Notes
1. The title of this paper alludes to an essay by Arthur Koestler.

Key References
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