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ANCIENT POETS AND PROPHETS SPEAK FOR THE CONSUMERS INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE ON TRADITIONAL WISDOM AND VALUES

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Abstract: While concepts like human rights, democracy, ecology, consumer forum, etc. are well developed in the West, the response from Asian countries has been rather ambiguous, tending towards uncritical and unsuitable imitation of Western norms or outright rejection of anything coming from outside. Clearly, even if the impulse comes from outside, the real change in attitudes and value perceptions can only take place only from within the society itself. Referring to the native wisdom tradition is a way of building bridges that assures self-confidence that the new concepts are not unknown to the ancients. So a meaningful interaction on an equal footing is thereby possible. This paper refers to values from Tamil traditional wisdom that may shed light on social marketing, in today's human interaction. This is also linked to the notion of spirituality, with its foundations in the historical consciousness of human beings.

Keywords: inter-cultural dialogue, spirituality, values, tradition, advertising

WHAT IS SOCIAL MARKETING?

It is said that social marketing came into existence as a discipline in the 1970s, when Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman realized that the same marketing principles used to sell products to consumers could be used to “sell” ideas, attitudes and modes of behavior within society (Philip & Eduardo L. Roberto, 1989). This technique is currently employed for health programs, such as drug abuse, heart disease and organ donation.

In commercial marketing the primary focus is on the consumer. The intention is to persuade consumers to buy what we happen to be producing. Social marketing on the other hand is not trying to persuade consumers to buy products. It seeks to influence social behaviors not to benefit the marketer, but to benefit the target audience and society in general (Weinreich, 1999). As in all forms of marketing, the techniques of advertising are employed to communicate the message to the audience and to achieve the desired result – in terms of sales or other outcomes. However, with social marketing, advertising is used to promote, not products, but basic values which should guide human interaction. As such, Kotler and Andreasen define social marketing as “differing from other areas of marketing only with respect to the objectives of the marketer and his or her organization.” Looking at the ancient literature of Tamil society in South India we can see the beginnings of social marketing in the way basic values were upheld by the poets, the conscience-keepers of ancient consumer society.

“Advertising” Values through Poetry from Tamil Wisdom Literature

Terms like marketing, consumer, and advertising are clearly not of the ancient world, but the reality denoted by these terms was not unknown to early human society. That is to say, people were interacting

with one another, selling and buying goods, negotiating and protesting in their own way to achieve a desired goal. While in a typical monarchical society consumers could not protest, nevertheless there were some social leaders, like the prophets of Biblical times, who could tell the rulers when things were going wrong.

Puranaanuru – is an anthology of 400 poems of varying length in the Tamil literary tradition. They are ascribed to 157 poets with 14 poems left anonymous. The puram genre deals with issues of public life, mostly praising heroism; 138 stanzas commend 43 kings belonging to the three Tamil dynasties (Chera, Cola, & Pandya); 141 stanzas praise 48 chieftains; there are also poems on widowhood, elegies, gnomic verses, and some of a philosophical nature. They are all dated prior to 200AD; with some stanzas perhaps dating from the pre-Christian era. The first printed edition by U.V. Swaminatha Iyer was published in 1894 in Madras (Zvelebil, 1995, p. 581).

In the ancient Tamil world the poets were the articulate bearers of honor and blame. It was they who had the power to counsel, to sneer, to curse, to make peace and to point to the vanity of human endeavors. In the puram poems dealing with public life, we see a society geared to the values of war, to fashioning a warrior “like a chariot wheel”. Honor, fame and a good name in life or in death were what men sought. For their part, the poets kept up the morale of warriors by singing their past ancestors in genealogies, the gore and smoke of present battle and of the wealth soldiers would share if they survived or the great posthumous honor if they did not (Ramanujan, 1985, p. 291).

It was the business of the bards to keep honor alive, they were the censors and mirrors, the memories and superegos of the heroic milieu. They were the custodians and transmitters of past history, and carried the good name of creative men and women into the future. The following poem from Purananuru (184) by Picirantaiyar speaks in a parable how the king should not tax his subjects excessively. Indiscriminate taxation and expenditure is to the detriment of the people and the kingdom just like the entry of an elephant into the paddy field before it is ripe, satisfying neither the farmer nor the elephant’s appetite. On the contrary, the King should use discretion in collecting revenues in proportionate measure (Mudaliyar, 1959, 43-45).

The Trampling Elephant

Cut the paddy corn, when it is ripe,
 And make it into balls of rice,
 And the yield of a small field, barely a fraction of a cent,
 Will feed an elephant for many a day
 But if the brute should step into a field,
 And trampling eat,
 Even a hundred acres will not serve,
 For the feet will spoil more than the mouth could eat.
 So, if a wise king levies his taxes justly,
 His kingdom will yield him millions,
 And will greatly prosper as well.
 But, if weak and thoughtless, he gathers around him,
 Day after day a crowd of noisy courtiers,

Foolish and flattering, and unjust to a degree,
 And avidly wrings his uttermost,
 Losing his people's love –
 Then,
 He is sure to be starved of his riches,
 And like the elephant-trampled field,
 His kingdom too will be ruined.

Kings at War

The poet Nettimaiyar addresses King Peruvaluti in a poem of the Purananuru (12) collection. He questions the wisdom a king who is so generous to his supporters but so unjust in dealing with others (Ramanujan, 1985, p. 113).

Your bards are wearing lotuses of gold
 And the poets are getting ready to ride
 Fancy chariots drawn by elephants
 With florid brown-shields:
 Is this right,
 O Lord rich in victories,
 This ruthless taking
 Of other men's lands
 While being very sweet to protégés?

A Poet's Counsel to Warring Clansmen

In the Purananuru collection of poems no. 45 (Ramanujan, 1985, p. 121) the poet Kovur Kilar speaks to the warring kings Netunkilli and Nalankilli. He points out the futility of their actions and asks them to reflect before they launch a battle on the neighboring territory.

Your enemy is not the kind who wears
 the white leaf of the tall palmyra
 nor the kind who wears garlands
 from the black-branched neem trees.
 Your chaplets are made of laburnum,
 your enemies are made of laburnum too.

When one of you loses
 the family loses,
 And it is not possible
 for both to win.
 Your ways show no sense of family:
 They will serve only to thrill alien kings
 Whose chariots are bannered,
 Like your own.

This World Lives Because

In the following poem (Purananuru 182) the poet Katalul Maynta Ilam Peruvaluti sings in praise of selfless humanitarian benefactors. This poem speaks of values such as concern for the needy, reconciliation and self-respect that sustain any society (Ramanujan, 1985, p. 157).

This world lives

Because

Some men
Do not eat alone,
Not even when they get
The sweet ambrosia of the gods;
They've no anger in them,
They fear evils other men fear
But never sleep over them;
Give their lives for honor,
Will not touch a gift of whole worlds
If tainted;
There's no faintness in their hearts
And they do not strive
For themselves.

*Because such men are,
this world is.*

Why Do We Look Back to Ancient Wisdom Traditions?

Our concern today is consumer rights within the context of business ethics. While we often take such terms unquestionably, it is important to realize that the values implied in such terms, come from distinct philosophical and cultural backgrounds with their own pre-suppositions. Similarly, terms like human rights, democracy, ecology and equality are also product of a specifically Western tradition. For example when human rights were formulated by the United Nations it did not take into account the implications of concepts of human nature from other cultures — such as the Chinese Ren or Indian Purusha.

Increasingly Asian countries are trying to grapple with these concepts within their own cultural parameters. It does not mean that they were previously unaware of these values or opposed to them, yet they try to discover the shared dimensions implicit in their own traditions. These become explicit or thematic in the course of time. In India for example, we are trying to use the Western concepts to interpret Indian traditions. One can see any number of publications like Vedic hermeneutics, Vedic ecology human rights watch towers, interfaith dialogue etc.

To provoke a meaningful response from Asian audiences it is important to first refer to local cultural heritage. One cannot talk casually of democracy, business ethics, consumer rights, human rights etc. because such concepts presuppose a society which has a sense of these values and is capable of responding in a meaningful way. For a society which has been subject to centuries of colonial rule and other authoritarian regimes — either politically or through caste hierarchy as in the case of India —it may not respond as expected. The concepts assume a society which enjoys a sense of economic and social security

and freedom for people to act. However often the psyche is so conditioned that people are inclined to take uncritically what is being offered even if they perceive injustice. One of my friends in charge of food quality control for example, said that it is easier to do his job in India simply because people are so reluctant to protest. It seems that in this context, many people are willing to accept such difficulties as fate or as karma.

Similarly, just as democracy presupposes a certain level of awareness of the available choices from which citizens can articulate their needs, so also in a world of business contracts, one expects people to perceive the fundamental workings of the contractual obligations and their implications. They must be aware of their rights and simultaneous duties, and also be aware of the responsible and available means of protest when their rights are violated.

Appealing to ones cultural past and human dignity awakens a sense of self-respect and a sense of pride. Our sense of identity is strongly influenced by our understanding of our past, with the shared history of the members of a particular group to which we belong and with which we identify. Referring to the native wisdom of each locality is thus a way of building bridges that assures confidence but the new concepts are not unknown to the ancients.

Historical Consciousness and Spirituality

The notion of historical consciousness is very much related to the notion of spirituality. An awareness of one's social nature and responsibility towards others is one of the most important implications of historically conscious spirituality. Human beings are not isolated individuals, but their thinking is colored by the accepted language, images and concepts of the society that shapes them. This awareness has caused a shift from a private relationship with God to a stress on human relationships and community in spiritual growth. It also led some to reinterpret asceticism not simply as rejection of earthly possessions and comforts, but rather as a process of discerning legitimate human needs and enjoyment with an eye to a more just distribution of goods.(Nuth, 1993, p. 478).

The notion of spirituality is in turn very much related to ethics and morality. In the Christian spiritual traditions there were differences between the East and the West - the Eastern stress on liturgy and resurrection and the Western stress on moral doctrines, original sin and the passion of Christ. But recent trends have enriched the theological context of studies in spirituality. Joann Wolski Conn has noted five distinct trends: "sustained attention to feminist issues, concern for the link between prayer and social justice, reliance on classical sources for answers to current questions, recognition of the value of developmental psychology and its understanding of the 'self' and agreement that experience is the most appropriate starting point"(Conn, 1989, p. 31). These currents in the studies on spirituality opened the way to the greater use of new philosophies, hermeneutics, linguistics, anthropology, aesthetics, psychology, sociology, political science and economics.

Such an interdisciplinary approach is needed to deal with concerns such as poverty and world peace. It is not merely economic factors that keep people poor. People will remain poor if they do not have any sense of the future, are not able to plan their life and live accordingly, with self-confidence and self-respect. Poverty is not a problem of economics alone but also with the philosophical outlook of the people concerned. The fisher-folk communities in India for example spend lavishly on celebrations affecting their families and future savings. They justify this by saying, "what one earns from the water must be spent like

water.” But if that is their philosophy, it may be difficult for others to help them.

CONCLUSION

People have always differed about what rights are. If one asks an ordinary person on the street “what is ‘right’?” she or he will be stumped to give an answer. They may know what it is to trample on someone’s rights, or to have his or her own rights denied or ignored by others. But what exactly is it that is being violated or wrongly denied? Is it something one acquires or inherits at birth? Is it some essential characteristic of a human being or is it something which someone has given us? Can rights be conferred? Can they be taken away? How do we know what such rights are? Such questions are raised only by philosophy, not by political scientists or sociologists (Magee, 1978, pp. 3-4).

The basic question addressed here is about inter-cultural dialogue and the East-West encounter. How one builds effective relationships which value one’s own cultural heritage while remaining open to new ideas. The impulses coming from outside provoke and invite people to look deeper into their own traditions and cultural heritage. This process enables one to discover dimensions of one’s own culture that perhaps were not explicit previously. This sort of dialogue should become a way of life for all, not an optional extra. One cannot afford to be isolated, absolutizing one’s own tradition, nor is it beneficial to float about without being rooted in some tradition.

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