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Asian Values In Journalism:
An Idle Concept Or A Realistic Goal?

By

Enayetullah Khan
"Asian Values In Journalism—An Idle Concept Or A Realistic Goal"
By Enayetullah Khan

"Today when a periodical asks its readers a question, it does so in order to collect opinion on some subject about which everybody has an opinion already, there is not much likelihood of learning anything new. In the Eighteenth century (The Age of Enlightenment in Europe, parenthesis mine) editors preferred to question the public on problems that did not yet have solutions. I do not know whether or not the practice was more effective; it was unquestionably more entertaining."

Michel Foucault, the maverick French philosopher of contemporary times, wrote the above in a discourse on what is enlightenment and was referring to Immanuel Kant who had responded to a poser by a German periodical in November 1784.

Over two centuries later, this seminar poses a question to editors and media practitioners, and not vice versa, on a subject about which everybody has an opinion already. Or is it? The problematic is stated thus: "Asian values in journalism—Idle Concept or Realistic Goal?" And it marks a discreet entrance into the history of thought of a question that, to my mind, has not been answered yet, nor gotten rid of. The question of values hence opens up a lead to a wide avenue of inquiry on the calculus of reason, empiricism and history. Politics, that demands a reckoning of the inquirer's exercise in this particular context, is subsumed within this non-universal categories of disciplines which seek to determine an answer, howsoever tentatively.

On the question of enlightenment Foucault tells us: "Let us imagine that the German journal still exists, and it is asking its readers the question: what is modern philosophy? Perhaps we could respond with an echo: modern philosophy is the philosophy that is attempting to answer the question raised so imprudently two centuries ago: was 1st augklärung—what is Enlightenment?"

What are values then, asked in the context of century 21 by this seminar, and in a post-modern era of technological and capitalist triumph. If opinions come aplenty, the answers don't. Values, as a system on one hand, and as particularities on the other, have their origins and their descent in a genealogical order, so to say. The closest we get to values is through the equivalence of what the Greeks term as the Ethos and the Mores. But the very prefix of 'Asian'—and values at that—sets 'Asian Values' apart from a universal category, and throws up historical, political and moral references on the scale of time, and in the context of culture, economies, geography, ethnicity and language. The new inquiry is a non-metaphysical, non-ontological inquiry into a question that is at once subjective and objective. In other words, the thought itself, and the objectification of the subject calls for a labour of diverse inquiries with a strong political reference to values.

Thanks to a chequered political history of imperial conquests, western colonisation and post-colonial shocks and impositions, the historiography of Asia as a whole or the countries as parts, is wrat in varying measures of external and metropolitan domination, exploitation and superstructural incursions. Here were, and are a multitude of people of diverse ethnicity, language, culture, religion and institutions whose value-system has in the course suffered more distortions than enhancements. The mystiques of civilisations and traditions that each Asian country would proclaim exist more in their breach and defacement than in their pristine mould.
Given an origin and a descent, values are conditioned by myriad events down the line through which—thanks to which, against which—they were formed. There is no 'monotonous' finality in this descent; like every origin of morality from the moment it stops being pious' is pitted against its own critique. The construction of values is 'cyclopean' and proceeds along the veritable mutations of speech, printed words or texts, desires and ideas. Because words and texts do not always keep their meanings, desires do not always point to a single direction, and ideas do not retain their logic. Inquired thus, devolution of values does not follow the thread of a single truth or precept, but occur in a critical interchange of meanings, directions and logic of passing events and ideas, as much in their proper dispersion as in their minute deviations or even complete reversals.

At the peril of sounding somewhat Nietzschean, I dare say values are either forever or absolute. There are no divinities or solemnities in their origin, nor any holy certainty in their descent. As Nietzsche said: "We wished to awaken the feeling of man's sovereignty by showing his divine birth; this path is now forbidden, since a monkey stands at the entrance." Foucault goes further, "man originated with a grimace over his future development; and Zarathustra himself is plagued by a monkey who jumps along behind him, pulling on his coat-tails." Genealogy, in the above sense, is Darwinian to a fault.

How do we situate non-divine values then—Asian or else? If values are paraphrased into a set of acquired beliefs of particular peoples of particular climes, those are essentially rooted in empiricism, albeit with a moral face. Behaviourally, those are a set of attitudes defined with reference to the context of history and politics of a given society. Values are a posteriori, and are often the uneasy products of the endlessly repeated play of dominations of words, ideas and logic or worse even of men or class over others. Such dominations create their own universe of rules, laws, beliefs and precepts. The dominations also produce their antitheses. The domination of certain men over others leads to differentiation of values; class domination generates the idea of liberty, national subjugation produces resistance, genocide meets with liberating violence, and finally economic and technological dominance of the metropolis over the rest creates an enigma of sovereign inequality and hence a repugnance to it.

As long as dominations exist, values will be sought to be universalised under the command of the epoch-makers. A universe of rules and beliefs, customs and mores, as opposed to the diverse, therefore, arbitrarily determines the bottom-line of values *per se* in the contemporary world order. It is at this point of attempted universalisation of the values of the dominant powers in politics, economics, culture and *informatics* that the inquiry into, and the pursuit of differentiated values in the Asian context takes on a new urgency. It is more so when Asia is no longer a mere hinterland of the metropolitan west. The inquiry and pursuit, therefore, run into conflict with the new political and supposedly moral order which is using the *informatics to universalise its thoughts and beliefs,* or oftener an utter lack of these. A whole new regime of disciplinarian thought, and some grossly marketable thoughts and ideas of prudence, are and now being administered through *apparatuses of informatics,* as if those are divinities incarnate.

Once the universality of values is disclaimed or negated, the affirmation of particularities of values in a given society, given history and given political ambience takes hold. These particularities are to be abstracted from the experience of our day-to-day living. These are located in the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats. And the particularities are defined by the marks which politics leaves on a people in times—past and present.
What I understand as Asian values is nothing Koranic or Biblical. It is an abstraction of history and politics, an embodiment of our pride and prejudice, and an informal codification of social, moral, economic, political and cultural precepts. These values in each country, as the societal expression of the collective, are not uniform. But between them and across the board, the values share a commonality born of historical and political experience. A repugnance of colonial past, and a deep suspicion of neo-colonial regime of exploitation are the two principal elements in this commonality. Though ideological buffers still remain to strike a political divide of contending social systems, this commonality of Asian values runs through China and Vietnam on one hand, and Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea, on the other. The autonomy of values, asserted in this context, also finds echo in South Asia, East Asia, and even West Asia.

Yet, it would be naive, if not preposterous, to try to determine the lowest minimum denominator of Asian values. Because values, though normative, do not form part of a faith or have juridical writ. The uniformity emerges from the particularities of each country’s historical and political experiences in the construction, accretion, even distortion and reversal of values. The question posed by the seminar brings up the issue of Asian values’ on a common footing—as a definable set of shared experiences which have led to the uneven descent of a value system. What is more, the question calls for conscious historico-critical investigations of the specifics of each country which would bear upon a material, an epoch, a body of determined practices and discourses. The subject of values has to be objectified without reference to credos and dogmas.

I have sought to indulge in this somewhat opaque and random exercise with some benefits of critical rationality of thoughts I have happened to stumble on, and in the light of general empirical understanding of politics and history. The task is for historians and thinkers to explore this question and put it firmly on the agenda. So far as the media is concerned, the question of values is very much on the agenda, albeit subconsciously. To my mind, the media, particularly the print media, is a testament to sustained critical rationality with political intent. Asian Values like all values are political and historical. It runs through the media like a shadow that constantly moves with us, follows us, precedes and yet never disappears. There is no discovery involved in charting the course of the shadow of politics and history. It exists, therefore it is. On this existentialist note, I endorse the question and seek answers to it. The media has to consciously redeem values from the abstract realm of reflection and the shadows of what is not an unreality.