

Complementarity – The Ultimate of Human Existence and Growth

- Dr. G.P. Rao

Some of us, may be many of us, would have gone through the article, Wheat people versus Rice People, by T M Luhrmann appearing in The New York Times, Dec. 3, 2014. The subtitle of the article, Why some people are more individualistic than others?, pinpoints its focus.

The article offers two major view points: The first is that world over, self perception at individual and national levels can broadly be categorized in to two broad categories. The first is that of as ‘individuals’ – as unique, autonomous, self motivated, self made. The other broad category is that of those who understand themselves as ‘interwoven with other people’, as interdependent, not independent.

Americans and Europeans represent the first category. The rest of the world is likely to find themselves in the second category.

The second major viewpoint offered in the article relates to the possible reason for existence of such a varied and conflicting self perceptions at global level. The write up quotes the research results reported recently by Thomas Talhelm, a young psychologist of the University of Virginia. It research relates to the work done by Talhelm, and his colleagues. The research team ascribes these different orientations to the social worlds created by wheat farming and rice farming. Rice is a finicky crop. Because rice paddies need standing water, they require complex irrigation systems that have to be built and drained each year. One farmer’s water use affects his neighbour’s yield. A community of rice farmers needs to work together in tightly integrated manner.

Not wheat farmers. Wheat needs only rainfall, not irrigation. To plant and harvest it takes half as much work as rice does, and substantially less coordination and cooperation. ‘And historically, Europeans have been wheat farmers and Asians have

grown rice', the study points out. Their test case was China, where the Yangtze River divides northern wheat growers from southern rice growers.

The research thus demonstrates the inter relationship between climate, water supply, nature of crop, 'social worlds', and, self perception and image. Good; but what is so great in it, one may ask. The significance of these results as an add on to the existing human knowledge can better be appreciated when we juxtapose them with the already existing and widely debated human awareness originating from the brain function comprising the left and right side of the brain, to Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang, to Indian philosophy of Oum, aham, cosmic consciousness, to systems thinking and several other schools of thoughts. All of these 'windows' of knowledge, so to say, have their own specific foci and areas of study. However, being windows, they logically form part of a home – the human being. This metaphor indicates the distinctiveness as well as the organic inter relationship which exists between and among different disciplines of study.

Thus, when we understand better the nature of these different concepts and thought processes and their interrelationships, a larger picture emerges and offers us a better and more complete knowledge of ourselves as human beings, the dynamics of human relationships and the rather long term objective of human existence and growth. We move – to paraphrase Thomas Crum - from a Point of view to Viewing point.

Left side and right side of the brain can be the starting point for our discussion to continue. The human brain is divided down the middle into two hemispheres, with each half performing a fairly distinct set of operations. Roger Sperry, whose contribution in understanding brain function has been significant, states that in general the left hemisphere is dominant in language: processing what you hear and handling most of the duties of speaking. It's also in charge of carrying out logic and exact mathematical computations. When you need to retrieve a fact, your left brain pulls it from your memory.

The right hemisphere is mainly in charge of spatial abilities, face recognition and processing music. It performs some math, but only rough estimations and

comparisons. The brain's right side also helps us to comprehend visual imagery and make sense of what we see. It plays a role in language, particularly in interpreting context and a person's tone.

Based upon subsequent research work on brain function, one can sum up that the left side of the brain relates to reasoning, mathematical and analytical skills and intellect; while the right side refers to emotions and sentiments, imagination and descriptive skills and intuition

“Brain asymmetry is essential for proper brain function,” Professor Stephen Wilson of University College London stated, "It allows the two sides of the brain to become specialized, increasing its processing capacity and avoiding situations of conflict where both sides of the brain try to take charge." The distinctiveness of each side of the brain, but the need of complementarity, for its overall effectiveness is the message we get from this statement. But, ‘as usual’, if one can say, we disregard such messages – at our own peril.

It is important at this point to note that research taking place in other disciplines on the theme of distinctiveness as well as the need for being togetherness has been buttressed by what is known as systems thinking developed by Fritz Capra, Marshall McLuhan and Peter M. Senge. The essence of systems thinking is that synthesis and synergy is needed of the two schools of thought of western science – one that focuses on the study of matter or quantities, and the other on pattern and quality. Such a synthesis through conceptual framework, it is proposed, integrates the biological, cognitive and social dimensions of human life.

As a result, the knowledge about the left side and the right side of the brain, has been beautifully, logically and organically integrated with the knowledge of wheat people and rice people, noted at the beginning of this write up,. An attempt is made to present such integration, as below:

Left side of the brain.	Right side of the brain
Quantitative.	Qualitative.
Logic and reasoning.	Emotions and sentiments.
Intellect.	Intuition.
Yin.	Yang.
Masculine .	Feminine.
West.	East.
Wheat farming.	Rice farming.
Wheat people.	Rice people.

Perhaps, at this point, our knowledge of ourselves as human beings and our inter relationship is clearer. It can in fact be summed up in two sentences. The first is that we are distinct, yet together cognitively, emotionally and culturally. The second sentence is that let us stay together. The first statement is positive and rather a statement of fact. The second statement is normative and beckons us the path to take up for restoring our weakening human bond, as I submitted elsewhere, ‘Swollen heads and shallow hearts’, The way is very simple and significant. Let us, as Mahatma Gandhi said, ‘remake’ ourselves as human beings, by being and becoming humane. As Spandan (Heartbeat) approach puts it, let us become aware, accept and act upon the basic goodness, innate divinity and intrinsic altruism, bestowed in all of us, in our interactions with others at individual and institutional levels .Although simple and significant, the path to tread is long, arduous, an odyssey – yet, self fulfilling.

We thus move from point of view of distinctiveness to the viewing point of oneness and cosmic consciousness. This perhaps is the ultimate of human existence, and the purpose of human life .As a participant in one of the workshops put long ago, ‘My funda is simple: Be good, do good’.