



The Power of Culture in  
Sustainable Development



Ministry of Education and Culture of the  
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## OUR PAST AND OUR FUTURE

Amartya Sen

This is my first visit to Indonesia, and yet I have been to Indonesia many times in my imagination. From my school days in Santiniketan in India – the school that the poet Rabindranath Tagore built – I was growing up surrounded by batik artists and puppet plays and shadow theatre, all developed with inspirations, ideas and technology from Indonesia. I was fortunate to have these exposures as I grew up in India.

However, no matter where we are located, if we have an interest in the history of archaeology, or in the diversity of innovative arts, or in the chronicle of navigation, or in the fusion of mass culture with classical erudition, or in tolerant religiosity (especially the richness of Muslim multiculturalism that would have thrilled that pioneering pluralist thinker, Emperor Akbar, the Great Mughal), we cannot fail to see the glories of Indonesia. What is particularly important for us to recollect in the context of the meeting for which we have all gathered here amidst the beauty of Bali, is Indonesia's wonderful history of making room for the cultivation of many different elements in its richly diverse cultural background, within an inclusive and powerfully constructive framework.

In his warmly welcoming words for us, President Yudhoyono has emphasized that “strategic changes demand that culture in all its manifestations be championed as an indispensable agent of change and reconciliation in the face of unprecedented globalization.” This is not only an inspiring thought, it also has major constructive implications. Indonesia's extraordinary multicultural affluence, developed over thousands of years of globalization, makes it

wonderfully appropriate for this great country to play a leadership role in making today's flood of globalization serve as a constructive force. We have to save globalization from being exploited for the cultivation of divisiveness and inter-group hostility, with hugely flammable consequences, and instead draw on global cultural interactions to advance our future, even as we admire the past.

Why is this important? First and foremost, it is important to understand the ability of human beings to live in peace with each other, rather than falling for incitement to violence. Second, it is also important to appreciate the capacity of humanity to talk with each other, and to replace confrontation by dialogue and conversation. Third, a peaceful world is not only crucial for good human living, it also makes economic and social development possible, rather than diverting us into the destructive and damaging channels of getting our way against those of others. Development may be influenced by technology – and modern technology is far in advance with what we had in the past – but the basic historical understanding that peace and security are central to social advancement – economic, social and cultural – still remains centrally relevant. Fourth, progress in health care is greatly helped by peace and security, and the removal of culture-centered tension can help to advance progress in longevity and reduction of unprevented and untreated morbidity. Fifth, the need to reverse traditional patterns of gender inequality is not only important for its own sake, but furthermore, releasing the creative agency of women can greatly contribute substantially to every aspect of social progress (as the recent experience of Bangladesh's development powerfully brings out – and so does the history of modern Indonesia). Finally, in order to maintain and advance the quality of quality of human life – and ensure the survival of other species – in the future, we

need global dialogue aimed at sustainable development. It is only through extensive consultations and dialogue among people from different parts of the world that a fair and feasible global protocol can be drawn up to ensure our future (the meager nature of such dialogue ruined the prospects of the kind of world contract that the Copenhagen conference on climate change hoped, unsuccessfully, to secure). All these are parts of the challenge we face today, and cogent and imaginative utilization of culture – in the broadest sense - can help to deal with each of these problems.

### Human Identity and Cultural Inclusion

One of the central questions concerns the challenging issue of human identity: in particular, how we can reasonably see us, and how others can reasonably understand us. Should we allow ourselves to be categorized – and partitioned - in terms of exactly one of our many identities and affiliations? There is no doubt that our inherited traditions are important, given by our race, religion, language, nationality, or ethnicity, but there is a plurality of identifications even here. And we can acquire new identities in terms of location, education, profession, politics, and social commitment. To overlook the inescapable plurality in our identities and to place us into a singular box of one identity – be it race, or religion, or community, or whatever - is a remarkably efficient way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world.

I have tried to argue in my book, Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny, that we all have many affiliations and associations, and each of these identities fit into the way we lead – and can continue to lead - our lives, without displacing other identities. When prioritization is needed in a particular choice

where there is a need for putting more emphasis on one identification over another, we must ourselves choose – if only tacitly - the relative priorities between these diverse identities, which may vary from context to context (taking the responsibility that comes with reasoned choice). No “choice independent identity” can be reasonably imposed on us – our rich humanity is denied when we are pigeon-holed into just one identity emphasized by others, such as being Jewish or a gypsy in Nazi Germany, or being black in apartheid-dominated South Africa.

Going further, rather than seeing multiculturalism merely as a policy of leaving people alone, we have to consider society’s responsibilities in trying to advance people’s ability to lead an integrated life, combined with - when necessary – the ability to make reasoned choices. Central to that engagement is the valuing of human freedom, which demands not only freedom from restraint, but also social opportunities of employment, education, political inclusion, and participation in civil society. And this is where the demands of reasoned multiculturalism – focused on human freedom and on reasoning – merges with the demands of sustainable development.

### Beyond the Perception of Civilizational Clash

Consider the increasing fashionable subject of the clash of civilizations. Many leading commentators now tend to see a firm connection between global conflicts and civilizational confrontations (for example, between "Western" and "Islamic" civilizations). In fact, the invoking of "Western" values against non-Western ideas is rather commonplace in public discussions, and it makes regular headlines in tabloids as well as figuring in anti-foreign and anti-immigrant oratory (from the United States and Canada to Germany or France). Theories of civilizational clash have often

provided allegedly sophisticated foundations of crude and coarse popular beliefs. Unfortunately, cultivated theory can sometimes end up bolstering uncomplicated bigotry.

I would argue that the thesis of a "clash of civilizations" is basically confused and mistaken. But what is particularly important is to be clear about why it is mistaken, where exactly does it go wrong. There are, I would argue, two basic problems. First, the methodological foundations of the "clash thesis" involve a program of categorizing people of the world according to some one - allegedly commanding - system of classification. To see any person wholly, or even primarily, as a member of a so-called civilization (for example, in Samuel Huntington's famous categorization, as a member of "the Western world," "the Islamic world," "the Hindu world," or "the Buddhist world") is already to reduce people into this one dimension, overlooking the important fact that we all have so many other affiliations, related to language, literature, arts, music, profession, business, politics, education, and so on. The deficiency of the clash thesis, I would argue, begins well before we get to the point of asking whether the disparate civilizations "must clash." The problem begins with an impoverished vision of a singularly categorized world, dividing people into little boxes.

Second, civilizational categories are far from clear-cut, and the simulated history that goes with the thesis of clashing civilizations exaggerate the contrasts, partly by ignoring the heterogeneities within each culture, but also by being oblivious of the actual historical interactions between the different cultures. Consider the way "Western civilization" is separated out from the rest of the world in these theories. The champions of "the clash of civilization," in line with their

belief in the unique of profundity of the singular line of civilization division, tend to see tolerance as a special and exclusive feature of Western civilization, extending way back into history. Samuel Huntington, for example, asserts that the West has "a tradition of individual rights and liberties unique among civilized societies."

Tolerance and liberty are certainly among the important achievements of modern Europe (leaving out some aberrations like Nazi Germany, or the intolerant governance of British or French or Portuguese or Dutch empires in Asia and Africa). But to see a unique line of historical division there - going back through history - is quite fanciful. The championing of political liberty and religious tolerance, in its full contemporary form, is not an old historical feature in any country or civilization in the world. Plato and Augustine were not less authoritarian in thinking than was Confucius in China, or Kautilya in India. This is not to deny that there were champions of tolerance in classical European thought, but even if this is taken to give pro-liberty credit to the whole Western world (from the ancient Greeks and Romans to the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Druids, and Vikings), there are plenty of similar examples in other cultures as well.

Indonesia's own history gives many powerful examples of well reflected tolerance and constructive integration. There has been some remarkable advocacy of tolerance and assimilation. For example, the Buddhist Emperor Ashoka's dedicated championing of religious and other kinds of tolerance in India in the third century B.C. (arguing that "the sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another") is certainly among the earliest political defence of tolerance anywhere. When a later Indian emperor, Akbar, the Great Mughal, was making similar pronouncements on religious tolerance at the end of the sixteenth century

(such as: "no one should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him"), the Inquisitions were flourishing in Europe. Indeed, Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake for heresy in Campo dei Fiori in Rome in 1600, even as Akbar was making visionary statements on the importance of individual liberty and religious tolerance in Agra.

Similarly, what is often called "Western science" draws on a world heritage. There is a chain of intellectual relations that link Western mathematics and science to a collection of distinctly non-Western practitioners. Even today, when a modern mathematician, at Harvard or Stanford or Caltech, invokes an "algorithm" to solve a difficult computational problem, he or she helps to commemorate – usually unknowingly - the contributions the ninth-century Iranian-Arab Muslim mathematician, Al-Khwarizmi, from whose name the term algorithm is derived (the term "algebra" comes from his book, "Al Jabr wa-al-Muqabilah"). A large group of contributors from different non-Western societies influenced the science, mathematics and philosophy that played a major part in European Renaissance and, later, in the European Enlightenment.

Often-repeated public rhetoric on the contrast between "Western science" and "non-Western cultures," as well as crude civilizational classifications on theories of cultures and clashing civilizations, have attempted to incarcerate the latter - science and mathematics - well inside the closed basket of "Western civilization," leaving other civilizations to seek their pride through specialized glorification, such as digging into religious depths. The anti-Western activists, including religious fundamentalists and cultural militants, then secure leadership roles through focusing on those issues that allegedly separate the non-Western world from the

West (such as religious beliefs, local customs and cultural specificities), rather than on those things that reflect positive global interactions running through history (including science, mathematics, literature, and so on), in which many non-Western societies, including Muslim societies, flourished. The dialectics of confrontation is powerfully fed by cultural confusion, to which both the Western supremacists and anti-Western militants contribute. The avoidance such a confused reading of history and culture has to be part and parcel of the call for making culture in all its manifestations serve in building a more peaceful and more prosperous and secure world (as President Yudhoyono has proposed).

### Nalanda, Srivijaya and pan-Asian Intellectual Pursuit

In the light of the general point I am trying to make in this talk, let me now comment briefly on a particular example of Asian integration and within-Asia globalization. I want to discuss an aspect of the history of the world's oldest university, Nalanda, which drew on pan-Asian cooperation involving particularly India, Indonesia and China, but also Korea, Japan, Thailand, and other Asian countries, from about 1500 years ago. Nalanda University is now being re-established as a part of joint initiative of the East Asia Summit, of which Indonesia is an important member.

When Nalanda University was founded by a Buddhist foundation in India in the fifth century as an institution of higher learning, it was already committed to a global view of education, partly connected with Buddha's own teaching, which took an affirmatively non-parochial view of intellectual pursuits. Buddha, the "enlightened one" (as his given name means), was ready to seek enlightenment from anywhere, but to be assessed always by one's own reasoning. Though

founded on Buddhist initiative, Nalanda was more than a Buddhist university: its teaching curriculum included linguistics and arts and sculpture, science and astronomy, medicine and public health care, and it was willing to acquire knowledge from any source. The engagement was not just on culture and religion, but on human development in the broadest sense.

A word on the ancientness of Nalanda University may be worth mention here. It was not only the oldest university in the world, when the most ancient European university – the Bologna University – was founded; Nalanda University was already more than 600 years old. The University was also large: at its peak, it had more than 10,000 residential students, drawn from India and abroad.

Two points are particularly important to note about Nalanda in the context of our discussion in this seminar of the World Cultural Forum. First, Nalanda was aimed throughout its history as a pan-Asian university, drawing its students not just from India, but also from China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, and elsewhere. A second point to note is that there were international linkages which made it easier for foreign students to come to Nalanda to study, thanks to pan-Asian collaboration. Aspiring students, for example from China, had the opportunity to be introduced to, and trained in, the Sanskrit language and literature and to Buddhist academic heritage, in Srivijaya – in Sumatra. This was one of the remarkable examples of ancient net-working.

Perhaps the most famous student at Nalanda who first networked in Sumatra for one year before moving on the Nalanda was Yi Jing. He had little Sanskrit when he left China to come to Srivijaya, which was already – in the seventh century – a major centre of Sanskrit-based education in the world. By the time Yi Jing sailed

from Sumatra to India, landing in Tamralipta (not far from modern-day Calcutta), he had already acquired considerable mastery over Sanskrit and the basic literature on the subject, acquired in Indonesia. Yi Jing stayed on in Nalanda for ten years, and among his other accomplishments is the fact that he wrote the first study of comparative medicine in the world, comparing Chinese and Indian medical studies and public health care.

There is a lot of work to be done on the subject of the ancient traditions of networking in Asia. In the line of the programme of this conference, I would like to emphasize the importance of this aspect of cultural interactions. There have been many studies of comparative architecture and religious history, but a broader investigation of Asian intellectual interactions call for much more attention. Given the importance of the plurality of our identities, which can help to reduce confrontations based on some arbitrarily imposed privileged identity – religion, nationality, ethnicity or whatever – ignoring all others, on which I have already commented, the many ways in which different people and different cultures have historically worked together and interacted with each other deserve particular attention. Sustainable peace in the world demands that serious attention be paid to the value of such global cooperation, and sustainable development, in its turn, critically depends on the maintenance of peace, and on the use of human ability to talk and work together, rather than to threaten and fight.

People have worked together in many different ways throughout world history, and these interactions are particularly important to study and appreciate to rescue culture from incarceration in the narrow boxes civilizational partitions, seen in confrontational rather than cooperative terms. We can definitely see culture as

“an indispensable agent of change and reconciliation in the face of unprecedented globalization,” as President Yudhoyono has asked. This can happen if, and only if, we know what we are trying to do and why. There is much to be done in pursuit of the vision that President Yudhoyono has outlined in summoning us to the deliberations in this meeting.

