

*Alan Kennedy*

## **Introduction: Values and a Changing World**

The essays collected in this special issue of *The Dalhousie Review* were, for the most part, delivered at an international conference held at Dalhousie University in October, 1985 under the auspices of The Pearson Institute for International Development.<sup>1</sup> The topic of the conference was "India: Economic Development and Cultural Value". This somewhat ambitious focus was intended to bring together professionals from various areas and ask them to interact on the general question of development while keeping their consciences troubled, as it were, about what happens to traditional values as development occurs. It seemed possible to consider development in the light of the question of the quality of life, and at the same time to see if any light could be shed on the actual functioning of value systems in the process of development. We thought it equally likely that it would appear that values can at times foster economic development and that at times values can obstruct economic development. And of course there is possible an infinitely complex interaction of value and change.

We were approaching our subject with a wide and inclusive idea of cultural value in mind, and were not restricting ourselves to what is often commonly meant by culture. Equally we did not want to exclude consideration of the arts (dance, music, poetry and so on) while talking about economics. And we did not exclude them. It is not without interest, for instance, that the paper by Dr. Mahapatra on tribal society in India is written by a man who is also one of India's leading poets. What was perhaps surprising to some was the fact that those supposedly poetical had a clear grasp of economic necessity, while the economists tended on occasion to be poetic in their advocacy of the necessary supremacy of human values in times of economic development. If one general point emerges from some of the following papers it is perhaps this: that there is no *necessary* conflict between values and economic change. Steven Marglin's paper<sup>2</sup> and his comments during the conference make it clear that if those responsible for the processes

of change and development pay careful attention to the context in which change is being brought about, then not only can local inhabitants be presented with change as something that is inherently part of their own value system, but also that change itself is facilitated rather than impeded by an intelligent consideration of local context.

The point was repeatedly made, then, that there is no *necessary* conflict between forces of change and human values. Since my own professional interests are poetic, in that I am a professor of English Literature, I found this insistence somewhat surprising, I must say. In my considerations of literature, I try always to keep in mind the social/historical/political/economic context(s) in which beauty is produced and consumed. Fortunately I have not found myself in situations of extremity, but—even though I am a professor of poetics—it has never seemed to me self-evident that the force of writing, truth, beauty—of value in general—could withstand economic extremity, or the necessities of staying alive in forcing circumstances. If one has to give up either bread or circuses, it has always seemed to me that one would give up the circuses. The difficulty with such a view, however, is that it assumes that values can exist in some kind of changeless permanency, rather than as part of the processes of life. Another major point that emerges in the following papers, then, is that values are dynamic: they are the ways in which human beings attempt to shape the changes that make up their corporate life. And clearly, it is also the case, that in situations of extremity, human beings do not necessarily choose to give up the values they live by in order merely to stay alive.

Two examples from my recent visit to India might make clearer what I have in mind. An item appeared the newspapers while I was there about a strip-mining project in a remote area of the state of Orissa. Tribal societies<sup>3</sup> in India are, of course, in relatively remote parts of the country, so it was no surprise to find that the inhabitants of the area were justifiably concerned about the effects of the project on their area. One needn't, of course, assume that tribals are slow to adopt new ways and technology when they are confronted with them. In nearby Andhra there is an active trade in the latest electronic technology, radios and so on, as tribals find ways to make money from gold they can find in the rivers. In Orissa, however, the tribals were convinced that the new project would pollute sacred rivers (this had already occurred.) Their traditional hunting ground would be denuded of forest if the project continued. What will happen is unclear. But the tribals were protesting in a way that is both traditional and sophisticated. They were taking out protest marches and blocking access roads for vehicles. Gandhi did the same kind of thing, and so,

recently, did the Haidas in British Columbia when their forests were threatened by the logging companies (and governments). Contemporary political-cultural values were being brought to bear in the form of protest, in an attempt to protect other traditional values associated with an ancient way of life.

Another kind of example is to be found in a film called *Aakrosh*, starring one of India's leading actors, Om Puri. The film is an excellent one, typical of a large group of excellent "serious" films being made in India these days. What is interesting is that leading actresses and actors will work for virtually nothing to make these serious films, that are so different from their usual fare. Of equal interest is that these films do not in general do well in the box office, and can in fact damage the career of the actress or actor involved. Om Puri plays a tribal forest worker whose wife is raped and murdered by the bosses; the blame is put on the husband and he is on trial for murder, with a conviction a virtually foregone conclusion. Puri's character does not once speak during the film; a brilliantly sustained piece of acting. A young female relative is left to look after an infant with only the protection of Puri's father, who is too old to be of any real aid. When the old man dies, Puri is released from prison to complete the funeral rites. After setting the pyre alight, he seizes his moment and grabs a forester's axe and runs—not at his captors as one suspects—directly for his young female relative and with a single blow splits her head open and the film ends.

At the end of the film it is impossible not to cry for the tragedy, the pity, shame and horror of it all. And then one breaks off for tea, or a return trip home and life goes on. What a great film; everyone says so. And yet. One wonders what process of change is likely to result from such an expression of values. One even begins to wonder if the film can (ever) unequivocally express a particular value. The value of the lives of the oppressed is certainly clearly expressed. But one wonders if the value of self-immolation is not also indirectly expressed. Puri's character shockingly hints to us that the oppressed begin to see their own death as the only value remaining; and that inversion of values is also clearly related to the question of the development of the forests. A vicious equation, by which all lose, but some lose doubly, seems to be set up. If the forest workers kill themselves, the development of the forests will end and so will their exploitation. If they do not kill themselves, they will be destroyed without any remnant of pride or self-respect by the developing forest industry. And when they are destroyed—their lives and ways of life eliminated—then too perhaps the development of the forests will be brought to an end. Unless, as seems increasingly likely, the forests are brought to an end first, and then of course, the way of life of the tribal and of the developer equally

will end. Of course, developers find other ways, other modes of carrying on their lives.

This is all a question of values as they appear in art. But that was at least part of our topic. One cannot, it seems, get by the subject without mentioning Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. That novel, of course, makes us think of the horror involved in economic development, especially when pursued under the aegis of imperialist values. It also gives a structure for the consideration of our question. When two cultures confront one another a conflict of values is likely to arise. One of the cultures, if not both, is likely to change. It will change according to the force of the values of the other culture. Which is to say that developmental change will take place internally to one culture according to values which are external to it—those of the other culture. Change according to values internal to a culture would seem to be impossible, unless we think of cultures as a system of stable instabilities—that is, as containing within them the necessary violations of their own principles of stability, such that change, development, will occur and produce a result that will not be in conflict with the central stability-producing values of that culture. But that seems like a good description of just what must be the case for a culture to survive. And cultures do survive, in a vital way, at least for periods of time. They keep themselves dynamic by means of internal processes of change, or in conflict in a benign way with other cultures, by learning and by changing their internal value systems, by becoming something somewhat different in principle from what they were before. This is perhaps another way of putting a central theme of our conference, that culture is dynamic. But we can perhaps also now say that dynamism is not always equivalent to preservation.

Some of the speakers, Mahapatra amongst them, spoke along similar lines when they pointed to the contentedness of the peasant in the fields, sleeping under his tree, unmoved by western arguments that his life would be somehow better if he slept less and worked harder for more production. The goals of developmental change, especially when the value system pushing change is clearly and only that of more financial benefit, need to be clearly spelled out and evaluated. One can, of course, note that more financial benefit means more food, less starvation, more life, and therefore more culture and possibility of value. Which seems self-evident. However, if it is agreed that alleviation of starvation is the goal beyond more financial benefit, then one needs to analyse the different economic models that might produce such a result. One needs, for instance, to weigh development of the forests against redistribution of wealth by political means. The argument that development necessarily means more food is not really likely

to delay anyone when it becomes an immediate question. As I have already said, if it seems likely that circuses or bread has to go, I know my choice (I think). Also if I am asked if I would prefer to see money pumped into a huge hydro project in India, or into the development of some industry, or if on the other hand, I would prefer a seven-year study of values involved, I would go for the cash. In this, however, I suspect I am typical of one type of value system. The arguments about the importance of value questions will not leave off haunting me. Could it possibly be the case that we would now, all of us, be better off than we are—and I take it as read that all of us, taken as a whole, are not well off at all—if more time had been taken, would be taken, over “philosophical” questions of value?

Of course, our conference had other aspects as well. We tried to present cultural artifacts as a context, and an excellent display of artifacts was arranged by Mrs. Sharma. T. Viswanathan and T. Sanakaran instructed and delighted a capacity audience with their music, and Oopalee Operajita charmed them with an Odissi recital. The essay on dance included here, points to problems that could open up much further research on the concept of the classical and its relation to current life. It turns on the central pivot of all our discussions during the conference, the relation between past and present. Values themselves, we do well to remember, are not simple items and it is no wonder that our conference at Dalhousie did not end the discussion.

#### NOTES

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2. Marglin read his paper at the conference, but did not meet the deadline for submission for publication, so his paper does not appear here.
3. The expressions “tribals” and “tribal societies” might cause concern to some, but the terms are in ready use in India and are in no way derogatory.