

Finding the golden mean: the middle path between community imagination and individual creativity

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In the western intellectual tradition, dichotomies play an important role—for instance the dichotomy between the mind and the body, or the self and the other. Indian thought gives less weight to the idea that I am this and not that, but says that in reality I am neither this nor that. In political thought a significant dichotomy exists between individualism and communitarianism. They are regarded as competing or rival political ideologies. For a long time a major debate has raged between thinkers who believe that protecting individual rights and interests should override all other values and concerns in determining how societies should be governed and the principles of justice with which they should operate, and those who believe that societies should give primacy to the rights of the collective and the values of citizenship and community life.

We know that individualism and communitarianism have their darker sides. In its extreme forms, individualism promotes selfishness and self-advancement, perfectly at ease with the idea that people should look after their own personal interests and not feel any responsibility towards the wider society in which they live. Individualism, in this version, combined with fundamentalist capitalism, advocates an impoverished idea of freedom. It sees the value of freedom as lying in the ability to make material choices, and the key role of political and economic systems as expanding the range of the things that people can consume and buy. The idea of freedom is individualism's calling card; the source of its allure. But in the darker version of individualism, freedom loses its liberating potential because inadequate emphasis is placed on the freedom to ideate, to envision, to create, to realise one's full potential or to pursue alternative lifestyles.

Communitarianism too has its darker side. Stressing the rights of the community to the exclusion of all other considerations divests communitarianism of the ability to critique any collectively enforced 'consensus' on exploitative arrangements, hierarchical systems or medieval practices that most of us today would find deeply repugnant. Nor can it

question the growth of parochial attachments or the hardening of identities in communities. It is not easy for a radical communitarian to argue against the rising tide of inward-looking, change-resisting or xenophobic societies.

Speaking from the better sides

Both individualism and communitarianism, therefore, need to speak securely from their better sides. Unfortunately, though, neither communitarianism nor individualism appears to have the internal intellectual resources to check the possible rise of their respective darker sides. And we cannot expect either political ideology to look to the other to discover a sense of balance and resist collapsing into its darker side: implacable ideological opponents will not seriously contemplate 'sleeping with the enemy', so to speak.

But perhaps we should not even try to urge individualists and communitarians to speak in their finest voice by accommodating what is best in each other – which takes for granted that they are rivals in the ideological space of politics. What we might want to do instead is convince both sides that when they *do* speak with their best voice they *in fact* end up accommodating each other, and thereby position them as possible allies rather than competitors.

In an implicit critique of what I have called the darker side of individualism, social scientist Shiv Visvanathan has remarked, 'We read diversity through the logic of individual consumption, not through the logic of alternatives which speaks through the prism of culture.'¹ Now individualism, in its narrow, diminished sense undoubtedly valorises individual consumption and cherishes an impoverished idea of the self – one which attaches significance only to whatever can be ingested or devoured. But the domain of self-interest can encompass a larger universe of meaningful choices. It cannot be individualism's case that the freedom to choose strawberry over chocolate ice-cream is worth protecting but not the liberty to choose between alternative forms of living.

There is no reason, therefore, why individualism, in its expansive version, would resist embracing 'the logic of alternatives which speaks through the prism of culture.' 'Culture', I have elsewhere suggested, '... sets the limits to our ascription and production of meaning and value in the world ... We do not pursue culture as we pursue happiness; rather culture determines the boundaries of what we might regard as a life worth pursuing.'² Individualism inspires when the primary freedom it stresses is the freedom to lead the kind of life one finds worth pursuing. And 'alternatives', Visvanathan reminds us, 'deals [*sic*] with the plural ecologies of culture and livelihoods. It emphasises the community.'³

Communitarianism inspires because it upholds the virtues of mutual support, shared responsibility and unity of purpose; it disillusiones when it encourages insularity, tribalism and feudalism. However, to be able

to speak in its best voice, communitarianism must come out in support of freedom of choice. K.V. Subbanna – an inspirational community art worker in India – believed that the imagination of the community and the creative powers of the individual must work in tandem: ‘Neither would be complete without the other ... communities bereft of the life-giving touch of individual genius are turning barren and ... individuals are losing their way without the caringly guiding hand of their community.’⁴ Without pioneering and imaginative minds – minds that envision and undertake creative interventions – communities quickly become decadent, he said. In other words, communities must value and provide space for the exercise of the conscience and creativity of the individual to ensure that they do not collapse into their darker version, developing an over-determined sense of themselves and a pathological notion of the other.

Self and community evolving together

Mahatma Gandhi captured this idea when he spoke about the self and community evolving together. For Gandhi, in Subbanna’s words, ‘progress or development was ... an all-inclusive holistic process. Here, every human being would be able to blossom ... in consonance with his fellow men, to gradually and completely flower out in fulfilling self-expression. He termed this process Sarvodaya – the ennoblement of all, together at the same time.’⁵

In the end, any sane society must esteem the values that both individualism, in its best sense, and communitarianism, in its best sense, espouse. The freedom to create, envision and lead self-fulfilling lives must be cherished alongside the values of reciprocity, interdependence, co-operation and shared purpose. If societies strike a golden mean between individualism and communitarianism, each will curb the other’s immoderate propensities. Embedding both types of values in society will induce both individualism and communitarianism to speak in their best voice.

National governments can be expected to promote policies and arrangements that protect individual freedoms and provide opportunities for all to lead self-determining lives. They are less good at fostering a sense of community, or guiding a process of constructing or revitalising communities. Local governments must assume this vital responsibility because they are closer to the ground, closer to where the action is.

And there can be no doubt that the arts, which create narratives of belonging and shared meaning, are the most powerful agency for community building and regeneration. Artists can reshape community stories into larger narratives ‘in a way that helps to reshuffle the deck of the teller’s self-understanding to reveal more agency, more creative power, than the teller may ever have imagined.’⁶ Through the arts, communities and individuals can treat their past as open, and create new, altered or refocused narratives of what went before to serve them better in the present.⁷ ‘A society which has an inventive idea of memory,’ Visvanathan says, ‘builds its own

safeguards against obsolescence and erasure'.⁸ It does so, I would add, through its bards, storytellers and performers. And communities that have been traumatised by natural disaster or human action can, through artistic practice, reframe and retell their stories, thus rejuvenating the meaning of their lives and giving birth to the possibility of healing.

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Endnotes

1. S. Visvanathan, 'Silly ideas on knowledge, choice are destroying us', in the *Deccan Chronicle*, July 27, 2009, accessible at <http://www.deccanchronicle.com/op-ed/silly-ideas-knowledge-choice-are-destroying-us-298>.
2. A. Vellani, 'Development without culture', in *Infochange Agenda*, issue 16, 2009 accessible at <http://infochangeindia.org/Agenda/Multiculturalism-and-intercultural-dialogue/Development-without-culture.html>.
3. S. Visvanathan, 'Silly ideas on knowledge'.
4. K.V. Subbanna, 'Theatre and community', in N. Manu Chakravarthy ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, Akshara Prakashana, Sagara, 2009, pp. 65-66.
5. K.V. Subbanna, 'Over the rivers into the seas: speech at the presentation of the magsaysay award', in N. Manu Chakravarthy ed., *Community and culture: selected writings by K.V. Subbanna*, p. 36.
6. Arlene Goldbard, 'The story revolution: how telling our stories transforms the world', accessible at http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2005/01/the_story_revol.php.
7. As Goldbard underscores in the essay cited above.
8. S. Visvanathan, 'Silly ideas on knowledge'.