The Emergence of Stereotypes

Opening of Discussion

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When people talk of the fact that Jews in India or Asia are few in number, both in terms of actual numbers and of percentage, I am compelled to remind them that there is a certain degree of transformation of the Jewish heritage which does express itself in India — not necessarily through the small Jewish communities in Cochin, Bombay and elsewhere, but in terms of the Jews who became Christian and are Indians.

Further, I have lived most of my life in various parts of the world, and being an alien represents an ideal form of being able to engage in an introspectional study of culture, and just as colloidal suspension is an ideal example of a perfect gas, so as an alien have I been in an ideal position to observe not only discrimination, but both positive and negative aspects of stereotyping at various times.

Stereotyping is an incomplete and hostile perception of others’ lifestyles. If it were not a perception, then, of course, it would not be stereotyping, and if it were a complete perception, then it would have to be considered as an accurate or detailed study rather than a hostile perception or exercise in stereotyping.

Stereotyping, as I have said, combines both positive and negative aspects. As discussion has so far been mainly about its negative aspects, may I in turn talk about its positive ones?

One of the positive aspects of stereotyping is the recognition of separate and viable identities of other peoples. A second is the acceptance, even if grudging, of the viability of other lifestyles. And a third is the expression of a certain homage to those peoples and lifestyles through an incomprehension of the successes and wellsprings of their viability.

There are also neutral aspects to the subject. One reflects the inability of the stereotypers to adopt the others’ particular lifestyle, either because it is forbidden, or because they do not know how, or because they deem it inferior, even if seen to be successful. The other neutral
aspect relates to the acceptance of success as part of that alternative lifestyle, and that success may be attained not in one dimension alone but in many dimensions or directions.

Many people have reflected upon the fact that Jewish lifestyle and perceptions of life must contain something very special intrinsic to them, as evidenced by the fact that they have survived through generations and centuries of transmission. Even those who seek to destroy them recognise that there must be something extra-special about them that must be demolished utterly lest they survive.

The negative aspects of stereotyping entail losing sight of the human dimension. We, as humans, have a tendency to say that what we cannot join, we must denigrate and, if possible, destroy; we are also apt to hold that if a certain lifestyle is one with which we cannot identify, then it is less human than our own and less relevant also, the activities and expressions of that lifestyle needing, therefore, to be counteracted.

In this context, therefore, apart from legal remedies directed at thwarting the effects of stereotyping, there is also a need for education, such education aiming at making people identify with those whom they tend to stereotype by bringing out their human dimension.

A further set of points I wish to deal with relates to the fact that stereotyping is not always made by outsiders but also by insiders. Sometimes, it comes from oversimplification resulting from showmanship at others from oversimplification due to sheer ignorance. It may be a consequence of partisan interests; it may originate among people who are uncomfortable with what they really are.

There are among my compatriots some scientists who say that all religious observances are superstitions. Yet they may be discovered partaking in just such observances in secret. If confronted with the question why, in the light of their convictions, they do so, they reply variously, “I do it to please my mother,” or “My wife insists on my doing it,” or “I want to set an example to my children,” or “I do it out of sheer habit,” or “I do it in order not to be different from other people.” This notwithstanding, they remain among the most vehement in talking about such observances as being the stuff of superstition. In many ways, this misrepresentation comes about partly because of the fact that very often when one is asked
to justify his actions, instead of saying simply, "I don't know why I do it but this is what I do and it makes me feel good," one says instead, "I do it because the moon is in this particular phase, or because this is supposed to be a good time to wash my hands . . .," and so on.

In discussing Professor Khanal's paper, Professor Sidorsky asked the question which was not answered relating to whether the traditional Indian and Nepalese societies which contained certain components were undesirable and whether they ought to be replaced by new societies in which the traditions were to be wiped out. Traditional societies can easily be caricatured or stereotyped. If one confronts a society in which one does not like something, one calls it feudal, static, and so on; if, on the other hand, one values the qualities and traditions it possesses, one counters by saying, "After all, one must have taste, one must have good manners, one must have some sense of class. People like us don't do this kind of thing. After all, civilisation means a certain amount of discipline . . .," and so on.

In India, we have a pluralistic society and, therefore, we have many opportunities for creating stereotypes of all kinds of people, not only of those from other countries, but also from our own, as also people adhering to other religions and language groups, people who are shorter than us, people who are taller than us, people who eat meat, and people who don't eat meat, and so on. And the amazing thing is that each group has a clear idea as to why it is superior to others. Each has its own concept about who is above and who is below.

The Jews as a group are at present seen in Asia, and particularly in India, as an aggressive Western community which appears to ignore much of its ancient compassionate quality. Jewishness is seen as a foil to Islam rather than on its own terms in an Asia which has very many Muslims. While I was growing up, my heritage involved a very detailed study of the Bible. Together with others, I followed the adventures of the Jewish people in relation to the Covenant, and it took me a long time to realise that the history that is written there, so finely, so successfully depicts that when the Jewish people won in conflict it was because God wanted them to win, and when they lost, it was because God wanted them to lose. We studied the history and felt with the people and exulted in its victories and suffered in its losses and felt distinct empathy with its adventures.

Today, however, this is not the picture that the majority of Indians or of Asians have of
the Jewish people. The majority sees rather a Western power which happens to be located in Asia and is also the last outpost of Western military technology on Asian soil.

This, of course, is not the perception of thinking Israelis. Many of my learned Israeli friends have in effect said this to me: "Look, we are Asians and we would like to have associations with you. We have longer associations with other peoples, partly because of the fact that they are friends with us. We would like to be friends with you; we would like to identify ourselves as an Asian country."

To me, this is a very important and necessary perspective. The view held of Israel and of the Jewish religion and tradition as something wholly Western is in fact just as wrong, just as incomplete, and as much a stereotype as regarding Buddhism as something particularly Japanese or Chinese. One speaker has already stated that religion was an Asian discovery and nationalism a Western one, and that while we have exported religion, we have also unfortunately imported nationalism. I believe it is very important for Asians — both for Jews and non-Jews in Asia — to rediscover the truth that Judaism and its offspring Christianity and Islam are really Asian religions, to recognise also that the Asian component has been temporarily under eclipse, and that we are really not so very different in various things.

The one way of avoiding the propagation of stereotypes is through education. Education, however, is a two-way street, and for education to be effective there must be willingness for all sides to communicate with one another. Shylock persuaded neither myself nor my classmates; we tended to see him more as a caricature, so outrageously drawn that we regarded the whole matter as a joke rather than as something serious. This was because, in some sense, the community into which I was born was identified with precisely the same kind of vices — being moneylenders, being heartless, and so on, even though I knew my father, my mother and others around me had their hearts in the right place. To us, the one had nothing to do with the other.