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The East Unleashed

Raam P Gokhale
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A Dialogue Concerning the Political Ramifications of the Developing World

“India is a macrocosm and may be the world’s default setting for the future.” – Patrick French

“Freedom for India is an insult to freedom.” – Kedar Joshi

Scene and Players: The luxurious Marriott in Pune, India. Kedar and Ram are sipping watermelon juice and Earl Grey tea respectively—of course, Ram’s treat.

Kedar: Why are you so reluctant to write the political dialogue?

Ram: Because I know the black bile which passes for you as political philosophy. Did I succeed in offending you?

Kedar: No, I’m not offended. There is a quote by Henry Brooks Adams that’s very apropos: “Politics, as a practice, whatever its professions, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds.”

Ram: You can marshal quotes quite readily, I concede. But I know the kinds of things you say when speaking for yourself. They would never come under ‘Political Philosophy’ in any academic journal.

Kedar: So much the worse for academic journals. Look, India, the developing world in general, is a developing cancer that must be nipped in the bud. We don’t have time for academic niceties. If India grows the whole world will one day look like India. I’m reminded of Suketu Mehta’s comment: “There will soon be more people living in the city of Bombay than on the continent of Australia...Bombay is the future of urban civilization on the planet. God help us.”

Ram: Granted we wouldn’t want a slumdog world, but there is a lot of good in India.

Kedar: Name it!
Ram: It’s like the traffic here, the rickshaws, the two-wheelers, the boxy cars, the cows all interpret the traffic laws to suit themselves but the whole thing works because everyone is very forgiving. What’s the Hindi phrase? Chalta hai?

Kedar: Every country has its chalta hai. The crucial point is what sort of actions we as framers of the body politic want to allow to be forgiven, to be chalta.

Ram: Forget for a minute that I don’t see myself as a framer of the body politic—whatever that means—, but specifically what about India would you not want to be chalta?

Kedar: Where to begin? The crudeness, the rudeness, the incivility, the conceit in spite of the incivility, the tolerance of it all by the incredibly corrupt civil authorities.

Ram: Could you give an example?

Kedar: An example? We’re so assaulted with them on a daily basis that you’ve become numb to them. A simple example is what happened yesterday at the zebra crossing. The cars, the rickshawwalas, the two-wheelers were so uncivil not allowing us to cross even though we were standing right in front of the stripes that gave us the right of way. And of course, the civil authorities don’t care. They would’ve just laughed at us if we tried to report the infractions.

Ram: Yeah I remember. I even joked: it’s a zebra crossing but all the drivers are donkeys.

But it’s the same in any urban environment. Even in New York, the drivers are simply too rushed to care about the pedestrians. It’s just worse here because there are so many more pedestrians…so many more pedestrians, customers in bookstores, more people everywhere. You see, I remembered how the service at the bookstore the other day was below the standards you were used to in the UK or in this oasis which is Marriott.

Kedar: You know my views on New York. The difference between London and New York is the difference between an ideal world and crude reality. And as regards bookstores, the Borders in Cambridge, for example, is much more crowded than Crosswords in Pune, yet the assistants there are so much more civil, polite. Remember Crosswords? How the cashier short-changed me by one rupee? Granted a rupee is not much. Rickshawwalas cheat you out of larger sums all the time. But when I stood on principle, how the cashier looked at me as if I was some kind of kook. That’s Indian service.
And anyway, you’re an actuary. Don’t you think it causes inflation when everyone rounds up their charges? Maybe requiring merchants to carry and provide the proper change, and most of all enforcing such laws, would rein in the inflation that seems so rampant here.

**Ram:** Rounding up is definitely one of the ‘slings and arrows’ one is subjected to here and it probably contributes to inflation. Still I can’t help but focus on the low cost of everything, especially when measured in dollars. My medicines and gas, or petrol as you say, are heavily subsidized by the government and everything from food prices to doctors’ bills to the rickshawalas has such a low base cost in the currency my assets are in that any inflation seems almost irrelevant.

**Kedar:** Well, you get what you pay for. The infrastructure for example is crumbling beneath our feet. The roads are in constant need of repair because of the shoddy ways they’ve been made in the first place. There is a need of flyovers, or overpasses as you Americans call them, to relieve the perpetual congestion; a need of signals on the streets, better-enforced standards for pollution from Asia’s main culprit, the two-stroke engine, cleaner public toilets—you can measure a country’s decency by the state of its toilets, you know!—respite from disease, the constant Delhi-Belly—did you know I had dysentery for a year when I was a baby? And the poverty, not only of the people but the emaciated random animals like dogs, donkeys, the occasional pig you see everywhere foraging for food. All this is intolerable for a sensitive, civilized mind.

**Ram:** Not to seem insensitive but some of these things—not the toilets—might seem quaint or ‘exotic’ to some westerners. In fact being a novelist, I confess I sometimes see them that way.

**Kedar:** I grant you ‘exoticness’ is a draw for some people and not just exoticness in surroundings but exoticness in the underage girls that serve the sex tourism industry, but how many people are novelists, or pedophiles for that matter. You can afford to be fascinated by exotic subject matter for your novel because you sit on piles of cash from America.

**Ram:** I admit I was being insensitive, but you have to admit a lot of westerners feel the same way.

**Kedar:** I guess people appreciate their own physical or financial health most when confronted by others’ lack of it, but a country should be designed most for its citizens and not for tourists and that is where India fails miserably.

**Ram:** I think it’s not only tourists but India’s growing middle-class that shares this exotic attitude.
Kedar: Are you kidding? Everyone looks to the next rung on the ladder. The poor look to the middle-class, the middle-class looks to the West as depicted on their expensive TV’s too big for their cramped living rooms. All are miserable. I submit to you, even most tourists are miserable. Not everyone has a novelist’s fascination with the exoticness of misery.

And speaking of tourists, it’s not all one way you know. Your growing middle-class is growing all the way to America, to Europe, to visit, to immigrate. That is the real problem because the point system that western countries employ is radically misguided. They check for degrees, work experience, financial capability, in short all things that are achievable by typical Indians without changing their basic attitudes. What’s missing in these Indians, as far as suitability for immigration is concerned, is what I’d call the Germanic attitude of discipline, of dedication to work, in general a serious-mindedness, a commitment to perfection in all things. The typical Indian is envious, undisciplined, mischievous, impolite, and unpunctual—like a child. And in the ghettos of New York and London you can see what these unparented children do, unparented because unfortunately they are old enough to be given full adult rights though they’ve done little to deserve them. At best, they don’t assimilate, don’t bother to learn the language or the culture and more often than not, join the ranks of the poor, the dependent, the criminals of the host country. In general the immigration policies of the west spread the cancer of the east. They might’ve been OK for the first wave of immigrants—the educated doctors and engineers—but they do little to stem the tide of their lesser relatives who come under their sponsorship, not to mention the laborers the West must import to fill in the gaps left by its declining population.

Ram: You know this is the second time you said ‘cancer’. Don’t you think that’s too severe? You yourself admit the typical Indian has many good qualities: if he is envious, he is also competitive; if he is undisciplined, mischievous and impolite, he is also unselfconsciously friendly and refreshingly impish—the desirable traits of children. Are the Eastern and Western mindsets so fundamentally opposed that you can’t take the best of both worlds instead of taking the bad with the good of one to the exclusion of the other?

Kedar: I wouldn’t necessarily say that. My view is simply that some of the typical Indian’s characteristics are very pernicious and the filters the West currently has in place are hopelessly unsuited to the task of preserving the civilized, Western way of life.

Ram: I’m sorry but I don’t see it. The chief advantage of a civilized society according to you is that of making its citizens productive, right?
**Kedar:** Yes, but…

**Ram:** Wait a minute. So the issue is which characteristics are most conducive to productivity, right? I, as well as many in the west, see a lot of advantages to the Eastern mindset. For example, the unselfconscious friendliness enables the Easterner to largely escape the Prozac alienation of Western societies. The emphasis on family, on getting ahead in life inculcates in children a respect for education, a drive to learn. These characteristics make Asians in America the model minority. And you speak of productivity? One of its key ingredients is teamwork. Just in my two short years in India I’ve joined forces with you in writing philosophical dialogues, with my sister in designing clear, attractive websites, with her husband in publishing a philosophical journal. All these activities, or anything like them, would be entirely missing if I’d continued living in America. What made them possible here? Again it was the unselfconscious relationships that exist in a family, at least on the eastern model.

**Kedar:** Teamwork is certainly a key factor in productivity. And I concede that modeling society on the Eastern family does produce the strong bonds essential for effective networking. But my fundamental point stands. If we examine the characteristics of, not the cream of Eastern society, but the all-too-pervasive dregs, you have to ask yourself what kind of product would teamwork among such people produce.

In the West, teamwork is the result of intellectual honesty, a healthy respect for the opinions of others, in short, a true democracy of equals—a concept that is totally alien to the so called Indian democracy of mosque-destroying, rioting mobs.

I wish there was a catchy name for the Western model of democracy.

**Ram:** There is. Opposed to the family model is what might be called the academic model. I remember reading about it in the writings of the political philosopher Hannah Arendt. Software companies are built around this model, at least for the rank-and-file. That’s why their offices are called campuses. Strangers teamwork for the sake of producing superior results. That’s what bonds them together not sentimental family ties.

Hannah Arendt described and faulted the Eastern view of society as being modeled on the family, with a clear head-of-household being dictator over the family’s collective actions. In fact she didn’t even dignify the activities of family members under a head-of-household as actions—she characterized them as labor. True actions as under a Western democracy arise under conditions of freedom; labor takes place under the yoke of necessity.
But I’m not sure the East of today anymore labors under the family model…

**Kedar:** Hold on. This is very interesting. East vs. West; the family vs. academe; true democracy vs. mob-rule instigated by demagogues. My view is that the East needs a benevolent dictator from the West. Only an almost parental authority can check the negative childlike impulses of its citizens. Gandhi launched the ‘chale jao’ movement against the British Raj in the 20th century. What the 21st century needs is a ‘chale ao’ movement welcoming the Western powers back.

**Ram:** Now you hold on. I think you’re getting carried away. Colonialism failed worldwide in the 20th century when the West was much more militarily dominant. What makes you think the East would stand for Western domination again?

**Kedar:** Well, we’ve identified the problem. I have what I call the hard solution and the soft solution. Both call for domination of the East by Western ideals for the benefit of both; the difference is in who does the dominating. In the hard solution it is Western powers like Britain, the EU or the US; in the soft, local true democratic governments inspired by the Western model. The problem with colonialism was that it was entirely motivated by economic concerns. My new solution—be it hard or soft—is inspired by the desire to preserve and promote the superior Western way of life. Without some such solution, we know what will happen: the dregs of the East will immigrate to the West, allowed by the West because it will need a labor force. And because their birthrates are substantially higher than those of Western populations, the former will overrun the latter. Democracy will die. Today there is England, there is the West, there is hope, there is a point in living; tomorrow it will be all India, solely the East, there will hardly be any hope, hardly any point in living.

**Ram:** Ahem, before you cry in your cup about your beloved England, let me just finish what I started to say: I don’t think the East of today so neatly fits the family model. Let’s start with education. In ancient India, students coming of age, their heads ritually shaved, used to go apprentice with a Guru who was like a father figure to them. Education followed the family model. Contrast that with students these days who go study in the West and if not study at Indian IT’s modeled on Western universities like MIT. The authoritarianism of rote-learning is increasingly being phased out. The number of engineers turned out by Indian and Chinese colleges—a key barometer of a nation’s progress—is rivaling those graduating from American colleges.

**Kedar:** You don’t know man. You didn’t go to school here. Rote-learning isn’t being phased out: memorization, not any ‘Socratic analysis’, is how students cram for their 10th grade exams here. In fact, I would invert Socrates’ quote: in
India, education is the ‘filing of a vessel not the kindling of a flame’. It’s terrible: these exams determine the whole course of life of the 10th graders, from what career they will follow to how affluent they will be. Many commit suicide from the pressure. The rote-learning from unquestioned authorities, the channeling of too young minds into narrow career-paths all suffocate freedom. India is just one big, not-so-happy family.

**Ram:** I got one word to say to that: competition. The East faces competition from the West whether in the educational field or the corporate world. Business schools—always at the forefront of productivity debates—used to favor the Eastern, in particular the Japanese model of conformism, but where is Japan today? The family model has been replaced by software campuses. It is intellectual honesty, free and open interaction that produces today’s iphones and ipads. Economic competition will force the East to adopt the Western model if it hasn’t already.

**Kedar:** Again, your cock-eyed optimism focuses on a very narrow segment of Indian society. The lower classes don’t live like that.

**Ram:** My optimism isn’t so wild-eyed. Did you know my cook’s son is a wiz at computers. He even helped me with my laptop when I was having some problems.

Indians, in general, just love gadgets. You know how widespread mobiles have become here. You’ll see: as computers become cheaper and more portable, they will follow. And the internet is the key to spreading the gospel of networking, of Western-styled democracy. Look what’s happening through facebook and twitter with democratic movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya.

**Kedar:** What’s happening there is definitely interesting. It in some ways exemplifies what I call the soft solution: true democracies arising locally by cultural currents from the West. But I don’t think it will work where it most needs to work: in India and China, the two threats most on the lips of your American politicians.

**Ram:** Why not?

**Kedar:** For one thing, they’re both ancient civilizations—their egos would get in the way of too wholesale an adoption of foreign values. Look at the glorification of regional heroes like Shivaji, the Hindu warrior king everything in Maharashtra seems named after. Do you think his followers will ever launch your facebook revolution?
The paradoxical thing is even the suicide-bomber has a love-hate relationship with the Western culture he’s out to destroy. The Muslim youth, the Hindu Shivaji-sainik, often admires Western racists like Hitler for their racism. He understands their appeal for racial unity. Moreover he envies Western success and hates the West for excluding him from membership in its club. Gandhi, for example, had his life-changing event when he was thrown off a train in South Africa. Nehru’s nationalism was hardened when he was denied membership in a club in India because he wasn’t European.

The resistance to cultural influence from the West is not only ego, it’s also an inferiority complex. Maybe it’s ego in the fanatical movements’ leaders and inferiority complex, which the leaders exploit, among the troops on the ground.

Ram: Interesting insight…though not being a fanatic, I don’t really know if it’s true. But tell me, with such differing psychological motives, are the leaders visions being realized by the troops on the ground?

Kedar: Not really. Gandhi for example has been an immense failure. One reason he wanted the British out of India, was because they were capitalists, industrialists. Gandhi was an agrarian; he wanted India to return to its villages. He saw the industrialization in the West as thwarting man’s true purpose: to reach God, which Indians could best do in their villages. Asked what he thought of Western civilization, he laconically replied, “That would be a good idea.”

It’s the same with other national heroes. If Shivaji were alive today, he would cut off the hands of today’s Indians for their thieving ways, just as he used to when he ruled.

It’s not surprising really but it’s surprising how often we’re surprised by mass movements reverting to their base impulses after the leaders who briefly tapped into them, die off. What’s needed is for the troops on the ground to be shaped by a leader’s visions and this is impossible to do within the span of one leader’s life. It requires centuries of history to shape a single human mind, history which the West has had. A Briton once said, “You had just one Gandhi; our average man is like Gandhi: honest, sincere, disciplined, conscientious”.

Ram: Hmm. I’m reminded of another Gandhi quote: “I like your Christ. I don’t like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” Earlier you’d observed that I make the mistake of taking the cream of Eastern society as representative of the whole. I think you’re making a similar mistake here, taking the cream of Western society as representative. Maybe we both need to see more clearly the other’s majority, to see why the cream in both cases is not the crop.
**Kedar:** You can see the Eastern crop quite readily in the Bombay underworld, whose influence is spread all the way through Dubai, Pakistan, Malaysia... The rich in Bombay from actors to industrialists to businessmen all kowtow to people like Dawood Ibrahim, the crime boss who got his start with an illicit electronics shop his policeman father set up for him. Did you know he was number 4 on the Forbes 2008 list of the world’s 10 most-wanted criminals, and number 50 on the Forbes 2009 list of the world’s most powerful people?

The Bombay underworld didn’t exist under the British. The lion doesn’t tolerate the hyena encroaching on his territory.

**Ram:** But an underworld, a mafia, exists in all Western democracies.

**Kedar:** Maybe authoritarian governments are needed in the West also. Look, I don’t care what kind of government rules a country. It can be a democracy or a military dictatorship; whatever it is, it should promote Western values of civility. Indian politicians are not motivated by such lofty ideals; all they want is money or sex. Did you know the typical Indian politician gets sex from virgins when he visits the ashrams of destitute girls?

**Ram:** That’s not far different from Kennedy’s using the Secret Service to procure mistresses for himself. And look at the sex scandals in Italy.

**Kedar:** You can draw your parallels but the fact remains: people, life, in Western countries is civilized. In the East civility is missing and must be imported from the outside. Cultural influence is too slow. The East will overrun the West before the West ever civilizes the East by what I’ve termed the soft-solution. What’s needed is the hard solution: a military takeover of the East by the West.

**Ram:** Surely you’re joking. The East, India and especially China, have stockpiles of nuclear weapons. A third world war would probably mean annihilation for the human species.

**Kedar:** Well, the third world could be responsible for the third world war. But to tell the truth I don’t think that’s the optimum or even the realistic solution. What’s needed is a domination of the East by the West to such an extent that the East will eventually surrender or lose control of its own governance.

**Ram:** You’re being a little vague though from the sound of things I’m a little fearful of what you will say if being clear.

**Kedar:** I agree that an actual third world war would be catastrophic but maybe all that’s needed is the threat of war...something like how the U.S. beat Russia in the cold war. Of course, there would be differences because, after all, what’s
needed is a military victory, a control of the East by the West, which has no analogy in the cold war. It’s kind of like chess: the king is checkmated not removed from the board like the other pieces. There is no war but an encirclement leading to victory.

**Ram:** You speak of the East and West as monolithic blocks. There is no East and West. There are diverse people in different countries, each with their own interests, ideologies and idioms.

**Kedar:** But the blocks are forming. It’s like how ice forms in a pond. It doesn’t just start in one place. The process is underway throughout. In the West, you have nations congealing like the ice, the EU for example which, as time goes on, will join forces with the U.S. and Australia and even Russia. They’re already a part of NATO. You have to ask yourself why these alliances are forming and why countries like India and China are excluded from them. They’re excluded ultimately because of cultural and ideological differences. Like the family vs. academia, which we talked about earlier, the differences between the East and West encourage unification within each camp and conflict without.

Moreover, I don’t simply see blocks. Each nation has its own curious role to play in the drama about to unfold: the U.S. traditionally safe from the fray, separated by a vast ocean, can call the shots from a distance; Japan can be the role model for the East as far as the West is concerned; Pakistan, the West’s dog who doesn’t fear being beaten, is and can be an ideal front for the West; China is the wildcard because it is so powerful and because there is no telling who she’ll side with in a war between India and the West.

**Ram:** I think China is the wildcard as far many world projections are concerned. Does it remain the bulwark and propagator of communism or does it succumb to capitalism and democracy? You of course are suggesting another way in which it’s a wildcard.

**Kedar:** Yes China might help the West if it perceives it as being in its own interest or it may stay neutral retreating into itself as China of old.

Either way it will be a glorious conflict.

**Ram:** At this rate, the world might well end in 2012.