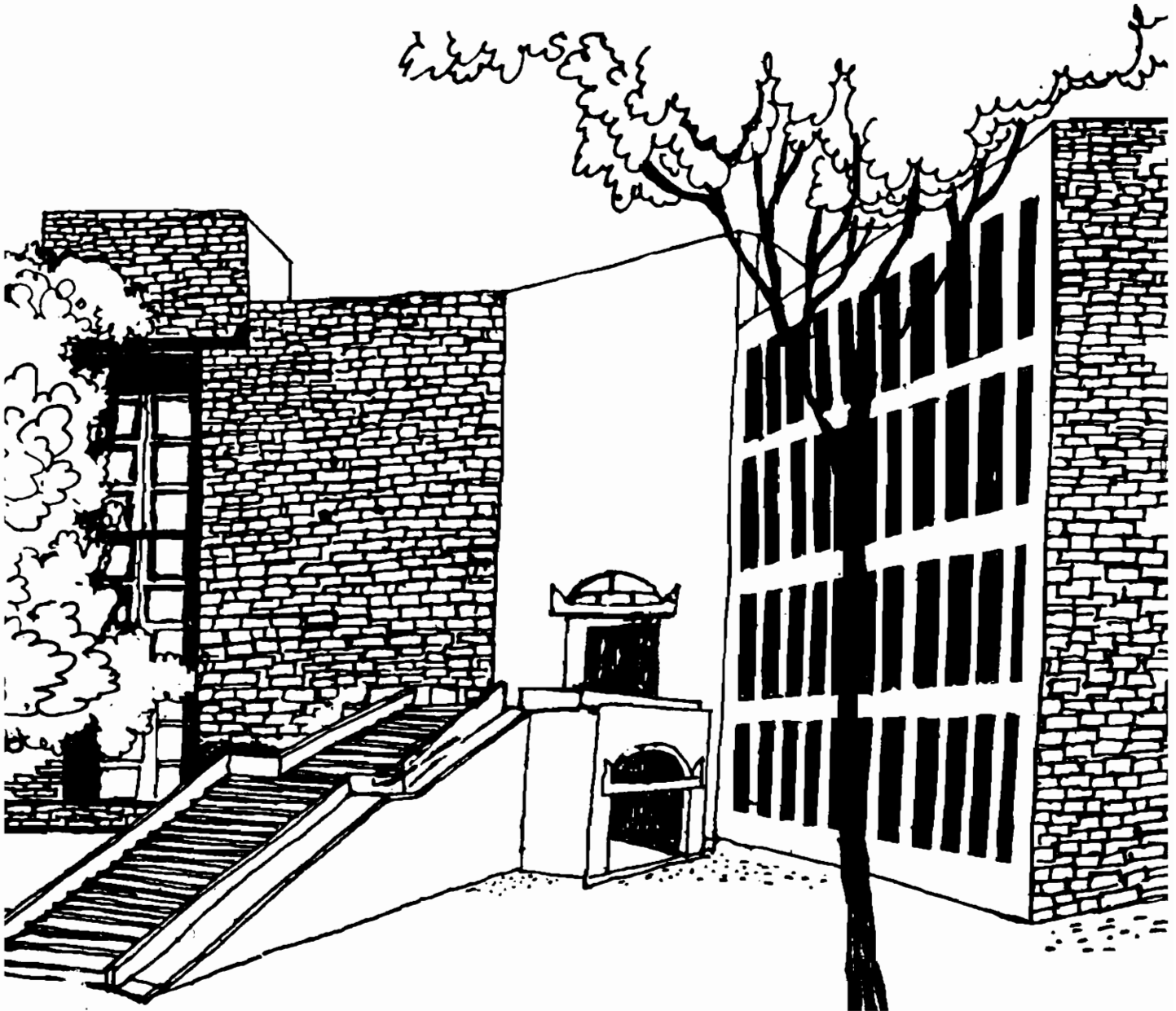




विद्याविनियोगादिकासः  
IIIMC  
AHMEDABAD

# Working Paper




# **The Quest for a Universal Morality: Jurgen Habermas and Sri Aurobindo**

**Ananta Giri**  
Visiting Faculty  
Ravi Matthai Center for Educational Innovation

W.P. No. **1134**  
August 1993

The main objective of the working paper series of the IIMA is to help faculty members to test out their research findings at the pre-publication stage

WP1134  
  
WP  
1993  
(1134)

**Indian Institute of Management  
Ahmedabad**

W.P 11321

**PURCHASED**  
**APPROVAL**  
**GRATIS/EXCHANGE** R & P  
PRICE Committee  
**ACC NO.**  
**VIKRAM SARABHAI LIBRARY**  
**E. M. AHMEDABAD**

## **The Quest for a Universal Morality: Jurgen Habermas and Sri Aurobindo**

"I think there are a few aspects of contemporary civilization where the structural noncontemporaneity (or synchronism) of different sectors of sociocultural development is more striking than in the dimension of conventional morals, especially if it is compared or confronted with the actual requirements of a common and joint responsibility for the global consequences of human activities....What we need today is indeed a universally valid ethics for the whole of humankind, but that does not mean that we need an ethics that would prescribe a uniform style of life for all individuals or for all different sociocultural forms of life."

*-Karl-Otto Apel (1991: 261).*

"[The self is] conscious of its ideal universality that can distinguish value from appetites, pleasures and selfish interests and can become the moral subject....The order of our social world is that of value-based norms arising ultimately from the idea of the person as the supreme value. The being or reality of person is in self-consciousness which contains within itself a tension between ideality and actuality....Correspondingly the categories relevant to the comprehension of social reality can only be definitions of norms based upon value which itself is truly apprehended in terms of self-enlightenment."

*-G.C. Pande (1982: 113-115).*

"Moral universalism is a historical result... . To be sure the gradual embodiment of moral principles in concrete forms of life is not something that can safely be left to Hegel's absolute spirit. Rather, it is chiefly a function of collective efforts and sacrifices made by sociopolitical movements."

*-Jurgen Habermas (1990a: 208).*

### **The Problem**

Globalization is one of the main signs of our times. Our contemporary moment is characterized not only by a global interpenetration of cultures but also by the globalization of our everyday lives. With the help of modern science and new technologies, we are able to annihilate space and time. Social, political and economic processes in our contemporary world break down our boundaries and insularities, compelling us to participate in a global flow of culture and consciousness. In the evocative words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, "foreignness doesn't [now] start at the water's edge but at the skin's" (Geertz 1986: 112). The globalization of our lives and the rise of a transnational world pose enormous moral questions both within a particular society and in its relationship with another. To begin with, "...moral issues stemming from cultural diversity...that used to arise mainly between societies now increasingly arise within them" (Geertz 1986: 115). As cultures and societies

participate in a global flow of consciousness, their ways of worldmaking and institutional bases are increasingly subject to a moral critique, which originates from a "view from afar" of a more meaningful "good life" that has been made possible here on earth. Globalization of our condition provides us a glimpse of a more meaningful "good life" in another society, an experience and knowledge of which provides us a global vantage point both to appreciate and criticize our own taken for granted institutions and traditions. At the contemporary phase of globalization, it is difficult to insulate our cultural frames and institutional mores from the moralizing gaze born of this global awareness.

While the emergence of a transnational world in the domains of economics and politics is relatively more pronounced today, with the rise of transnational corporations, and movements embodying a transnational ethos, its evolution in the field of culture and consciousness leaves much to be desired. While our contemporary global existence urgently calls for "certain readjustment in both our rhetorical habits and our sense of mission" (Geertz 1986: 119), our culture and consciousness is still bound to the conventional morals of state and society. It is perhaps for this reason that political theorist William Connolly writes: "...globalization of contingency is the defining mark of late modernity, but unfortunately our reflection on issues posed by this condition is shifted to the margins of state-centered political discourse" (Connolly 1991: 25). At the same time, there is an increasing realisation in many of us that "...conventional morals...can no longer cope with the new challenges of human responsibility for the distant consequences of our action" (Apel 1991: 261). Philosopher Apel best articulates this sensibility:

"Thus it appears that in both dimensions of cultural evolution, namely that of technological interventions in nature and of social interaction, a global situation has been brought about in our time that calls for a new ethics of shared responsibility, in other words, for a type of ethics that, in contradistinction to traditional or conventional form of ethics, may be designated a (planetary) macroethics" (Apel 1991: 264).

While globalization of our contemporary condition calls for a planetary macroethics and a universal morality, developments within individual social systems simply mock at them. Our contemporary phase of social evolution, name it modernization or postmodernization is characterized as it was bound to be by pervasive structural differentiations. In the words of Habermas, "morality gets no clear status in the construction of a structurally differentiated lifeworld" (Habermas 1987a: 92) [1]. Insightful critics of contemporary advanced societies such as sociologist Robert Bellah argue that our contemporary "institutional dilemmas" are primarily "moral dilemmas" (Bellah et al. 1991: 38). Bellah and his colleagues tell us that Americans now have to articulate a new moral language to think about their institutions as they are now ridden with "unprecedented problems" (Bellah et al. 1991: 42). In the face of the challenges of the present and the dislocations of the postindustrial transition Bellah et al. argue that now there is an urgency to think of "democracy as an ongoing moral quest" not simply as a political process--"as an end state" (Bellah et al. 1991: 20). They plead for a new "moral ecology" to think creatively about institutions--their predicament and possibility--since "the decisions that are made about our economy, our schools, our government, or our national position in the world cannot be separated from the way we live in practical terms, the moral life we lead as a people" (Bellah et al. 1991: 42; emphasis added) [2].

The imperative for a moral grounding of our institutions can be better understood by a critical reflection on two examples of persistent social conflicts that Habermas discusses in one of his recent papers (Habermas 1990b). The first is the persistent question of poverty and disadvantage in advanced industrial societies. For Habermas while in the classical phase of capitalism capital and labour could

threaten each other for pursuing their interests, today "this is no longer the case" (Habermas 1990b: 19). Now the underprivileged can make their predicament known only through a "protest vote" but "without the electoral support of a majority of citizens...problems of this nature do not even have enough driving force to be adopted as a topic of broad and effective public debate" (ibid: 20). In this situation, a moral consciousness diffusing the entire public sphere is the only way. As Habermas argues: "A dynamic self-correction cannot be set in motion without introducing morals into the debate, without universalizing interests from a normative point of view" (ibid: 20). The same imperative also confronts us in addressing our contemporary global problems such as environmental disaster, world poverty, and the inequality between the North and the South. It is "clear that the increasing gap between the First and the Third world raises some of the most difficult moral questions of the modern world" (Hosle 1992: 229). Habermas also argues that in addressing these problems we need a moral perspective. In the words of Habermas:

"These problems can only be brought to a head by rethinking topics morally, by universalizing interests in a more or less discursive forms... . The moral or ethical point of view makes us quicker to perceive the more far-reaching, and simultaneously less insistent and more fragile, ties that bind the fate of an individual to that of every other-making even the most alien person a member of one's community" (ibid: 20).

The imperative for a moral point of view in thinking about ourselves and thinking through our problems, necessitated by the developments within our social systems and the rise of a transnational world, is paralleled by what can be called a restructuring of moral theory. Morality in the sociological and anthropological discourse has been looked upon as a construction of culture and as an appendage to social norms. In the conventional sense, moral development means learning the norms of a particular culture. But such a notion of morality and moral development ignores the question of the Being and the universal issue of justice, well-being and freedom. In this context psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg speaks of a "post-conventional" stage of moral development when the individual differentiates "his or her self from the rules and expectations of others and defines his or her values in terms of self-chosen ethical principles" (Cortese 1990: 20).

The unease with strict sociologism that the idea of a "post-conventional" morality embodies is paralleled by efforts in political discourse and moral philosophy to break away from a strictly politicized view of morality. For Edelman western philosophical tradition from Plato to Hobbes, and even unto Rawls, is characterized by what he calls "politicization of morality"--"the attempt to derive moral principles from...political considerations" (Edelman 1990: 108). In such traditions "the *raison d'être* of moral practices" lies "in the limitation or adjudication of conflict among men" (ibid: 8). In such accounts of morality "the purpose of moral practices is to secure and maintain for men mutually advantageous social arrangements" and "the content of 'morality'...is a product of the requirements of the 'polis'" (ibid: 9). But Edelman argues that

"In none of the accounts of morality belonging to this tradition are the needs, interest and desires whose satisfaction is at issue themselves characterized as specifically 'moral' needs, interests or desires. That is to say, we do not begin with any moral discrimination concerning them. The conception of morality at the root of these accounts itself rules out that possibility. Morality here is simply the means of escape from, or the means of keeping free of, that predicament characterized by conflict and the frustration of desire, a predicament that would inevitably ensue were 'morality' not allowed to do its work" (ibid).

For Edelman, the politicization of morality removes the "inner life from the sphere of the moral" and "makes it impossible to articulate proper moral concepts" (ibid: 53). In this context of the pervasive discourse of the "politicization of morality" Edelman pleads for articulating an adequate language of morality where "it will no longer be conceived of as a satisfaction of individual interests" and a servant of the "polis"; instead the "polis" will be a servant of justice and morality. This requires a break from

the discourse of politicized morality and to realize that the source of morality lies in morality itself. For Edelman, the idea of a common good which is not simply an aggregation of individual interests or a sum total of aggregated interests but a "metaphysical" conception is important for an adequate conceptualization of morality and the required quest for its embodiment.

The present paper looks into the issue of universal morality in the context of this structural and discursive restructuring. The paper critically examines the work of the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas and the Indian spiritual prophet Sri Aurobindo from the point of view of the discourse of morality and its universal import.

### **The Quest for a Universal Morality: Linguistification of the Sacred and the Agenda of "Discourse Ethics"**

Habermas argues that at the contemporary juncture where the Sacred no longer has the unquestioned authority that it once had, morality can no longer be grounded in religion. Rather it has to emerge out of and be anchored in a process of rational argumentation where the actors participate in undistorted communication as members of a community of discourse. To understand Habermas's moral theory, we have to understand his perspective on social evolution, which following Durkheim and Parsons, is mainly characterized by structural differentiation and the "uncoupling of the System and the Life World" (Habermas 1987a; also Habermas 1979). For Habermas, the rise of the public sphere of rational argumentation and rationally-motivated communicative action goes hand in hand with the relocation of the sacred from the domain of the "Unspeakable" to our everyday world of language, making it both an object and medium of our ordinary conversation. Habermas's moral theory has to be understood in this evolutionary framework of the "Linguistification of the Sacred" (Habermas 1987) and the "Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" (Habermas 1989). Habermas describes for us:

"The disenchantment and disempowering of the domain of the sacred takes place by way of a linguistification of the ritually secured, basic normative agreement; going along with this is a release of the rationality potential in communicative action. The aura of rapture and the tenor that emanates from the sacred, the spellbinding power of the holy, is sublimated into the binding / bonding force of criticizable validity claims and at the same time turned into everyday occurrence" (Habermas 1987a: 77).

Habermas, further, tells us about the implications of such an evolutionary shift:

"Norm-guided interaction changes in structure to the degree that functions of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization pass from the domain of the sacred over to that of everyday communicative practice. In the process, the religious community that made social cooperation possible is transformed into a communicative community striving under the pressure to cooperate" (ibid: 91).

Habermas argues that any agenda of morality in modern society inevitably faces this challenge of the decline of the sacred and the creation of the new linguistic and public spheres for the search for meaning. At the same time, Habermas argues that morality, anchored in and emerging out of the rational arguments of participants in discourse, can fill the void created by the demise of the sacred order. Habermas argues: "...only a morality, set communicative aflow and developed into a discourse ethics, can replace the authority of the sacred...In this morality we find dissolved the archaic core of the normative, we see developed the rational meaning of normative validity" (ibid: 122).

### **Towards a Rational Society**

The idea of a rational society and an "ideal communication community" is central to Habermas's agenda of morality. For Habermas, "the projection of an ideal communication community serves as

a guiding thread for setting up discourses" (ibid: 95). Those who participate in this communication community have an urge to participate in not only communication but also in a discursive transformation, where "in the relationship between the Self and the Other there is a basic moment of insight" (ibid). Habermas quotes George Herbert Mead, whose work he values a lot and whom he considers as one of the main inspirations for his theory of communicative action, programmatically: "What is essential to communication is that the symbol should arouse in oneself what it arouses in the other individual" (ibid: 15). Habermas tells us: "I think all of us feel that one must be ready to recognize the interests of others even when they run counter to our own, but the person who does that does not really sacrifice himself, but becomes a larger self" (ibid: 94; emphasis added).

But Habermas' ideal of a rational society must not be confused with a technological society where the Cartesian reason reigns supreme. Habermas's agenda is a profound critique of modern positivism, scientism and technological determinism. Expressing his nostalgia for the classical integration of theory and practice and his abhorrence towards its divorce under the regime of modern positivism Habermas tells us: "While in the classical Natural Law the norms of moral and just action are equally oriented in their content toward the good-and that means the virtuous life of the citizens, the formal law of the modern age is divested of the catalogues of duties in the material order of life, whether of a city or of a social class. Instead, it allows a neutral sphere of personal choice, in which every citizen, as a private person can egoistically follow goals of maximizing his own needs" (Habermas 1973: 84).

### **From Categorical Imperative to the Discursive Formation of Will**

It is the participation in a "wider common world of rational beings" that makes morality a matter of public discourse and enables it [i.e. morality] to replace the "[Kantian]categorical imperative with a procedure of discursive will-formation" (Habermas 1987a: 94). For many commentators, such as philosopher Thomas McCarthy, "In his approach to moral theory Habermas is closest to the Kantian tradition" (McCarthy in Habermas 1990a: vii). "Like Kant Habermas distinguishes the type of practical reasoning and corresponding types of 'ought' proper to questions about what is practically expedient, ethically prudent, and morally right" (ibid: vii). Both for Kant and Habermas, "calculations of rational choice generate recommendations relevant to the pursuit of contingent purposes in the light of given preferences," and "when serious questions of value arise, deliberation on who one is, and who one wants to be, yields ethical advice concerning the good life" (ibid). Like Kant, Habermas understands "practical reason as universal in import: it is geared to what everyone could rationally will to be a norm binding on everyone else" (ibid). But there is as much discontinuity between Habermas and Kant as there is continuity. As McCarthy helps us to understand this: "His discourse ethics, however, replaces Kant's categorical imperative with a procedure of moral argumentation...This shifts the frame of reference from Kant's solitary, reflecting moral consciousness to the community of moral subjects in dialogue" (ibid: viii).

In order to understand Habermas's agenda of morality and the practice of "discourse ethics" that makes it possible, we have to understand Habermas's view that an urge for justification of norms that guide individual action is very much part of being human. Though Habermas is dismissive of questions of ontology he proceeds with two basic assumptions about man, viz. that she has a need for communication and an urge for justification [3]. Habermas argues: "from the perspective of first persons, what we consider justified is not a function of custom but a question of justification or grounding" (Habermas 1990a: 20). This universal need for justification has a special manifestation in modern social systems. For Habermas all norms have now "at least in principle lost their customary validity" which makes the need for justification all the more urgent in modern societies (Habermas 1988: 227). The idea of morality has to be understood in the context of both this specific and general need for justification. The procedure of rational argumentation, which is the other name for "discourse ethics", fulfills this need of and for the "discursive redemption of normative claims to validity" (Habermas 1990a: 103).



## **Taking a Hypothetical Attitude to Culture**

For Habermas, the procedure of rational (moral) argumentation enables the participants to take a hypothetical attitude to their own form of life, which nonetheless presents itself as the best possible form of "good life" [4]. For Habermas, "practical issues" are issues of "good life," which in the form of "ethical formalism" has a "literal" incisiveness not only in the "totality of a particular form of life" but also in the "totality of an individual life history" (ibid: 104). In this context, "Individuals who have been socialized cannot take a hypothetical attitude toward the form of life and the personal life history that have shaped their own identity" (ibid). It is here that participation in the procedure of practical discourse serves as a redeeming process. First of all, it breaks the illusion of the "good life" that has been associated with a particular form of life by the force of custom and habit. The procedure of moral argumentation subjects the self-proclaimed goodness of a particular form of life to a critique from the point of view of justice. While the formal ethics of a society binds us to its order and scheme of evaluation, discourse ethics breaks this bondage and enables us to understand our own self as well as the validity of our culture from the point of view of not only culturally prescribed norms of righteousness but also from the point of view of justice. Habermas tells us that "the universalization principle [of practical discourse] acts like a knife that makes razor-sharp cuts between evaluative statements, and strictly normative ones, between the good and the just" (ibid: 104).

Habermas makes two crucial distinctions: one, between the taken-for-granted goodness of society and the challenge of universal justice and the other between ethics and morality. While ethics and the taken-for-granted goodness of a society are natural attributes of a form of life, morality is a matter of conscious deliberation and enlightened "discursive formation of will". For Habermas, the ethical life is not usually subject to a discursive critique, and for the most part remains unproblematic. However, the development of a moral point of view, for Habermas, "goes hand in hand with a differentiation within the practical into moral questions and evaluative questions" (ibid: 108). In this context, it is a theory of justice that is central to Habermas's idea of morality. Thomas McCarthy helps us to understand this: "If taking modern pluralism seriously means giving up the idea that philosophy can single out a privileged way of life..., it does not in Habermas' view, preclude a general theory of a much narrower sort, namely a theory of justice" (ibid: viii).

## **A Thrust Towards Problematization**

It is this concern for justice that creates an incessant thrust towards problematization, laying bare the moral problems within our taken-for-granted culture. For Habermas, a "thrust toward problematization" is essential for moral consciousness to emerge and to be at work in the context of the life world (ibid: 107). Habermas tells us how in the normal circumstances of what he calls "ethical formalism" this problematization is not possible. In his words:

"Within the horizon of the life world, practical judgments derive both their concreteness and their power to motivate action from their inner connection to unquestioningly accepted ideas of the good life, in short, from their connection to ethical life and its institutions. Under these conditions, problematization can never be so profound as to risk all the assets of the existing ethical life. But the abstractive achievements required by the moral point of view do precisely that" (ibid: 109).

Participation in discourse ethics enables the participants to look at one's own culture critically, where criticism means discovering whether the "suggested modes of togetherness genuinely hang together" or not (See Neville 1974: 189). For Habermas, the practice of discourse ethics is an instance of both self-criticism (facilitated by and accompanying self-discovery) and cultural criticism. As a total critique, practical discourse is "linked with two other forms of argumentation: aesthetic and therapeutic criticism" (ibid: 105). Habermas argues that "for the hypothesis-testing participant in a discourse, the relevance of the experiential context of his lifeworld tends to pale. To him, the normativity of existing

Institutions seems just as open to question as the objectivity of things and events" (ibid: 107). At this stage, "moral judgment becomes dissociated from the local conventions and the historical coloration of a form of life. It can no longer appeal to the naive validity of the context of the life world" (ibid: 109).

However while describing the thrust towards problematization Habermas himself acknowledges that culture is no mere convention. In another context, Indian philosopher G.C. Pande has argued that cultural consciousness is characterized primarily by the actors' seeking for value and the quest for self-transcendence. For G.C. Pande, "The idea of culture...is the idea of an autonomous order of values, of ideal modes of self-realization. Cultural apprehension begins with the discrimination of the ideal and the actual where the ideal is necessarily presented or expressed through a symbol" (Pande 1985: 11). In this perspective, cultural items are items "in an evolving context of meaning that is to say items in the quest of self-realization" (Pande 1989: 20). Though Habermas reserves this critical attribute of self-realization and transcendence to moral consciousness, he himself realizes that "cultural values too transcend de facto behaviour...through which subjects can distinguish the good life from the reproduction of mere life" (ibid: 208). But ordinarily it is the established convention of society which shapes "the identities of groups and individuals in such a way" that even the culturally constituted idea of a "good life" is not what moves the actors. It is in this context that "discourse ethics" performs a redemptive and transformative function. For Habermas, "Under the unrelenting moralizing gaze of the participants in discourse...familiar institutions can be transformed into so many instances of problematic justice" (ibid: 108) [5].

### **Critical Discussion of the Idea of Discourse Ethics: Habermas's Self-Criticism**

Habermas argues that the abstractive requirements in discourse ethics provide actors a cognitive advantage--a capacity for distanciation. But this cognitive distanciation is not enough either for the practice of discourse ethics or for the quest for universal morality. It calls for parallel emotional maturity and growth. Habermas argues that "cognition, empathy, and agape" must be integrated in our moral consciousness especially when we are engaged in the "hermeneutic activity of applying universal norms in a context-sensitive manner" (ibid: 182). Thus Habermas argues, reminding us of Christian imperatives for love and care, that "concern for the fate of one's neighbour is a necessary emotional prerequisite for the cognitive operations expected of participants in discourse" (ibid). This integration of cognitive distanciation and emotional care is particularly required when the initial separation between morality and ethical life is to be overcome. Habermas is aware of the difficulties that this separation poses for the practice of morality. Thus he is not content to leave his agenda only at the "deontological level" like Kant. He is interested to bring back morality as a guide for action and reflection into practice. Habermas himself writes: "Moral issues are never raised for their own sake; people raise them by seeking a guide for action. For this reason the demotivated solutions that postconventional morality finds for decontextualized issues must be reinserted into practical life. If it is to become effective in practice, morality has to make up for the loss of concrete ethical life that it incurred when it pursued a cognitive advantage" (ibid: 179). Thus it is "an integration of cognitive operations and emotional dispositions and attitude" that characterizes "the mature capacity for moral judgment" (ibid: 182).

Moral consciousness is characterized by an integration of the "ethics of love and ethics of justice" (ibid). What is required for moral consciousness is not only an "ability to think hypothetically about moral-practical issues" (ibid: 186) but an appropriate emotional growth. Thus Habermas himself writes: "even if the passage to the postconventional level of moral judgment has been successful, an inadequate motivational anchoring can restrict one's ability to act autonomously" (ibid: 183). Though a notion of universal human justice is central to Habermas' idea of universal morality Habermas himself takes great care to emphasize that morality must obey both the principles of justice and solidarity. While the first "postulates equal respect and equal rights for the individual," the second "postulates empathy and concern for the well-being of one's neighbour" (ibid: 200). For Habermas, these cannot be pursued in an either / or fashion in our moral engagement. Habermas writes: "It is

an imperative to see that both principles have the same and the one root: the specific vulnerability of human species, which individuates itself through socialization. Morality thus cannot protect the one without the other. It cannot protect the rights of the individual without also protecting the well-being of the community to which he belongs" (ibid). What is important to note is that both these concerns, for Habermas, "should flow from an adequate description of the highest stage of morality itself" (ibid: 182).

### **Concern for Solidarity and the Work of "Connected Criticism"**

In the Habermasian agenda the concern for solidarity and community has as much a transformative potential as the concern for the cognitive distancing. It is this concern that enables the passage of "return" to society from the initial phase of "withdrawal" from the world of taken-for-granted norms and social orders, to borrow the words of Toynbee. It is this concern for community that creates an incessant urge within the seekers and practitioners of morality to engage themselves in a continuous conversation with the fellow members of their society as a "connected critic," where a critic "earns his authority or fail to do so by arguing with his fellows" (Walzer 1988: 33). Recently Michael Walzer has described for us the practice and challenge of what he calls "connected criticism," which is not possible by a one-sided pursuit of cognitive distancing, which at best can make us "marginal men" (ibid: 32). It is not the marginal man but a "connected critic," who practices an integration of ethics of love and ethics of justice, that can act as a regenerative seed of transformation since, as Walzer rightly tells us, "marginal men and women are like Simmel's strangers in but not wholly of their society. The difficulties they experience are not difficulties of detachment but of ambiguous connection" (ibid: 32). The critical consciousness that characterizes Habermas's ideal stage of morality is one of "connected criticism."

The significance of "connected criticism" for our needed moral unity in the face of diversity of morals that characterize the human condition must be appreciated. "Connected criticism" makes possible criticism "from within a tradition" and "this possibility of transcendence from within is what holds out the prospect of moral unity" (Mohanty 1989: 148). J.N. Mohanty helps us understand this. What Walzer calls "connected criticism" is similar to what Mohanty calls "transcendence from within." In the words of Mohanty,

"The diversity of morals concerns each tradition's own *Sittlichkeit* [a Hegelian word, meaning ethical standards]. The unity consists in the possibility on the part of each member of that tradition to rise above an unreflexive immersion in that ethical substance, and to critically reflect on its internal coherence from an external point of view... . As a person, situated in time and history, I belong to a tradition which has already defined for me the parameters of my ethical life.... But, for that reason, to say that I can at most try to 'understand' it, but can never be a critic, goes against my moral intuitions. In order to be a critic of my tradition, I need, in some measure to transcend it-while still, as a person I belong to it. I play the dual role of a person and a transcendental ego" (ibid: 146; emphasis added).

### **Towards Hermeneutic Supplements**

**VIKRAM SARABHAI LIBRARY  
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT  
VASTRAPUR, AHMEDABAD-380015**

Habermas begins his agenda of discourse ethics with the frank admittance that its strategy of practical discourse is only a procedure. But towards the end of his treatise, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Habermas himself tells us that "discourse ethics, though organized around a concept of procedure, can be expected to say something relevant about substance, more important perhaps about the hidden link between justice and the common good" (Habermas 1990a: 202).

Habermas is also aware of the limitations of "discourse ethics." To begin with, Habermas himself writes that "...the discursive justification of norms is no guarantor of moral insights" (ibid: 209). Moreover, "discourse cannot by itself insure that the conditions necessary for all concerned are met"

(ibid). Discourse ethics also requires an appropriate institutional climate, where institutions facilitate human creativity rather than constrain it (See Unger 1987). When material living condition is not adequate and when individuals are plagued by "poverty, abuse, and degradation" it is difficult to pursue the quest for universal morality (ibid). Habermas clearly argues that the incidence of a universal morality is "contingent upon a complimentary form of life" (ibid: 210).

For Habermas, The quest for morality confronts the actors with two crucial challenges: how to apply universal moral norms in specific situations and how to anchor moral insights in our motivational Being. For Habermas, "these two problems can be solved only when moral judgment is supplemented by something else: hermeneutic effort and internalization of authority" (ibid: 179). The authority to be internalized here is not the authority of the existing systems and naturalized conventions. Rather it is the authority of universal moral insights, born of the practice of "discourse ethics" [6]. Moreover this internalization ought to be reflective, which helps the actors not only to build the creative bridge between the universal and the particular but also saves them from the danger of turning their insights into a dogma [7]. Hermeneutic effort, indeed, provides such crucial reflexivity. For Habermas, hermeneutics is a practical communicative skill as well as a "reflexive engagement" (Habermas 1987c). The hermeneutic engagement not only enables the actors to understand and "making oneself understood" in one's natural language but also to "translate from any language to any language" (ibid: 177). For Habermas, the basis of this reflexivity and translation is the fact that "every natural language has its own meta-language" (ibid). This "reflexive structure of natural language" provides the native speaker with a "unique metacommunicative" skill which not only enables one to understand distant traditions but also at times exposes "the already understood context of one's own world" as being "incomprehensible" and "questionable" (Habermas 1990a: 176).

If such is the hermeneutic claim to universality and its redemptive role in transforming strictly conceived cognitively distanced view of universal morality then what role does pragmatics play? For Habermas, communicative competence that is at the root of speech has "as universal core as linguistic competence" (McCarthy in Habermas 1979: xviii). The task of universal pragmatics is to make us aware of the universal import in speech as it reconstructs "the ability of adult speakers to embed situation in relation to reality" (ibid: 68). While comprehensibility is the criterion of validity of grammatical sentence, the validity of a speech depends upon "whether it is true or untrue, justified or unjustified, truthful or untruthful, because in speech, no matter what the emphasis, grammatical sentences are embedded in relation to reality in such a way that in an acceptable speech action segments of external nature, society, and internal nature always come into appearance together" (ibid).

Habermas uses both hermeneutics and pragmatics to lay the blocks of universal morality. This universal morality, though embedded in language and speech and an extension of the universal import embedded in these two communicative practices, is critical, reflexive and postconventional. In developing his idea of universal morality Habermas has been influenced by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's seminal work on moral development. However, compared to Kohlberg, Habermas stresses more on stages of reflection as crucial to understanding different stages of moral development as he writes: "the relevant distinction is concerned solely in terms of the stages of reflection" (Habermas 1990a: 172). At the highest stage of moral development, which Kohlberg calls postconventional, Habermas argues that internal nature is thereby moved into a "utopian perspective" (Habermas 1979: 93). At this stage, internal nature is not subjected to the "demands of ego autonomy; rather through a dependent ego it obtains free access to the interpretive possibilities" (ibid).

### **Habermasian "Discourse Ethics": Some Critical Remarks**

Though Habermas pleads for post-metaphysical orientations in our moral engagement a careful reading of Habermas would show that he is deeply aware of the limitations of his agenda. He recognizes that his agenda is anthropocentric and man-centered. Habermas himself writes: "Compression for tortured animals and the pain caused by the destruction of the biotopes are surely manifestations of moral intuitions that cannot be fully satisfied by the collective narcissism of what

in the final analysis is an anthropocentric way of looking at things" (Habermas 1979: 211). For Habermas, the criterion of justice is central to the idea of universal morality but according to philosopher Agnes Heller the idea of justice cannot be meaningfully pursued unless it involves a profound anthropological revolution. For Heller, without a conception of the Beyond and its transformative influence in our lives, the idea of justice, confined only to the political and the legislative domains, remains only a mirage, as we have seen in the last two centuries of modern western experience. In the words of Heller:

"..a just procedure is the condition of the goodlife--of all possible good lives--but is not sufficient for the good life...The good life consists of three elements: first, righteousness; secondly, the development of endowments into talents; and, thirdly emotional depth in personal attachments. Among these three elements, righteousness is the overarching one. All three elements of the good life are beyond justice" (Heller 1987: 273).

By "Beyond" Heller means that it must be beyond and deeper than mere socio-political legislation. Justice is embodied when "goodness becomes character" (ibid: 325-326). For Heller, "...Beyond has the connotation of 'higher' and not only of being 'different'" (ibid). But it is this intimation of the "Beyond" and a transcendental height that is missing from Habermas. Habermas might not care to take note of it but he cannot justify his post-metaphysical thinking as a self-proclaimed truth and as a self-validating system. The rise of not only religious fundamentalism (not only in the so-called irrational societies but also in the "rational societies" of the West) but also what one sensitive commentator has called "global spirituality" (Cousins 1985) shows that Habermas must justify his own neglect of the critical potential that a transcendental Sacred has in rethinking existing social arrangements and transforming our conventional institutions which chain human dignity in many guises. In this context the work of political scientist Roberto M. Unger calls for our attention. Unger tells us:

"Imagine two kinds of sacred reality. The first is a fundamental reality or transcendent personal being; the second, the experiences of personality and personal encounter that, multiplied many times over, make up a social world. Whereas the first of these two sacreds is illusive and disputable and requires, to be recognized, the power of vision, which is the ability to see the invisible, the second seems near and palpable. Whenever they can, men and women try to identify the first of these two sacreds with the second. They want to see the social world graced with the authority of an ultimate reality. But the progress of insight and the disclosures of conflict prevent this bestowal of authority. If there is a common theme in the history of human thought and politics, it consists precisely in failure to sustain claims of unconditional authority on behalf of particular ways of talking, thinking, living, and organizing society. As the two sacreds lose their contact with each other, the distant one fades away into an ineffable, longed- for reality without any clear message for understanding and conduct. The nearby becomes profane and arbitrary" (Unger 1987: 576).

The above extract from Unger's *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* shows how in the contemporary political discourse the idea of a transcendental Sacred is being invoked as a frame of criticism and transformation. Habermas must take note of Unger since Unger is a political theorist like him not simply a preacher or a theologian. For Unger when people are only bound to the sacredness of the existing social contexts, "nothing is left to them but to choose one of these worlds and to play by its rules" (Unger 1987: 577). These rules, though "decisive" in their influence, are ultimately "groundless" (ibid). For Unger, the decisiveness of the present social world, presenting itself as a sacred order, "arises precisely from its lack of any place within a hierarchy of contexts" (ibid). Then "there is no larger defining reality to which it can seem as the vehicle or from whose standpoint it can be criticized" (Unger 1987: 577).

It is perhaps for these reasons that Dallmayr does not look at Habermas' "discourse ethics" as a categorical shift from the Kantian deontological morality. "Discourse ethics," Habermas writes, "picks up the basic intent of Hegel's thought-in order to redeem it with Kantian means" (quoted in Dallmayr 1991: 117). But for Dallmayr there is no scope for genuine redemption in the Habermasian agenda. Dallmayr argues that the "supportive life forms" that Habermas requires for his "discourse ethics" to be embodied are those "which can be happily found in modern western societies" (Dallmayr 1991: 120). For Dallmayr concrete life forms "persist less because, than in spite of, decontextualized universalism" since "more reason is abstracted and universalized" "enclaves of moral life have increasingly been denuded or stripped of prudential-rational resources" (ibid). But in the contemporary thrust towards universalization and globalization it is important to realize that "the western way of life is not universalizable" (Hosle 1992: 247). Articulation of universal morality coming from the West, either via Kant or Habermas, must face the problem that Hosle has recently posed: "Is it really legitimate to wish for a world society built according Occidental values?...It is the Occidental culture that has brought mankind to the verge of ecological disaster, and it is our way of life which is not universalizable and therefore immoral" (Hosle 1992: 258-259). Especially in our current phase of globalization where universalization means Westernization and Americanization there is the crucial urgency to explore "the possibility of penetrating other and less familiar strategies of social reproduction in their articulation with world economic and political-as well as cultural-processes" (Lash & Friedman 1992: 29). Despite his recent plea for a moral orientation on the part of the people of advanced societies towards global problems Habermas does not face these issues squarely. For Indian social scientist Andre Beteille his interest in an other society such as India is even less compared to what his hero and fellow German critic Max Weber had at the turn of the century (personal communication). Thus Dallmayr argues that Habermas "makes reference to the alleviation of suffering or of 'damaged life'-but only as a marginal gloss not fully integrated in his arguments" (Dallmayr 1991: 126).

#### **The Quest for Universal Morality: The Limitations of the 'Discourse Ethics' and the Promise of the 'Synthesis of Yoga'"**

Habermas writes: "The agreement made possible by discourse depends on two things: the individual's inalienable right to say 'yes' or 'no' and his overcoming of his egocentric viewpoint" (Habermas 1990a: 202). But how can an actor genuinely overcome her / his ego and in that quest of overcoming arrive at a synthesis between the ego and the Other? Even long before his pointed articulation of discourse ethics in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* Habermas had written in *Knowledge and Human Interests*: "Hermeneutics derives its function in the process of genesis of self-consciousness. It does not suffice to talk of the translation of a text; the translation itself is reflection: 'the translation of what is unconscious to what is conscious'" (Habermas 1972: 228). But without a deeper reflection on the nature of the unconscious, what is that the Habermasian hermeneutics going to make conscious? Here Sri Aurobindo's critique of the Nietzschean idea of "superman" can be applied to Habermas' "discourse ethics" as well: "But then the question of questions is there, what is our Self, and what is our nature?" (Sri Aurobindo 1962: 219).

In his insightful paper, "Moral Development and Ego Identity" Habermas argues that moral development is characterized by the formation of an ego identity, which replaces the role identity (Habermas 1979). But for Sri Aurobindo, "The ego is not the true center of the Self; the law of mutuality which meets it at every turn and which it misuses, arises from the truth that there is a secret unity between our Self and the Self of others and therefore between us and the lives of others" (ibid: 606-607) [8].

Habermas uses rational argumentation as the key to the founding of a universal morality. Sri Aurobindo does not discount the significance of reason for the origins and growth of morals but wants us to have a proper perspective regarding "The Office and Limitations of Reason" (ibid). Much like Habermas Sri Aurobindo argues that reason and rational development have played a key role in our being human. In his discussion of "The Curve of Rational Age" in *Human Cycles* Sri Aurobindo

argues that "the present age of mankind" is characterized "from the point of view of a graded psychological evolution" by an attempt to "discover and work out the right principle and secure foundations of a rational system of society" (Sri Aurobindo 1962: 181). Sri Aurobindo himself argues, reminding us of Habermas, that "an attempt to universalize first of all the habit of reason and the application of intelligence and the intelligent will to life" has played a crucial role in the shift from the "infrarational" to the "rational" age (ibid: 179). Sri Aurobindo also wants us to appreciate the crucial significance of reason in understanding the validity of traditions. In the words of Sri Aurobindo:

"Reason can accept no tradition merely for the sake of its antiquity or its greatness; it has to ask, first, whether the tradition contains at all any still living truth and, secondly, whether it contains the best truth available to man for the government of his life. Reason can accept no convention merely because men are agreed upon it; it has to ask whether they are right in their agreement, whether it is an inert or false acquiescence. Reason cannot accept any institution merely because it serves some purpose of life; it has to ask whether there are not greater and better purposes which can be best served by new institutions. There arises the necessity of a universal questioning and from that necessity arises the idea that society can only be perfected by the universal application of rational intelligence to the whole of life..." (ibid: 183).

Like Habermas' plea for undistorted communication, Sri Aurobindo also sensitizes us to the distortion that power can introduce in the working of a rational discourse and the realization of even its inherent emancipatory potential. In the words of Sri Aurobindo:

"The reason which is to be universally applied, cannot be the reason of a ruling class; for in the present imperfection of the human race that always means the fettering and misapplication of reason degraded into servant of power to maintain the privileges of the ruling class.... It must be the reason of each and all seeking for a basis of agreement" (Sri Aurobindo 1962: 184; emphasis added).

But even though reason is so important for moral development and evolution (both phylogenetic and ontogenetic), it cannot be a sole foundation of morality. Sri Aurobindo accords this role to spirit, not to reason. For Sri Aurobindo both order and evolution in life involves "interlocking of an immense number of things that are in conflict with each other" and discovering "some principle of standing-ground of unity" (Sri Aurobindo 1962: 201). Reason cannot perform this function because "The business of reason is indeterminate....In order that it may do its office, it is obliged to adopt temporarily fixed viewpoints" (ibid). When reason becomes the sole arbiter of life and morality, "every change becomes or at least seems a thing doubtful, difficult and perilous....while the conflict of viewpoints, principles, systems leads to strife and revolution and not to basis of harmonious development" (ibid). For Sri Aurobindo harmony can be achieved only when the "soul discovers itself in its highest and completest spiritual reality and effects a progressive upward transformation of its life values into those of the Spirit; for they will all find their spiritual truth and in that truth their standing-ground of mutual recognition and reconciliation...." (ibid).

For Sri Aurobindo, the inadequacy of reason to become the governor of life and morality lies in man's transitional nature--half animal and half divine. For Sri Aurobindo "the root powers of human life, its intimate causes are below, irrational, and they are above, suprarational" It is for this reason that "A purely rational society could not come into being and, if it could be born, either could not live or sterilise or petrify human existence" (ibid: 114). Sri Aurobindo argues: "If reason were the secret, highest law of the universe...it might be possible for him by the power of the reason to evolve out of the dominance of the infrarational Nature which he inherits from the animal...But his nature is rather transitional; the rational being is only a middle term of Nature's evolution. A rational satisfaction cannot give him safety from the pull from below nor deliver him from the attraction from above" (ibid: 206). Sri Aurobindo uses reason but unlike Habermas does not think it as the end all and the

be all of life. For Sri Aurobindo, "The solution lies not in reason but in the soul of man, in its spiritual tendencies. It is a spiritual, an inner freedom that alone can create a perfect human order. It is spiritual, a greater than the rational enlightenment that can alone illumine the vital nature of man and impose harmony on its self-seekings, antagonisms and discords" (ibid; emphasis added).

An ideal society, for Sri Aurobindo, is not a mere "rational society" but a "spiritual society." A society founded on spirituality is not governed by religion as a mere social organization where society uses religion "to give an august, awful and ...eternal sanction to its mass of customs and institutions" (ibid: 211). A spiritual society is not a theocratic society but a society guided by the quest of the spirit. A spiritual society regards man not only as a "mind, a life and a body, but as a soul incarnated for a divine fulfilment upon earth, not only in heavens beyond, which after all it need not have left if it had no divine business here in the world of physical, vital and mental nature" (ibid: 213).

Sri Aurobindo's idea of the highest stage of morality is close to the Kohlberg-Habermas idea of the post-conventional stage of moral development. Like the Habermasian idea of post-conventional stage of morality, Sri Aurobindo's idea of morality is not an extension of the collective egoism of a particular society. But what distinguishes Sri Aurobindo's idea of morality is the invocation of God not only as a tertiary factor but also as a constituting factor in the dyadic relationship between the Self and the Other. For Sri Aurobindo, "The seeking for God is also, subjectively, the seeking for our highest, truest, fullest, largest Self" (ibid: 136). For Sri Aurobindo, "ethics is not in its essence a calculation of good and evil in action of a laboured effort to be blameless according to the standards of the world,- these are only crude appearances,-it is an attempt to grow into divine nature" (ibid: 143). Let us hear Sri Aurobindo in his own words about the probable more reassuring route towards a universal morality:

"..ethics only begins by the demand upon him of something other than his personal preference, vital pleasure or material self-interest; and this demand seems at first to work on him through the necessity of his relations with others. But that this is not the core of the matter is shown by the fact that the ethical demand does not always square with the social demand, nor the ethical standard always coincide with the social standard. His relations with others and his relations with himself are both of them the occasions of his ethical growth; but that which determines his ethical being is his relations with God, the urge of the Divine whether concealed in his nature or conscious in his higher self or inner genius. He obeys an inner ideal, not to a social claim or a collective necessity. The ethical imperative comes not from around, but from within him and above him" (ibid: 141).

### **The Ideal of Human Unity**

For Sri Aurobindo it is now an ideal moment to think about and strive towards the ideal of human unity. Sri Aurobindo wrote as back as 1919: "Today the ideal of human unity is more or less vaguely making its way to the front of our consciousness" (ibid: 262). For Sri Aurobindo "the impact of different cultures upon each other" has been accentuated by the "conditions of the modern world" (ibid: 300). This process of mutual interpenetration and interpretation of cultures is not simply a mirror reflection of the diffusion of Western modernity. Sri Aurobindo commented long ago: "The earth is in the travail now of one common, large and flexible civilisation for the whole human race into which each modern and ancient culture shall introduce its necessary element of variation" (ibid) [9]. For Sri Aurobindo this "new turn of impact of cultures shows itself most clearly where the European and the Asiatic meet" (ibid: 302). Sri Aurobindo is not a categorical critic of modernity as he is not a categorical defender of tradition. Sri Aurobindo appreciates the fact that the meeting between the East and the West is pregnant with creative potentials for both the sides. He writes: "The East is on the whole ....willing...to accept really valuable parts of modern European culture, its science, its curiosity, its ideal of universal education and uplift, its abolition of privilege, its broadening, liberalising democratic tendency, its instinct of freedom and equality" (ibid). But while accepting the



West the East is also engaged in a reconsideration and reconstruction of both tradition and modernity and wants to teach the West her forgotten spiritual and human values. In the words of Sri Aurobindo:

"But at a certain point the East refuses to proceed farther and that is precisely in things which are deepest, most essential to the future of mankind, the things of the soul, the profound things of mind and temperament. Here again, all points not to substitution and conquest, but to mutual understanding and interchange, mutual adaptation and new formation" (ibid).

An awareness of this new formation at work--what Dumont calls "the heritage of global modernity" and Appadurai "global ethnoscope"--is essential for realizing the ideal of human unity in our continued quest for universal morality (Appadurai 1989, Dumont 1986). But this awareness is only a first step. The next important step to take note of is that while modern science and technology has facilitated this global interpenetration of cultures, our method of realizing human unity must be primarily spiritual. While "intellectual and material circumstances" have contributed towards this, Sri Aurobindo wants us to realize that the "very commodity of the material circumstances," unaccompanied by any spiritual awakening, "may bring about the failure of the ideal" (ibid: 263). For Sri Aurobindo: "When material circumstances favour a great change, but the heart and mind of the race are not really ready--especially the heart--failure may be predicted unless indeed men are wise and accept the inner change along with the external readjustment" (ibid).

For Sri Aurobindo, it is only through a spiritualized religion of humanity that the ground for universal morality can be led and the realization of the ideal of human unity be possible. But this religion of humanity, unlike the 19th century positivistic approach, is not an intellectual religion but a religion of the spirit [10]. Sri Aurobindo tells us: "We begin to see through the principle and law of our religious being, through the principle and law of our aesthetic being, the universality of a principle and law which is that of all being and which therefore we must hold steadily in view in regard to all human activities" (ibid: 136).

### **The Inadequacy of the Idea of the State**

It is important to note that while describing his vision of the ideal of human unity Sri Aurobindo provides us an insightful sociological analysis of the work and the evolution of social aggregates in human history. To strive for human unity does not mean to be part of a huge conglomeration and a megastructure though Sri Aurobindo does not rule out the possibility of such an imperial formation. Rather it means to strive for both meaningful belongingness in one's culture as well as for developing one's transnational, universal and cosmic orientations. To put it in our contemporary idioms, Sri Aurobindo is sensitive to the simultaneous need for localization and globalization. Sri Aurobindo is a fervent critic of modern megastructures such as State which stifle individual and social creativity. For him, it is within a small scale that human creativity blossoms. Giving examples of the remarkable height of human creativity during the period of the Greek city states and the small kingdoms of India Sri Aurobindo writes: "If we consider the past humanity....we find that the interesting periods of human life....were precisely those ages and countries in which humanity was able to organise itself in little independent centres acting intimately upon each other but not fused into a single unity" (ibid: 263). At the same time, Sri Aurobindo is a critic of the organized state since it is one of the greatest barriers to the ideal of human unity. Sri Aurobindo does not accord modern state a sui generis reality, this he accords to nations. For Sri Aurobindo while "the nation is a persistent psychological unit which Nature has been busy developing throughout the world in the most various forms" "the organized State is neither the best mind of the nation nor is it even the sum of communal energies....It is a collective egoism much inferior to the best of which the community is capable" (ibid: 291, 280; emphasis added) [11]. Sri Aurobindo offers a profound moral critique of modern State on grounds of collective egoism and the quality of people who man the machinery of the State. For Sri Aurobindo: "...the modern politician...does not represent the soul of people or its aspirations. What he usually represents is all the average pettiness, selfishness, egoism, self-deception in him...Yet it is

by such minds that the good of all has to be decided...to such an agency calling itself the State that the individual is being more and more called upon to give up the government of his life" (ibid: 279).

Sri Aurobindo writes: "When the State attempts to take up the control of the co-operative action of the community, it condemns itself to create a monstrous machinery which will end by crushing out freedom, initiative and serious growth of the human being" (ibid: 282). This is close to Habermas' description of the internal colonization of the lifeworld under the machinery of the modern state. Habermas' thesis of "internal colonization states that the subsystems of the economy and state become more and more complex as a consequence of capitalist growth, and penetrate ever deeper into the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld" (Habermas 1987a: 367). The ascendancy of the State, its "hypertrophic growth of media-steered subsystems" (Habermas 1987: 332) leads to "cultural impoverishment and fragmentation of everyday consciousness" (ibid: 355). Under the conditions of cultural modernity and the modern nation-state, "everyday consciousness is robbed of its power to synthesize, it becomes fragmented" (ibid). Under these conditions "the imperatives of autonomous subsystems make their way into the lifeworld from the outside-like colonial masters coming into a tribal society-and force a process of assimilation upon it" (ibid). This makes it impossible for coordinating "the diffused perspectives of the local culture" to grasp "the play of the metropolis and the world market from the point of view of periphery" (ibid).

This colonization of the life world by the System World of the State leads to the "legitimation crisis" of state under advanced capitalism. As this makes the legitimacy of the State problematic in the eyes of the concerned citizens, it also gives rise to "transnational identifications" (Hettne 1990: 31). The colonization of the life world leads to the search for new meanings and new practices of "de-differentiation" on the part of the actors (Habermas 1984). This search takes place in the context of what political scientist Ronald Inglehart calls "culture shift" in advanced societies, which is characterized primarily by shift from "materialist" to "postmaterialist values" (Inglehart 1990). As Inglehart tells us: "...as a result of the historically unprecedented prosperity and the absence of war that has prevailed in Western countries since 1945, younger birth cohorts put less emphasis on economic and physical security than do older groups...[They] tend to give a high priority to nonmaterial needs, such as a sense of community and the quality of life" (Inglehart 1990: 56). The rise of postmaterialism as a widespread social value blurs the familiar boundary between the Left and the Right and plays a crucial role in "the rise of the wave of the new social movements" such as the ecology movements, which are not solely confined within individual nation-states but also are transnational in their mobilization and cross-cultural vision. Sister City Movement, Ecology movements and Habitat for Humanity are some of the familiar examples of transnational movements emerging from the advanced industrial societies. Bjorn Hettne tells us that "high level of education and welfare" in advanced societies are now "transformed into transnational identifications and concerns embraced by a reasonably large segment of the population" (Hettne 1990: 31). "The latter type of identification are expressed for instance through the new social movements which due to their global concerns also challenge the legitimacy of the State" (ibid).

The above description points to the fact that Sri Aurobindo's emphasis upon proper unit of human association is shared by Habermas and other contemporary political theorists and ethnographers. To think of the ideal of human unity is to refashion the "mediating relationships that link the individual household with the planetary ecosystem" and to be "aware of the middle range between the local and the global level" (Bellah et al. 1991: 14). This is best articulated by Bjorn Hettne when he writes:

"Alternative solutions are generally antistatist and usually have two, but not necessarily contradictory points of reference: the local community and the Earth...The relevant actor on the local level would not be the State but issue-oriented social movements whose global operations transcend the nation-state as the dominant mode of political organization" (Hettne 1990: 34).

## **Beyond the Technology of Power: Synthesis of Yoga and the Technology of Self**

The ideal of human unity requires a new technology of self. Elsewhere Habermas has argued that modernity is solely preoccupied with technology of power and not sensitive to the challenge of developing an appropriate technology of self (Habermas 1987b). Habermas discusses a great deal about self-consciousness but for Habermas this is born of psychoanalytic therapy and the dialogue between the analyst and the patient. But Sri Aurobindo discovers this through the practice of Yoga. For Sri Aurobindo, "Yoga is a methodological effort towards self-perfection by the expression of the potentialities latent in the being and a union of the human individual with the universal and Transcendent Existence" (Sri Aurobindo 1950: 2). Yoga is a practical psychology of self-perfection to help God complete His unfinished task of creation. Its objective is transformation and making possible a higher stage of evolution here on Earth, not individual moksha (salvation). Yoga helps us to overcome our "separative ignorance" (ibid: 618). The practice of Yoga helps us to go beyond altruism and egoism, good and evil where we are able to "take a wider psychological view of the primary forces of our nature" (ibid). Through the practice of yoga "there grows an immediate and profound sympathy and immixture of mind with mind, life with life, a lessening of the body's insistence on separateness, a power of direct mental and other intercommunication and effective mutual action which helps out now the inadequate indirect communication and action..." (ibid: 615). Yoga enables individuals to have a right relation with the collectivity where the individual does not "pursue egoistically his own material or mental progress or spiritual salvation without regard to his fellows, nor does he "maim his proper development" for the sake of the community but sums up in himself "all its [community's] best and completest possibilities and pour them out by thought, action and all other means on his surroundings so that the whole race may approach nearer to the attainment of its supreme potentialities" (ibid: 17).

### **By the Way of Conclusion: Towards a Comparison of Comparisons**

The crisis of our times requires a moral perspective both locally and globally. To come to terms with the fundamental questions of our times our individual social systems as well as our international system are in need of a moral anchorage. Jurgen Habermas and Sri Aurobindo help us to think creatively about morality as a practice of transformation. Both of them sensitize us to our emergent ideal of human unity and the need for the quest for universal morality. Habermas offers "discourse ethics" as a procedure while Sri Aurobindo presents "The Synthesis of Yoga" as a practical psychology of self-realization. Though these are two different agendas of action and reflection they are not necessarily opposed to each other. Sri Aurobindo does not oppose spirituality to rationality nor Habermas is a defender of functionalist reason. Both Habermas and Aurobindo are fervent critics of the idea of the state and urge for cultivating transnational, universal identifications.

Hence in our quest for universal morality there is no point in reifying the obvious that Habermas stresses on "rational argumentation" while Sri Aurobindo on spiritual realization for moral development and the planetization of our consciousness (See Chardin 1956, Giri 1992b). Taking inspiration from Sri Aurobindo our task is to discover the common ground as we strive to transcend our superficial distinctions between traditions and points of view in order to be able to contribute to social transformation and human evolution. The task for comparative engagement then is not to produce fixed wholes but to create a portrait of a "discursive formation," which ultimately enables us to transcend our taken-for-granted assumptions (See Giri 1992a). When we are confronted with the task of understanding a "discursive theme," Foucault tells us that the task is to "describe system of dispersion," rather than simply "reconstitute chains of inference" and "draw up tables of differences" (Foucault 1972: 37).

Universal morality has been the discursive theme in our comparative engagement here. Describing its trajectory of dispersion in Habermas and Sri Aurobindo it has not been our objective to provide an either / or comparison between them but to explore the potential for transformation in both of them, which has a global relevance. In another context, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that "the key to

comparative studies is the comparison of comparisons" (MacIntyre 1991: 121). MacIntyre argues that while comparing two philosophical traditions--say Confucianism and Aristotelianism--"we cannot find any legitimate standing ground outside the context of points of view" (ibid). Taking inspiration from Indian philosopher G.C. Pande (1992) and Western philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1990) we can situate Sri Aurobindo and Habermas in both historical and perspectival contexts of Indian and European Renaissance. This comparison of comparisons can show us the global relevance of the retrieval of these two traditions of Renaissance as both India and the West are entering the third millennium.

In reflecting upon Indian Renaissance G.C. Pande argues that modern Indian thinkers "discounted any basic contradiction between the values of liberal modernity and those of spiritual religion" (Pande 1991: 438). This is also true of the vision and the experiment of Sri Aurobindo. But for G.C. Pande, "That Sri Aurobindo has been the prophet of a new cultural hope should not make us forget that he was one of the most brilliant leaders of Indian Renaissance" (Pande 1992: 1). Sri Aurobindo felt that the Indian Renaissance if it took place fully would be "a thing of immense importance both to herself and the world" (Sri Aurobindo quoted in Pande 1992: 15). The Indian Renaissance was not simply an imitation of modern ideals but an effort to purify them by the "reaffirmation of the ancient spirit" (ibid). It was "no mere return but restatement" (ibid). For Sri Aurobindo, "Probably, here lies the key of the Indian Renaissance, in a return from forms to depths of a released spirituality which will show itself again in a pervading return of spirituality upon life" (ibid). Both for Sri Aurobindo and G.C. Pande the retrieval of this Renaissance tradition of synthesis and spirituality has much relevance now not only for India but also for the whole world.

Europe is also now confronted with a parallel task of the retrieval of the tradition of her humanist Renaissance in the contemporary context of ontological doubt and social despair. Stephen Toulmin (1990) is the clearest exponent of such a point of view. For Toulmin there was a modernity of Renaissance as there was a modernity of the Cartesian rationality. The modernity of Renaissance was an effort of creative reconciliation between late medievalism and the challenge of the emergent modern world. According to Toulmin, the writings of the Renaissance humanists such as Erasmus, Michel de Montaigne and Shakespeare displayed an "urbane open-mindedness and skeptical tolerance...they regarded human affairs in a clear-eyed, non-judgmental light that led to honest practical doubt about the value of 'theory' for human experience-whether in theology, natural philosophy, metaphysics or ethics. In spirit, their critique was not hostile to the practice of religion [but] they discouraged intellectual dogmatism..." (Toulmin 1990: 25). Montaigne best articulates this creative urge for synthesis when he writes: "Philosophy is very childish, to my mind, when she gets up on her hind legs and preaches to us that it is a barbarous alliance to marry the divine with the earthly, the reasonable with the unreasonable..." (quoted in Toulmin 1990: ). For Toulmin, "the stage in Western culture and society that we are now entering-whether we see it as the third phase in Modernity, or as a new and distinctive 'post-modern' phase-obliges us to reappropriate values from Renaissance humanism that were lost in the heyday of Modernity" (ibid: 201). But this retrieval and reappropriation has to take place in our contemporary context. The task is to humanize modernity rather than to condemn it. Stephen Toulmin best articulates this agenda for humanizing modernity:

"We are indebted to Descartes and Newton for fine examples of well-formulated theory, but humanity also needs a sense of how theory touches practice at points, and in ways, that we feel on our pulses. The current task, accordingly, is to find ways of moving on from the received view of Modernity-which set exact sciences and the humanities apart-to a reformed version, which redeems philosophy and science, by reconnecting them to the humanist half of Modernity. In that task, the techniques of 17th-century rationalism will not be enough: from this point on, all claims of theory-like those of nationhood-must prove their value by demonstrating their roots in human practice and experience" (ibid: 180).

Jurgen Habermas's discourse ethics is a humane integration of theory and practice and a sharp critique of their positivist divorce. Though neither Toulmin nor Habermas himself locates his work in this humanist tradition to a comparative eye this connection is clear. Habermas's stress on human practice and his nostalgia for the unity of theory and practice in the classical mode reminds us of the remarkable cultural creativity of European Renaissance and its modernity. It is the heirs of European Renaissance such as Vico, not Descartes and his positivistic children who are Habermas' heroes (See Habermas 1973). Our quest for universal morality via a comparative meditation on Habermas and Sri Aurobindo points to the global significance of both Indian and European Renaissance at present. But from Sri Aurobindo we learn of the urgent need to spiritualize our humanity as we are beginning our work of humanizing our modernity.

### Acknowledgments

This paper was prepared for presentation in the session on "Ethics and Morality" at the 1993 International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, held in Mexico City. I thank Professor Cynthia A. Sorti, the organizer of the session for her encouragement. This has also been presented as a lecture at Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad and Allahabad Museum for which I am grateful to Professors Anil K. Gupta and G.C. Pande as well as to the members of the audience for their comments and criticism. Here I am particularly grateful to Professors Om Prakash, R.C. Tripathi, O.P. Malaviya, Yogananda Sinha, and Dr. Parichaya Das. I owe a special debt to Professor S.P. Nagendra who has read the manuscript and offered valuable suggestions. Professor Thomas Pantham has made very insightful and critical observations on this work, for which I am grateful to me. While whatever promise this paper has is due to the scholars I have interacted with the limitations are solely mine.

### Notes

1. Jonathan Sacks best articulates our predicament when he writes: "Something quite revolutionary has happened to our ways of thinking: what I would call the demoralization of discourse. We now no longer know what it is to identify a moral issue, as something distinct from personal preference on the one hand or technique on the other" (Sacks 1991: 42).
2. It is interesting to note that another key commentator of our times Stephen Toulmin uses the phrase "ecology of institutions" to describe an ideal society. Please see, Toulmin (1990).
3. In this context we might take note of what William Baldamus, an insightful commentator on Habermas, writes. According to Baldamus, "...there can be no doubt that Habermas' graphical diagrams are created intuitively. Ironically, in his own terminology this means they have no rational foundation, although in logical terms their credibility may be unquestionable" (Baldamus 1992: 102).
4. On the question of taking a hypothetical attitude to one's existent social arrangement and be drawn towards an ideal, we can remember the seminal work of philosopher Vaihinger. Please see, Vaihinger's *Philosophy of As If*.
5. According to David Bidney, "An individual is said to be morally free insofar as he acts in conformity with the requirements of his "true good" and his "true self" ...Moral freedom and cultural freedom don't coincide" (Bidney 1967: 453).
6. Habermas's stress that even the actors with communicative morality must internalize authority reminds us of a similar argument by Ortega Y. Gasset. Gasset makes a distinction between the aristocrats and the masses. Aristocrats are the ones who give much to society and are its perennial critics. But Gasset also makes clear that still the aristocrats must obey some

commands. Needless to mention that this command is not of society but one's own conscience. Please see, Ortega Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*.

7. Here we can take note of the insightful arguments of philosopher Roop Rekha Verma. Verma writes: "The dialectic by itself does not explain the possibility of cultural change or critique of culture...What is important to add in this dialectic is that the internalization can be reflective or unreflective" (Verma 1991: 534).
8. Of course to be fair to Habermas the Habermasian ego is much more than the ego of the possessive individual. It is sometimes close to the Aurobindian Self. But the spiritual unity between the Self and the Other as constituted by an all-pervasive divine reality is missing from Habermas.
9. Louis Dumont's recent discussion and description of what he calls "the heritage of global modernity" calls for our attention here. In his *Essays on Modern Ideology* Dumont writes: "A more complex process...is found in the domains of cultures and results from their interaction. To the extent that the individualistic ideas and values of the dominant culture are spreading worldwide, they undergo modifications locally and engender new forms. Now-and this has escaped notice-the new, modified forms can pass back into the dominant culture and operate there as modern elements in their own right. In that way the acculturation of each particular culture to modernity can have a lasting precipitate in the heritage of global modernity" (Dumont 1986: 18).
10. According to Margaret Chatterjee, this was also the argument of S. Radhakrishnan. Please see, Chatterjee 1991.
11. In this context what Jonathan Sacks writes deserves our attention: "The problem of our moral ecology is that we have thought exclusively in terms of two domains: the state as an instrument of legislation and control and the individual as the bearer of otherwise unlimited choices...We have neglected the third domain: that of community" (Sacks 1991: 45).

### References Cited

- Apel, Karl-Otto, 1991 "A Planetary Macroethics for Humankind: The Need, The Apparent Difficulties, and the Eventual Possibility." In Eliot Deutch, (ed.), *Culture and Modernity*. Hawaii.
- Appadurai, Arjun, 1989 "The Global Ethnoscape: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology." MS.
- Baldamus, William, 1992 "Understanding Habermas's Method of Reasoning." *History of the Human Sciences* 5 (2): 97-115.
- Bellah, Robert et al., 1991 *The Good Society*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Bidney, David, 1987 *Theoretical Anthropology*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Chardin, Teilherd de, 1956 *Man's Place in Nature: The Human Zoological Group*. London: Collins.
- Chatterjee, Margaret, 1991 "Reflections on Religious Pluralism in the Indian Context." In Eliot Deutch, (ed.), *Culture and Modernity*. Hawaii.
- Connolly, William E. 1991 *Identity / Difference: Democratic Negotiation of Political Paradox*. Cornell.

**Cortese, Anthony, 1990 Ethnic Ethics: The Restructuring of Moral Theory. Albany: State University of New York Press.**

**Cousins, E.H. , 1985 Global Spirituality. Madras: Madras University Press.**

**Dallmayr, Fred, 1991 Life World, Modernity and Critique: Paths Between Heidegger and Frankfurt School. Polity.**

**Dumont, Louis, 1986 Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective. Chicago.**

**Edelman, John T., 1990 An Audience for Moral Philosophy? London: Macmillan.**

**Evans, J.D.G. (ed.), 1987 Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems. Cambridge.**

**Gasset, Ortega Y., The Revolt of the Masses.**

**Geertz, Clifford, 1986 "The Uses of Diversity." Michigan Quarterly Review. Winter Issue: 105-23.**

**Giri, Ananta, 1992a Critique of the Comparative Method and the Challenges of a Transnational World. G.B.Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad: Occasional Paper.**

**1992b "Chetanara Uttarana: Sampratika Biswamayita o Rastrottara Andolona [An article in Oriya meaning, "The Transcendence of Consciousness: Contemporary Globalization and the Transnational Movements"]. Eshana December 1992.**

**Foucault, Michel, 1972 The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language. New York: Pantheon Books.**

**Habermas, Jurgen, 1972 Knowledge and Human Interests. Cambridge: Polity Press.**

**1973 Theory and Practice. Cambridge: Polity Press.**

**1979 Communication and the Evolution of Society. Cambridge: Polity Press.**

**1987a A Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2: Life World and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason. Cambridge: Polity Press.**

**1987b The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity. Polity.**

**1987c "The Hermeneutic Claims to Universality." In Michael T. Gibbons, (ed.) Interpreting Politics. Basil Blackwell.**

**1988 "Law and Morality." In S.M. McCurrin, (ed.), The Tanner Lectures on Human Values. Volume VII. Universities of Cambridge and Utah.**

**1989 The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Cambridge: Polity Press.**

**1990a Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action. Cambridge: Polity Press.**

**1990b "What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking in the Left." New Left Review No. 183: 3-21.**

**Heller, Agnes, 1987 Beyond Justice. Basil Blackwell.**

**Hettne, Bjorn, 1990 Development Theory and the Three Worlds. Essex: Longman.**

**Hosle, Vittorio, 1992 "The Third World as a Philosophical Problem." Social Research 59 (2): 227-262.**

**Inglehart, Ronald, 1990 Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Societies. Princeton.**

- Lash, Scott and Jonathan Friedman, 1991 "Introduction: Subjectivity and Modernity's Other." In Scott Lash & Jonathan Friedman, (eds.), *Modernity and Identity*. Basil Blackwell.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair, 1991 "Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation Between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues." In Eliot Deutch, (ed.), *Culture and Modernity*. Hawaii.
- Mohanty, Jitendra Nath, 1989 *Transcendental Phenomenology*. Basil Blackwell.
- Neville, Robert C., 1974 *The Cosmology of Freedom*. Yale.
- Pande, Govind Chandra, 1982 "On the Nature of Social Categories." In Ravinder Kumar, (ed.), *Philosophical Categories and Social Reality*.
- 1985 *Aspects of Indian Culture and Civilization*. Varanasi: BHU Press.
- 1989 *The Meaning and Process of Culture as Philosophy of History*. Allahabad: Raka Prakashan.
- 1991 "Two Dimensions of Religion: Reflections Based On Indian Spiritual Experience and Philosophical Traditions. In Eliot Deutch, (ed.), *Culture and Modernity*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- 1992 "Sri Aurobindo: Cultural Perspectives." Paper presented at the national seminar on Sri Aurobindo at Pondicherry.
- Sacks, Jonathan, 1991 *The Persistence of Faith*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Sri Aurobindo, 1950 *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- 1962 *The Human Cycles, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- 1970 *The Life Divine*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- Strong, Tracy B., 1992 "What Have We to Do With Morals? Nietzsche and Weber on History and Ethics." *History of the Human Sciences* 5 (3): 9-18.
- Toulmin, Stephen, 1990 *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. New York: The Free Press.
- Unger, Roberto M., 1987 *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy*. Cambridge.
- Vaihinger, Philosophy of As If. Verma, Roop Rekha
- 1991 "The Concept of Progress and Cultural Identity." In Eliot Deutch, (ed.), *Culture and Modernity*. Hawaii.
- Walzer, Michael, 1988 "Interpretation and Social Criticism." In S.M. McCurrin, (ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. Universities of Cambridge and Utah Press.



PURCHASED

APPROVAL

GRATIS, EXCHANGE *P. N. S.*  
*Committee*

PRICE

ACC NO.

VIKRAM SARABHAI LIBRARY

L. L. M. AHMEDABAD