

Study of Cultural Shock in Radhanath Swami's *The Journey Home*

Sharad Kumar Tiwari

Assistant Professor, Rizvi College of Engineering, Bandra (W), Mumbai, (M.S.) India

Abstract

The culture, social issues, customs, geography and history of a nation differs from other nations. When a foreign national enters another country, he encounters these differences which make him shocked and uneasy. It is common to experience culture shock when you're transplanted into a foreign setting. This is a normal reaction to a new environment where you are no longer in control as you have been at home. You may experience a range of emotions when adapting to a foreign culture, from excitement and interest to frustration, depression and fear of the unknown. Culture shock is a term used to describe what happens to people when they encounter unfamiliar surroundings and conditions. This research paper attempts to explore the cultural encounters of Radhanath Swami in *The Journey Home*. He starts a journey to India inland. On his way to India, he passes through Asia and the Middle East countries. He is shocked to encounter the culture, geography, religious practices in these countries. He spends almost two years in India before he return to America. So, most of his encounters are confined to India.

Key Words: cultural shock, encounter, strange

Radhanath Swami, the author of *The Journey Home*, spends his childhood at Highland Park, Chicago, USA under the protection of his loving parents. When he becomes adult, he sets on a journey to Europe as a hippie and becomes member of counter culture. He visits England, France, Poland and Italy. During his journey to Europe, he realizes that he does not fit among the people adhering to the life of a hippie.

In Italy, he did meditation and had a calling from God that instructed him to move India to have a spiritual experience of life. He responds to this calling and decides to go to India. At the outset of his journey, he goes to turkey and from there he manages to reach Iran. On his destination to India, he meanders through many Asian countries, he encounters cultures which are weird and uncommon and he was utterly dismayed to experience them. He has recorded those strange

cultures in *The Journey Home* and also reveals how these encounters enable him to understand spirituality and to believe in God.

In Heret, Afganistan, the narrator explores the life of ordinary citizens. He is shocked to see the simplicity of life there. He discovers that the citizens of Heret do not possess riches, but their life is peaceful and they are complacent in their life. These citizens wear simple clothes and are quite friendly to their neighbours. The narrator who has never exposed to this simplicity in America is shocked to have a glimpse of it in Afganistan. He reveals:

Looking around, I was transported into a realm of timeless simplicity. My heart pounded. Camel after camel sauntered by. There were no sounds of horns or modern vehicles only camel hooves clacking on an earthen road. Families were crowded into tiny one-story houses made of

dried mud. A pungent taste of arid dust dried my mouth and the smell of camel excrement and burning wood assaulted my nose. People chatted while squatting on the roadside, dressed in their traditional Afghani clothing. Their loosely fitting garments were elegant though faded and tattered with wear. Men wrapped long sheets of cloth around their heads as turbans and many had faces riddled with deep blotches, scars made by small pox. Like aged leather, their skin was dried and toughened by the elements, and huge, spontaneous smiles revealed rotting or missing teeth. Baggy shirts extended below their knees as they performed their chores apparently with no concern for the time. Women covered their faces with a fine mesh and wore blue or black gowns that reached from the top of their heads down to the ground, leaving no trace of their bodies visible. (TJH, 68)

The narrator was not able to identify with the surrounding and was shocked to discover the incongruity of poverty and hilarious life of people in Herat. He becomes completely disoriented and questions his own existence. He remarks:

All at once, I found it impossible to identify with anything my five senses perceived. Utterly alienated, my ego succumbed to a painful breakdown. On my knees, sweating with emotion, I struggled to connect something to the world I knew. I failed. I felt totally disconnected. Although the dire poverty was disheartening, the people of Herat appeared to be happiest, most

carefree people I'd ever seen. This surreal combination of poverty and happiness short-circuited my intellect. (TJH, 68)

The narrator continues his journey and boards a bus to Kandahar. Aboard the bus, he is surprised to see the fellow passengers. He encountered an uncommon spectacle inside the bus. He was amazed to see the animals among the passengers. He relates:

In the centre aisle were sacks of produce, a half dozen chickens two sheep, and a goat. The straining unmuffled motor, the laughter of men and women, and wailing of babies provided the soundtrack for this amazing show. (TJH, 70)

Radhanath Swami was also surprised to see the devotions of the passengers to Allah. These passengers offer namaz to Allah many times a day irrespective of the place and circumstances in which they are. These passengers were not religious fanatics but they were ordinary people. Radhanath Swami delves into the complete devotion of these passengers:

Suddenly, the bus stopped in the midst of a vast desert. In a moment everyone got off. Was this an emergency? No, not at all. The passengers carefully unrolled their prayer rugs on the sand and faced the direction of the holy city of Mecca, performing their namaz, or offering of prostrations and salutations to Allah and his Prophet Mohammed. Every few hours this ritual was repeated with no consideration of where we were. The religion of these tribal people was their life. They were not mullahs, priests, yogis, or

monks, but ordinary family people. Yet in all situations and places it impressed me how their devotion to Allah took priority. (TJH, 70)

In Kandahar, Radhanath Swami befriends Hariz who takes him to his home one evening. They sit at the terrace of the home and get busy to have philosophical discussions. Suddenly Hariz moves to the edge of the terrace and howls. He drops a rope and pulls up a mangoose that shelter at the head of the Swami all night. The mangoose wanders in the street by the day time and seeks shelter at Hariz's home at night. This incident shocks Swami tremendously. He delineates the incident:

Suddenly, he jumped up from his chair, cocked his head to the moon and began to howl like a wolf, "Aaawwwuuu, aaawwwuuu, aaawwwuuu." What was going on? Had this distinguished gentleman gone mad? He grabbed a long rope with a loop at the end, raced to the edge of his rooftop and hurled it down to the road. What in the world was he doing? With rapt attention, he slowly reeled the rope in. To my amazement he had fished up a wriggling rodent the size and shape of a ferret. (TJH, 70)

Further, when Radhanath Swami reaches India, he again encounters situations, customs and traditions that are uncommon and unheard of for him. He becomes disoriented to encounter the diverse and weird practices in India.

Radhanath Swami hitchhikes in the car of a stranger to Firozpur, Punjab and from there he travel by train to Old Delhi under the guidance of the same stranger. When he comes to the railway station at

Firozpur, he discovers that this railway station is completely different that he had seen in his own country. Hundreds of people were sleeping on the ground and some of the families were conversing noisily. The most shocking experience was the way passengers board the train. Radhanath Swami narrates this horrifying encounter:

As the locomotive approached the platform, hundreds of people began to running full speed alongside the moving train. My host also ran as fast as he could. "Follow me," yelled. All at once, when the train slowed to a reasonable speed, everyone began diving in the windows. My friend, while sprinting, tossed his bag in through a window and leaped in behind it. I was running as fast as I could. He screamed at me from inside the train, "Jump now, before it is too late." Diving into a window of a moving train looked incredibly dangerous, but everyone was doing it. (TJH, 89)

Radhanath Swami attends the world Yoga conference in old Delhi. On the final day of the conference, he decides to roam around Connought Place, Delhi. He happens to see a shopkeeper who was selling the printed images of Indian gods and goddesses. He finds these printed images of gods and goddesses very unusual and fascinating, and becomes enchanted to them. He reveals his shock to see the physical appearance of Indian gods and goddesses:

Among the pictures was a beautiful woman with eight arms holding swords, choppers, and spears and riding on a loin, then a fantastical, somewhat pudgy man with the head

of an elephant who was sitting on a mouse. Flipping through them I found the picture of a handsome blue person with four arms decorated with elegant ornaments lying on a multi-headed serpent, next was a tranquil yogi immersed in meditation with snakes wrapped around his limbs, . . . This art was beyond description, the figures unbelievable. (TJH, 104)

From Delhi, Radhanath Swami headed to the Himalayan regions such as Rishikesh, Hardwar, Devprayag and DeharaDoon. He meets many yogis and ascetics such as Mahesh Baba, Kailash Baba, Anandmayi Ma and Balshiva Yogi. He wonders to see the yogic feats of some of these ascetics. In Devprayag, he visits an ashram for meal. A saint visits this ashram on a particular day and sends for many doctors too. This saint challenges the modern science by keeping him dead for nearly half an hour. During that half an hour, the doctors found him to be dead, but he awoke after an hour. The narrator relates:

With his back erect, sitting in a lotus position, he inhaled and exhaled with great force about twenty times. Then fully inhaling, he stopped he stopped breathing and sat motionless. Each doctor went to work with stethoscopes and other devices, but not one could detect a heartbeat, breath or pulse. They were astonished. "He is clinically dead," one doctor announced. Sceptical, I also stepped forward and borrowed a stethoscope to check his pulse and heart beat, but there was none. (TJH, 130)

Further, Radhanath Swami discovers the fact that, unlike the West, the religious mendicants have social acceptability and

enjoy exalted position in the society in India. He is surprised to encounter this fact. He recounts:

Unlike in the West, the begging of religious mendicants in rural India is considered an honourable way of life because the people receive so much in return from the sadhus they serve by giving alms. (TJH, 127)

Radhanath Swami also encounters Naga Babas, a sect of yogis in the Himalayas. The naga babas are quite different from other saints in the Himalayas and he is shocked to interact with them. The narrator finds their appearance disgusting/ awful. He relates the countenance of the Naga Babas:

I was sitting on a lonely Himalayan footpath one day when a fearsome tribe of perhaps twenty men approached. They were holding iron tridents crowned with human skulls, and each held their trident like a professional flag. Heavy coils of matted hairs were piled on their heads and their knotted beards swung in rhythm to their march. From their deadlocks to their bare feet, a thick covering of ashes covered their flesh, and strands of rudraksa beads hung from their necks. On their foreheads, they smeared the three-line symbol of Shiva, and around their waists they wrapped iron chains draped with bright red loincloths to cover their groins. (TJH, 138)

Once again, radhanath Swami get back to Delhi and from there he heads towards ancient city of Varanasi. On the way, he gets down at Agra and visits Taj Mahal. He reads a booklet about the history and is shocked to learn the miserable condition of the person who was

responsible to construct the magnificent monument. Radhanath Swami expresses his shock after discovering the fate of the person who constructed Taj Mahal:

Taking twenty-two years to complete and twenty thousand workmen and craftsmen, the monument was finally completed in 1648. Legend told that the hands of the gifted craftsmen were then severed to assure that there could be no duplication. In his later life, one of the king's own sons usurped the kingdom, exiled or killed his brothers, and imprisoned his own father. Looking up from the book, I tried to make sense of it all. After constructing magnificent palaces, forts, mosques, and the Tajmahal, this king was conquered and imprisoned by his own son. In the confines of prison, he suffered miserably while his family battled and murdered one another. (TJH, 146-147)

In Varanasi, Radhanath Swami wanders on its ghats. He encounters funeral processions and rituals of the last rites performed by the Hindus. He finds this completely different from that of the West. But he learns a great lesson from his observations of the burning dead bodies. He shares his experience:

After a chanting and crying procession through the streets, the body was placed on a pyre of wooden logs, and then decorated with sacred objects to the recitation of prayers, mantras and sacred texts. To conclude the last rites, the eldest son or the closest relative walked around the body while sprinkling it with Ganges water, then touched a flaming torch to the pyre. The burning of the dead body signified the release of the

spirit and the flames represented Brahma, the creator. The fire then began its work. Its flames raged higher and higher as black smoke drifted toward the heavens. At this point, many of the mourners offered a final prayer, bathed in the river, and departed. (THJ, 148)

Further, Radhanath Swami continues his journey Kalighat of the Ganges in Howrah. He visits the temple Kali there and is dismayed to see the beggars and lepers outside the temple. He was rather shocked to see the sacrifice of a goat in the temple. He relates his dismay:

Across from the Goddess's altar were sacrificial altars stained with blood and flesh. Squealing frantically, a black goat was being lifted by the legs as its head was inserted between the bloody staves. Bare chested and chanting mantras, a priest swung a large wide, curved knife down and – swack – severed the head of the goat. Blood spurted from its neck. A lifeless head, its eye looking into nothingness, fell with an eerie thump to the ground while its body was immediately taken away for cooking to feed the poor. (TJH, 155)

Moreover, Radhanath Swami plans to go to Nepal to get his visa renewed. On his way to Nepal, he reaches Janakpur where a sadhu named Vasudev offers him to take him to a special historical place – a historical rock in an abandoned field. This saint is well-versed in both material and spiritual subjects. After reaching there, Vasudev requests him to listen to the story of his past ordeal and how he had taken the path of devotion to god. He was tormented by a black tantric and his disciples when he was working as a

professor in a college in Calcutta. The black tantric wanted him to initiate him into black rites and mysticism, but he refused. Then the black tantric and his disciples did everything possibly they could to force him into black rites. They influenced his mother who threw him out of the home; they also influenced the principal of the college who got him terminated from the college. To whatever place Vasudev went, the disciples reached there and tormented him. The black tantric created an invisible weapon to slay Vasudev. This weapon was ineffective if the victim chanted the name of lord. Ultimately the weapon kills the tantric himself. But the evil mystic still existed and dispatched his disciples to whatever place Vasudev was to seek revenge. Vasudev reveals:

“The evil mystic still exists; he does not have a gross body. Now he controls his disciple from the astral plane. Dispatching them to wherever I hide, to seek revenge. They hunt me down at all times. I cannot settle in any one place because within a matter of weeks they terrorize me.” (TJH, 215)

Radhanath Swami was shocked to hear this terrible story and commiserated with Vasudev for his miserable and pathetic life.

On the other hand, when he comes back to Janakpur again from Nepal, Radhanath Swami meets a Nepalese student named Vishnu Prasad. Vishnu Prasad is from a very rich and prosperous family. He is well-mannered and humble. He takes Radhanath Swami to his home who is impressed to see the life style and culture of his family. All the children of his family have great respect for elders and

they are obedient to the elders. Radhanath swami is completely swayed to see the family culture and the atmosphere that exists at Vishnu Prasad's home. He relates it:

Uncles, aunts, and cousins all lived under one roof, but I never heard a single voice rise in anger. They had nothing but respect for one another. In the morning, the children respectfully touched the feet of their and the parents, in turn, offered blessings. No matter what their age, the children, even the teenagers, were naturally obedient to their elders and the younger children showed honour to the eldest son as the representative of the parents. Having been brought up in 1960s America, I experienced this teenage respectfulness as a pleasant kind of cultural shock. (TJH, 2160)

Finally, Radhanath Swami reaches Vrindavan. There he encounters a devotee, Ghanshyam, and is dumbfounded to discover his devotion to Lord Gopijana Vallabh, i. e, Lord Krishna. Ghanshyam belongs to an affluent family. He comes to Vrindavan on a pilgrimage and decides to stay back in Vrindavan his all life and begins a spiritual life as an ascetic. His dedication to serve Lord Krishna is so strong that he does not return to his home even if his family members threaten him to debar from his ancestral property. Radhanath Swami relates Ghanshyam's life in Vrindavan:

Sleeping on the ground and daily begging for dry bread from the homes of Vrajbasis he never once hankered after former wealth. Instead, he said, “I felt grateful to

serve Krishna in his sweet home.”
(TJH 281)

Moreover, Ghanshyam lives a completely renounced life in Vrindavan. Someone from the village offers him three vajrotis and gur everyday. He offers these vajrotis and gur as a *prasad* to Lord Krishna and later consumes them. When Radhanath Swami starts visiting him in the morning, he gives these vajrotis and gur to him and starves himself. For Ghanshyam serving a devotee of Krishna is more important than anything else that is why he reined hungry all day long. He feels that service to others is his only wealth. Radhanath Swami is completely overwhelmed to learn this fact:

One afternoon, while bathing in the river, I happened to see a familiar sadhu. Expecting to receive customary blessings this Baba always offered, I was blindsided by the harsh reprimand he served me instead. ‘Because of you,’ he shouted from the riverbank, ‘Ghanshyam is starving.’

‘I don’t understand,’ I cried.

He glared at me. ‘A vajrobasi brings him three rotis everyday. That is his only food. And every day you eat all of it. How selfish!’

‘What?’ I gasped, while climbing up the riverbank. ‘This cannot be. Please believe me, I never knew.’
knew. (TJH, 282)

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During the two years that Radhanath Swami spends in India, he imbibes and internalises the Indian culture and its spiritual life. When he goes back to his country, he finds himself in a strange place because during these two years his life style had changed drastically and he finds his own country and its life style foreign to himself. On his way to America, he goes to Belgium. He gets disoriented:

Entering into the streets of Amsterdam, the entire environment seemed to foreign. How people dressed and related to one another seemed strange. Evening came so I checked into a youth hostel where I was given the bottom bed of a bunk in a common room. May be while I live quietly in bed, I thought, I can adjust my mind to these drastic changes. (TJH, 333)

Thus, the *The Journey Home* records the cultural encounters of Radhnath Swami in India in particular and in Asia in general. He is completely shocked to see the life of common citizens and that of the saints in the Himalayan regions. But he finds true spiritual life and a guru to whom he can trust.