The Meeting of East and West

The maximum development of the society will be reached when there is a balanced development in the physical, mental and spiritual spheres.

by P.R. Sarkar {mosgoogle}Though the human society is one and indivisible, still there are certain differences in the attitudes to life and the world between the East and the West. Both have their distinctly different mentalities. The East is predominantly subjective in outlook, whereas the West has a mainly objective bent of mind. The East, throughout its development, has maintained a subjective approach, whereas Western countries put great stress on objective development. Too much emphasis on either one of these approaches is not conducive to the all-round growth of the society. We can build up an ideal society only on the basis of a happy adjustment between the subjective and the objective approaches.... While the East is essentially spiritual in outlook, some philosophies have distorted spirituality to such an extent that they regard the world as an illusion. Some Indian Monists emphatically declare (that) the expressed world is an illusion. (They say that) human life is like a drop of water on a lotus leaf, therefore it is futile to try and develop the material world. Such philosophies advise to “know thyself”. All the religions of the East have clearly instructed their followers to try and accept the path of that which leads to supreme benevolence only, to the utter exclusion of that which leads to the acquisition of mundane objects. It may be that this sort of philosophy is not logically incorrect, but in practice this type of extreme idealism preaches that the world should be ignored. The individual human being may develop conscience, morality, renunciation, etc., and may reach the height of spirituality, but the society as a whole will not thereby progress. The maximum development of the society will be reached when there is balanced development in the physical, mental and spiritual spheres. The Asian countries, in spite of their long heritage of morality and spirituality, have been subject to great humiliation during periods of foreign invasion. While the higher knowledge of philosophy propagated by the oriental sages and saints has been accepted as a unique contribution to the storehouse of human culture and civilisation, the people of these lands could not resist the foreign invaders. The history of all the Asian countries, a region of so many religions, has been dominated by foreign powers for centuries together. This imbalance brought about their material deprivation and political subjugation. On the other hand, the West is completely obsessed with physical development. It has made spectacular progress in the fields of politics, economics, science, warfare, etc. In fact, it has made so much material progress that it seems to be the sovereign master of the water, land and air. But for all that, it is not socially content and miserably lacks spiritual wealth. Unlike the East, in the West plenty of wealth has created a crisis. Therefore, it is abundantly clear that no country can progress harmoniously with only one-sided development. Thus, it behooves both the East and the West to accept a synthetic ideology that stands for a happy synthesis between the two. Here, the East can help the West spiritually, whereas the materialistic West can extend its material help to the East. Both will be mutually benefited if they accept this golden policy. In the educational system of the East, there is the predominant element of spirituality. Oriental students used to go to their Guru’s house at the age of five and live there up to twenty-five years of age. They led a strictly ethical and spiritual life and were mainly taught spiritual knowledge and some mundane knowledge. Then next in their domestic life, they cultivated mundane knowledge and spiritual knowledge up to 50 years of age, and in the last quarter of their life they cultivated spiritual knowledge exclusively. So the people of the orient could not but be spiritual in their thoughts and actions. Whereas there is, in the Western system of education, a clear and unilateral emphasis on mundane knowledge. So to build up an ideal human society in the future, the balanced emphasis on the two is indispensable. We should remember that morality, spirituality and humanity, and a happy blending of occidental extroversial science and oriental introversial philosophy is the very foundation of our system of education. This is excerpted from a talk given in 1969, in Ranchi, India. it is published under the title of “Talks On Education”, in the book, Prout in a Nutshell Part 18.