I am Thou or I and Thou? Convergence versus Disclosure: Ramchandra Gandhi’s Meditations on the Truth of India

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I Am Thou of Ramchandra Gandhi is a literary and philosophical work, primarily an advaitin narrative of Indian reality and civilization as it is in the core both virtually and really and also a metaphysical cum aesthetic critique of its unmeaning polyphonic appearance or appearance in a distortion of Nayayika’s samyoga category. Samyoga or Juxtaposition, for Gandhi, is of two types, viz. surrealistic in its European nuance, and sacred. Modern Indian Civilization is more surreal as it exhibits a juxtapositional nature, an unmeaning cohabitation of family and cruelty, worship and pollution, learning and cowardice, beauty and poverty, power and fear, love and tyranny, and so on. ‘But’, as he says, ‘this participation of our country in the pathology of modern times ought not to obscure the sacred juxtapositions of our religious life and culture symbolized, for instance, in the juxtaposition of Gods and their Vahanas ... and strikingly beautifully and revealingly the juxtaposition of Sri Lakshmi and the lotus on which she sits or stands assuredly but not grossly.’ (Gandhi : 1984 : 58-59) The sacred type of samyoga too may be called surrealistic but in its sacred dimension. At the deeper level it constitutes the Indian reality and exhibits its truth: “Yet perhaps Indian uniqueness is not co-existence as such but the co-existence of co-existence and synthesis. Hegemonistic Christianity, Islam, Capitalism and Communism could well become transformed if only they were to see in this samyoga of co-existence and synthesis a way out of their dilemmas and
antagonisms and we would do well to remind ourselves of the pitfalls of samyoga-abandoning hegemonism before we imitate the powerful and the glamorous in the modern world. The sky and the earth and the sea both coexist uninterruptedly and also constitute the backdrop of all drama and beyond horizons point to unrealized possibilities. One without the other is caricature and not reality. Indian achievements of civilization have powerfully exemplified the coexistence of coexistence and coherence, and perhaps Indian failure of civilization is nearly always a departure from that norm of sacredly surreal samyoga.” (Ibid: 59-60) The sky and the earth and the sea are analogically and metaphorically substitutive of the vedantin’s Oneness for holding the polyphonic world in its Indian way. Can one identify oneself with this backdrop before addressing it? Can the declaration I am Thou precede the dialogical realization of I and Thou? This question constitutes the central problematic of my paper.

Presence of the addressee is of a special nature because no address can categorize the addressee either in terms of conceptualization by the addressee (self) or as a fact circumscribed with other facts, history and preconceptions. Nor the presence can be conceived in terms of absence in its ordinary sense because absence is from the viewer, thinker, reader, writer, in short, from the subject or self. Hence both presence and absence of an other should not be taken as a category borrowed from ordinary, or existing scientific frame. There cannot be any second reference point in addressing an other as Thou. Thou is the only and final reference point in the act of addressing. Reverting back to the self as the reference point is to lose the meaning of addressing. This is a summary of the history of dialogical thought from Martin Buber to Emmanuel Levinas. It is story of dissolution
of the so-called empirical self and emergence of dialogical self in Martin Buber and self as responsibility in Levinas.

But then it is difficult to address someone if by addressing I mean relating myself to an other, - an other who is not my choice, my construction but an other with full autonomy of his/her being beyond presence or absence facing the self. It therefore demands a hyphen between I and Thou. An easy or taken-for granted acceptability of the self by the other or other by the self is resisted here by the very semiotics of the relationship. Hence the self becomes responsibility per se for its very existence in the face of the other. This is the responsibility for disclosure that is authenticated by the hyphen i.e. the space between I and Thou. From this point of view, a Thou is like an icon representing the relationship and the space, which is a hyphen. Given the constraints of language, I am Thou is to be understood as meaning convergence whereas I and Thou speaks of a disclosure of the self towards the other so that ultimately there is no I. Metaphysically speaking, if metaphysics is understood as a sector of human studies that takes up the task of unearthing the meaning of reality, both the expressions move for a dissolution of the ontology of self. Hence ‘disclosure’ as a phenomenon builds up a point of view for dissolution of self and projecting the reality as permeated by Thou. In Ramchandra Gandhi’s phraseology, it may be called the Atman-Brahman equation constituting the central thematic for envisaging the nature of truth in Indian context.

From the advaitin standpoint of Ramchandra Gandhi, another self emerges from and after this dissolution, - an I the meaning of which is drawn from this permeation or Thou. In close consonance with Kalidas Bhattacharya’s concept of anekanta Vedanta (Bhattacharya: 1982) Gandhi’s Vedanta serves as an important parameter for explicating the essence of Indian culture.
Addressing the other becomes an index of union through relation in this context.

Unlike Martin Buber Ramchandra Gandhi assigns primacy to union and not so much to the relation. In the preface of the book *I am Thou* he writes, “I and you and he and she, immediacy and intimacy of self-consciousness, root immanence, *this*, are not essentially other than the vastness of all-encompassing and all-exceeding reality imaged by the apparent limitlessness of space and time and circumstance, root transcendence, *that.*” (Gandhi R:1984:11) Self-knowledge, from this point of view, is not an empirical self-knowledge that consists in an oblivion of *root immanence* and *root transcendence*. Due to its experiential nature for discovering a different form of life, Martin Buber’s concept of dialogue chose its own trajectory in the history of European philosophy and did not remain settled with Buber alone. The very meaning of presence, for example, gathered further nuances in the hands of Levinas in the recent past. A phenomenology of self consequent upon a phenomenology of *Thou* as developed in Ramchandra Gandhi’s meditative discourse could well be the endeavor of the dialogical philosophers of Europe. Ramchandra Gandhi unearths this dialogical essence of reality in vedantic diction: “The foundation of all human communication is addressing, the vocative identification of one another by human beings, i.e. their identification of one another not as beings of this and that kind, possessing this or that characteristic, but as themselves, nirguna centers of all self-consciousness. It is a consequence of vocative identification, of addressing one another, and subsequent to it, that we go on to communicate to one another a variety of things about ourselves and the world, but in vocative identification we essentially merely stir one another to a nirguna conception of ourselves. We do not of course easily always or
even much or at all notice this, but in a variety of situations, and not merely through philosophical analysis, this is brought home to us in the thick of our worldly communicative life as the essential truth of ourselves and as the essential message of that life when all that has to be said is said and there remains a bare nirguna identification of ourselves as that, that we are. Love, aloneness, joy and peace also bring this insight.” (Gandhi :1984:150-151)

This points to a deeper meaning of communication, - communication that is not lost in worldly thickly communicative facts and incidents. The vedanic samskara embedded in it is meant for cleansing up the empirical world of communication and understanding the world of vyavaharika or pragmatic goals. It sets up the norms for it. Success or failure of such norms depends on the extent to which a society or individual sustains the consonance between this deeper samskara and the ongoing empirical world. Kalidas Bhattacharya spoke of this consonance as a regulative principle for safeguarding human life from any possible deviation from the path of Absolute as ideal of life: "Ordinarily when we speak of the world as such, we really speak of the things of the world, of the world, in other words, as just a loose collection of such things, no unitary integral whole, no one-entity by itself. The question of ‘world as a genuine whole’ arises – one may say, as a regulative principle – only in the context of some genuine human aspiration, when, for example, one attempts, more or less reflectively, to know this world, as when one builds up science, or when, in art, morality or religion, his attitude is directed towards the Absolute as such, whether this Absolute, as the most fundamental unity, stands outside the individual things, governing them all together as a lump and ab extra or wholly inheres in each of them, regulating and connecting them from within. In either case, the regulative character is to be understood as somehow
referring to the whole, not to this, that and that, which are elements of the whole.” (Bhattacharyya: 1975: 26-27) Nirguna identification of ourselves through the address of a Thou who, for Ramchandra Gandhi, is a Guru or for Martin Buber the Eternal Thou reminds us of this samskara. In fact the beginning of a dialogue between Guru and Shishya is like a dialogue between the Eternal Thou and the mortal self for transcendence of the latter towards a vedantic vision of this kind. For Martin Buber, and for that matter for most of the Bhaktivadins, it is the act of addressing that is more important. Dialogue among non-eternal thous may become profane losing the essence of dialogue if a thou turns out to be an It. Hence Buber says, “Every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou; by means of every particular Thou the primary word addresses the eternal Thou. Through this mediation of the Thou of all beings fulfillment, and non-fulfillment, of relations comes to them: the inborn Thou is realized in each relation and consummated in none. It is consummated only in the direct relation with the Thou that by its very nature cannot become It.” (Buber: 1958:75)

With an apology to Gandhi’s ‘apologies to Wittgenstein’ (Ibid: 248) we must contend that the purpose of advaita is to cross the boundary of linguistic privacy that may be invoked at the initiation of the Shishya or sadhaka into mantra-diksha. The dialogical culture in Indian history of truth-seeking cannot survive with strict adherence to private communication. In fact, the privacy of religious/spiritual communication is a misnomer; it is personal, and, in advaitin sense, as explicated by Bhattacharyya and Gandhi, against the larger backdrop of socio-cultural ethos of India this dialogical exchange is the foundation of the cultural being of an Indian. Without a physical/literal disclosure of the mantra the sadhaka communicates the being of it to all and to the entire world because a mantra, in defiance of
early Wittgenstein’s thesis, does not have any referent; it dissolves the language-reality bifurcation. Hence its communication is possible neither through a literal disclosure nor as a pointer to something outside it. But it must be communicated through living. A mantra is essentially tantamount to addressing in Buberian or Vashnavite’s sense. In this sense, *I am Thou* is also a mantra, - a mantra that is shareable as a cultural principle too.

The vedantic foundation of Indian culture, according to Kalidas Bhattacharyya, consists in an unparalleled version of pluralistic perception of One Brahman in whom many truths get integrated teleologically as indices of One Truth: “Every Jiva (individual being or soul) is a part of Narayana, everywhere there is revelation of Brahman, all is one in the core, diversity of the world is an expression of inscrutable lila of Mahamaya. Therefore the principal goal of human life is to glean at the maximum the great unity at the root of all diversity and to realize that all diversities hinge upon this principle of Oneness.” (Bhattacharyya : 1982) It is Vedanta in its widest sense signifying a culture or historical collective psyche that discerns what truth is for life as such. Its shareable nature and communicability is obvious or else it would not become a culture. For meditations on this truth and its communication to the world, Gandhi would perhaps agree, one needs to be self-consciously in dialogue with the temper, ethos, values of advaita and finally with the Advaita or what Kalidas Bhattacharyya calls the Absolute. It cannot be summarily set aside as Buberian dualism. Dialogism is not dualism. As Deshpande rightly points out, Ramchandra Gandhi of *I am Thou* is a participant in a religious form of life “as it manifests in the acts of Bhakti, surrender, divine grace, suffering, satyagraha, sadhana and the like.” (Deshpande : 2007)
In fact from Kalidas Bhattacharyya to Ramchandra Gandhi, a proclivity to a shift from analytical mode of doing philosophy towards engagement with philosophy more in a more metaphysical, phenomenological and literary fashion is noticeable. Philosophy becomes more like story telling and narrative building for unearthing the so far unknown versions of Truth that we commonly experience, read or write about in media, jurisprudence and other documents. Within the purview of Gandhi’s narrative, whatever he projects as the final reference point may be accepted. But he himself offers an option to us for opening a dialogue with him about the nirguna I or the Thou. It is noteworthy that Buber’s I and Thou too is a philosophical cum literary work. We can validly imagine an unending dialogue between Martin Buber and Ramchandra Gandhi in which the former may be dialogically led by the latter towards the Advaita and the latter disapproves himself by ostensibly proving the efficacy of dialogue! The heightened image of the self in dialogue imagining a convergence of I with Thou and then a relation of identity between self and the other is an advaitin reflection. But dialogue takes into account the incorrigible phenomenon of non-identity between self and the other at the very moment there is a word to describe it. Would Ramchandra Gandhi sing with us: “With one salute to Thee, My Lord, with one salute to Thee, let all my life fly beyond the domain of Great Death”? Ramchandra Gandhi’s phenomenology of self, in another important facet of his this narrative, is inextricably bound up with his conception of linguistic action and following that his conception of truth of action. It shows even more clearly the necessity of dialogic disclosure to an Other for a graduation of that communicatively intentional self-consciousness into a non-ego-specific being for a further convergence into the advaitin sea of the relation of identity between the self and that all-encompassing other. Every linguistic
action, for Gandhi, is a proof of intentionality of self-consciousness in causal independence and autonomy. In our communicative acts too this causal independence is ascribed to each other signifying freedom and intentionality of freedom: “The tiniest bit of linguistic action ... is proof of intentionality, manifestation of our independence from causality in the narrow but humanity-defining area of our lives where self-consciousness explicitly reigns. The incompletest linguistic action is such a proof, it is an announcement of celebration of self-consciousness in its aspect of independence from causality... But we do more in saying anything at all than celebrate causal independence and autonomy, the substratum of ritual performance in all linguistic activity has another equally fundamental dimension. We establish or seek to establish a relationship of causal independence between ourselves. For the actual or imaginative communicative intention in all linguistic action is such that I necessarily seek in you, my would-be or fancied audience, a contemporary witness to myself in my linguistic stance or dance or act or whatever, and not a mere causal target of my action. In the absence of or abstraction from your actual or imagined contemporaneity with me, my linguistic action cannot be described as a communicative venture; and your contemporaneity, actual or imagined, establishes or envisions you in causal independence from myself, immunizing you utterly in your role of pure witness against my causality” (Gandhi: 1984 : 235-6) We can think of moral equals in dialogue and talk about identical beings coming into the field of communication. But can we talk about spiritual equals? Then there will be no Eternal Thou. Then there will be no humility. Then there will be no assemblage of seven heavens on one tiny word shivering in hesitations. Then there will be no ambiguation of the world. Then there will be no truth of action. Also, mutual causal
independence in the context of religiousity is for seeking blessings or for surrender or simply for prayer in which the eternity enters for a further understanding of temporality in mundane cultural spheres. With insistence upon spiritual equals, if I am permitted to use Ramchandra Gandhi’s stylistic physiognomy, then we cannot contemplate with wonder on the sacredly surreal appearance of two santhal girls inseparable in comradeship cinematically bringing about the lila of Atman-Brahman. “Jai Shivashakti, Jai Prajapati, Jai Suryanarayana”. Gandhi’s phenomenology of self is finally based on a beautiful synergy of dialogue and convergence, identity and non-identity, I and Thou and I am Thou.
References


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