Hospitality as Openness to the Other: 
Levinas, Derrida and the Indian Hospitality Ethos*

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In contemporary discourses on cosmo-political hospitality, contributions of Derrida, and especially of Levinas, have special significance on account of the vision, scale and relevance of their discussions on the theme, in the context of an increasingly globalizing international scene, and the consequent global encounter with diversity. The article strives to read the Indian hospitality tradition and ethos, articulated in several of India's culturally significant texts, and available in some way as a cultural practice even to this day (propped up by a heritage of tolerance and acceptance of difference, which, however, has not necessarily translated into egalitarian social structures), through the lenses of cosmo-political hospitality, found in the writings of Levinas and Derrida, as openness to the other, irrespective of social labels imposed on her/him. Although homely, ritualistic and hierarchical, Indian hospitality was always universalistic in intent. The article argues that an attempt to recapture the core of the Indian ethos of hospitality, should take into account this universalistic intent, revisited as genuine openness to the other person, in the light of contemporary concerns raised by Levinas and Derrida, and fully awake to India's and the world's transformed context.

Introduction

The word ‘hospitality’, meaning cordial reception of and disposition towards guests and visitors, is today a word challenged. The word is challenged to be more than benevolent reception of guests. To underline this challenge, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) calls hospitality ‘hostipitality’

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The contradiction within the concept of hospitality (hostipality), the supposed mark of liberality, manifests as hospitality to the welcome guests and hostility towards unwelcome guests. Derrida’s deconstruction of the notion further shows that conditions laid down by the host limits hospitality ordinarily, whether it is in a home, city or nation. Hence, he takes conditional hospitality into the realm of unconditionality. ‘Anyone who is anyone arrives at any moment and passes without needing a key for the door’ (Derrida 2007: 260). Here we have hospitality that is limitless and unbounded.

In this article, we look at the Indian ethos of hospitality, available in some way to much of the subcontinent even to this day, through the lenses of the above-mentioned unbounded notions of hospitality. Our reference material for the study will be the works of Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) and Derrida on this theme, and selections from the large heritage of Indian texts like the Vedas, Upanisads, Manusmrti, Mahābhārata, Śrimad Bhāgavadam and the Tirukkural. The following dialogue between a cultural ethos and a conception that came out of a particular historical context, we believe, will throw light on the need for revitalizing and recapturing tradition in response to contemporary challenges. Moreover, as an inter-cultural engagement, the article breathes hospitality in its very texture.

As if to God:
Indian Hospitality Culture

India is famously described as a land of legendary hospitality, bolstered by a cultural and religious spirit of tolerance. There is no doubt that Vedic Hinduism treated hospitality as a cardinal virtue, flowing out from the great human virtue of liberality, praised much in the Rg Veda. ‘He is liberal who gives to the suppliant desiring food, wandering about distressed; to him there is an ample (recompense), and he contracts friendship with his adversaries’ (The Rg-Veda 2002: 328 [X:CXVII:3]). According to John McKenzie, liberality ‘found a place permanently in the thought and practice of the Hindu people, and all through it retains something of its original character’ (McKenzie 1971: 10). Later Indic religions, like Buddhism, fostered this inheritance.1 Hospitality offered by the householder to the wandering monk and the religious student of twice-born castes was considered a religious duty. When offering was made to all gods each day, the house-holder and his wife did not refuse anyone who asked for food.

In the Upanisads, hospitality and speaking of truth were considered two positive virtues, which in turn could be traced in some way to the great Indian virtue of ahimsā or non-injury. Negatively you are not to cause harm, and positively you are to give and be hospitable. As part of the ritualistic tradition, denial of hospitality wrought demerit upon the householder and its performance brought him merit (Marasinghe 1999: 394). It is in the Upanisads that we see the most cited passage on Indian hospitality, ‘atithidevo bhavah’ (treat thy guest as God). This instruction is given as part of the parting instructions to be passed on by the teacher to the student at the time of his leave-taking. The student is to be truthful in speech, diligent in the study of the Veda, firm in the practice of Dharma and the search for the wholesome and the great. He should not neglect the sacrificial works owed to the gods and to the ancestors. He should treat his mother, father, teacher and his guest as God (Taittirīya-Upanisad 2000: 245–6 [1:II:1–3]). A study of the Upanisads reveals that a strong hospitality ethos was already part of the Vedic society...
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when these sacred texts were composed. In the Brhadāranyaka Upanisad, the cardinal virtue taught to the gods is ‘subduing’, to the asurās it is ‘mercy’ and the virtue for humans is ‘giving’ (Brhadāranyaka Upanisad 2000: 95–6 [V:2:1–3]). Hence, it is from such a spirit of generous, liberal outpouring towards the other that hospitality was conceived as a social ideal. The Sanskrit word for ‘guest’, atithi, is revealing in that it literally means ‘the one who comes without prior notice’, without a set time, without appointment. Atithi need not be a stranger, but may be as well. In certain passages of the Taittirīyaka-Upanisad, a spirit of unconditional hospitality ideal is visible. ‘One should not refuse anyone in one’s house: that should be the vow. So one should get food by any means possible. Folk say, ‘Food is prepared for him’ (Taittirīyaka-Upanisad 2000: 257 [III:10:1]). At the most, we may attribute only a spiritual notion of reciprocity to such a conception of hospitality. It is the karmic order of nature that reciprocates the giver with karmic merit, prosperity and more food. The hospitable act is non-reciprocal in the sense that there is no expectation of a return from the receiver of hospitality. More than an open home, food is a symbol of hospitality. Hospitality is an act of giving.

In later times, when the laws were codified and the society more rigidly stratified, we still found a strong hospitality ethos. The text to focus for this period is unmistakably Manusmṛti, the most important of the nineteen Dharmaśāstras, and a work that reflected the orthodoxy of its times, with a mixed bag of social ethics injunctions, which have had a haunting effect on conservative India (cf. Jois 2004: 25–27; Mohanty 1997: 1–28). Here we find an open hospitality ideal coming into conflict with a rigidly structured and unequally stratified social fabric. Manusmṛti prescribes rules of behaviour for each caste, particularly for the three twice-born upper castes, according to their four stages of life (varnāśrama dharma). Hospitality is one of the ‘five great sacrifices’ or homage (pancha mahayajña) of the householder. Manusya yajña should be understood as a much broader concept than a narrow understanding of hospitality: it is all charity and social action. Nevertheless, Manusmṛti specifically speaks about hospitality in its narrow sense: ‘Having performed this Bali offering, he shall feed his guest and, according to the rule, give alms to an ascetic (and) to a student’ (The Laws of Manu 1964: 92 [3:94]). There is a complicated hospitality ritual meant for the twice-born householder but this hospitality, ritualistic as it is, is most meritoriously offered to a brāhmaṇa. But, non-ritualistic hospitality is to be offered to all: ‘A guest who is sent by the (setting) sun in the evening, must not be driven away by a householder’ (The Laws of Manu 1964: 94 [3:105–6]). It is offered according to the social status of the guest: ‘to the most distinguished in the best form, to the lower ones in a lower form, to equals in an equal manner’ (The Laws of Manu 1964: 94–5 [3:107]). Verse 112 says that a vaiśya and śūdra guest may be allowed ‘to eat with his servants, showing (thereby) his compassionate disposition.’ The householder is to eat only after feeding the guests, after performing the ritual acts and the rules of philanthropy. Manusmṛti’s discussion on hospitality is preoccupied with the treatment of brāhmaṇa guest rather than another, although offering hospitality to all guests is sporadically praised.

The epic literature of India, especially the Mahābhārata, gives a lot of insight into the way of life and customs of the people of its time. The hospitality ethos found in Mahābhārata’s long instructions to the kings and the householders, is once again universalistic in intent but constrained by the social parameters within which individuals
operated in its time. Its thirteenth section, Anuśāsana Parva, like Taittiriya-Upanisad, praises the giving of food to the seeker, although in a hierarchically meritorious order: ‘The giver of food is said to be the giver of life’ (The Mahabharata, Vol. IV 2008: [Book 13, Anuśāsana Parva, Part II, Section LXIII] 75). Section CXLIII of Anuśāsana Parva speaks of the vow of hospitality to all, amongst other virtues, as a must for a person to be born in a higher caste in a future life. Section II says that the virtue of hospitality can help a householder to transcend death. This instruction is given by the virtuous King Sudarśana, who wanted to conquer death as a householder, to his wife Oghāvati:

Do thou never act contrary to (the wishes of) those that seek our hospitality. Thou shouldst make no scruple about the means by which guests are to be welcomed, even if thou have to offer thy own person. O beautiful one, this vow is always present in the mind, since for householders, there is no higher virtue than hospitality accorded to guests. (The Mahabharata, Vol. IV 2008: [Book 13, Anuśāsana Parva, Part I, Section II] 8; italics added for emphasis)

The story goes on to say that Oghāvati had to take the extreme step of offering her chaste self as sacrifice to a guest, who was but God who came to test their hospitality. In an interesting study of the hospitality ritual and women’s place in it, Stephanie Jamison points out that surrendering of even one’s wife to the stranger was the ultimate demand made by Indian hospitality. She writes: ‘Women figure prominently in both areas, as dispensers of hospitality on the one hand and, more important, as the ultimate exchange token in the most fundamental exchange relation...’4 (Jamison 1996: 115). Throughout the Anuśāsana Parva, we learn of ‘hospitality towards all’ as one of the chief duties of the householder and more meritorious than a hundred sacrifices, but, as in the Manusmṛti, hospitality offered to a brāhmaṇa is more meritorious. It is non-reciprocal in the sense that hospitality in return for hospitality was considered meanness (though reaping of karmic merit was the aim of virtuous hospitality). Section XCIII of Anuśāsana Parva has this curse: ‘Let him be another’s guest for receiving in return those acts of hospitality which he has done to that other!’ , with the translator’s note that ‘to receive acts of hospitality in return for those rendered was regarded as not only meanness but also destructive of merit’ (The Mahabharata, Vol. IV 2008: [Book 13, Anuśāsana Parva, Part II, Section XCIII] 164). Book 12, the Śānti Parva, Section CXLVI, says that ‘Hospitality should be shown to even one’s foe when he comes to one’s house’ like a tree that does not withdraw its shade from its feller (The Mahabharata, Vol. III 2008: [Book 12, Santi Parva, Part I, Section CXLVI] 326). Section XCI of Ādi Parva enjoins that the householder should perform ‘the rites of hospitality unto all arriving at his abode, and should never use anything without giving a portion thereof to others’ (The Mahabharata, Vol. I 2008: [Book 1, Adi Parva, Section XCI] 194). Śānti Parva and Anuśāsana Parva give elaborate performance methods regarding hospitality (cf. The Mahabharata, Vol. IV 2008: [Book 13, Anuśāsana Parva, Part II, Section CXLII] 289–97).

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa or Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, one of the most important purāṇas or religious stories of India, tells the tale of the kind king Rantideva, who offered absolute hospitality to his guests, even forgoing his person when he was hungry and thirsty after forty-eight days of fast (Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 1992, Vol. 9: 659–73 [9:21:1–18]). He even gave the last bit of drinking
water left to the three visitors (a brāhmaṇa, a śūdra and a candāla outcaste surrounded by dogs) with appropriate hospitable decorum, because he perceived ‘the presence of the Supreme Personality of Godhead in every living being’ and he believed all beings were equal (ibid.: 662). But the king’s guests were Lord Brahma and Lord Śiva. The Bhagavad Gītā, the foremost among the Hindu scriptures, says: ‘With the same evenness of love they behold a Brahmin who is learned and holy, or a cow, or an elephant, or a dog, and even the man who eats a dog’ (The Bhagavad Gītā 1994: 67 [5:18]). Hence, Rantideva’s hospitality does seem to cross all border and strictures to touch certain unconditionality. Another Bhāgavata story speaks of the hospitality of Lord Krisna offered to his saintly but destitute brāhmaṇa childhood friend Sudāma, at the palace of Dwārakā (Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 1992, Vol. 10.4: 307–70 [10:80–81]). The story wonderfully exemplifies the cultural sentiments associated with the reception of guests, as it is Lord Krisna himself who is showering Sudāma, the typical penniless one dressed in rags, with hospitality.

The ancient Tamil ethical poem of Saint Tiruvalluvar, the Tirukkural, is another ancient Indian source that praises the virtue of hospitality. ‘The posterity of householders who gather wealth without misdeeds and share meals without miserliness will never perish’ (Tiruvalluvar 2000: 19 [I:II:5:44]). Hence hospitality creates merits. Chapter nine of the Tirukkural (kural 81–90) is completely dedicated to the theme of hospitality (ibid.: 27). The first kural of this chapter tells us: ‘The whole purpose of earning wealth and maintaining a home is to provide hospitality to guests.’ The chapter instructs the householder to receive guests courteously and cheerfully. The Tirukkural does not strictly go by any caste hierarchy in the extending of hospitality. Liberal hospitality is seen as the way to prosperity and the host should never expect to see no more guests. Most importantly, the Tirukkural adds that the advantages of the hospitable disposition are immeasurable (ibid.: 27 [I:II:9:87]), its reward is eschatological as the hospitable householder will be ‘a welcomed guest of those whose home is Heaven’ (ibid. [I:II:9:86]), and he/she should not hurt the guest even by an ‘unwelcome look’ (ibid. [I:II:9:90]). The Tirukkural’s hospitality injunctions are universalistic as there is no mention of the merit of the guest and it goes by the idea of spiritual, eschatological and even material reciprocity (prosperity) in return.

**Unbounded Hospitality: Levinas, Derrida**

The notion of hospitality that we see in Levinas and Derrida is indeed unconditional. Derrida calls Levinas’s Totality and Infinity (1991; henceforth TI) ‘an immense treatise of hospitality’ (Derrida 1999a: 21, 59). In fact, he characterizes the whole Levinas oeuvre as concerned with hospitality, rather than ‘ethics’, ‘the other’, ‘responsibility’ or whatsoever. It is an ‘ethics as hospitality’ (ibid.: 19), ‘a first philosophy of hospitality’ (ibid.: 20), a ‘pre-originary hospitality, anarchic goodness, infinite fecundity’ (ibid.: 95). Pointing out the ‘excess of the ethical over the political, an ‘ethics beyond the political’ in Levinas (ibid.: 61) and the difficulties of application hidden in his themes, Derrida tells us that Levinas’s eyes were pointedly fixed at the twentieth century’s cruel treatment of the immigrant, the refugee, the exile, the displaced and the foreigner (ibid.: 64).

For Levinas, the nation-state’s inhospitable and inhuman treatment of the refugee is never justified and so his strongest defence goes with ‘the stranger, the widow and the orphan’ and, especially,
the alien refugee without a land or a home. Levinas, and later Derrida, articulate a hospitality that unconditionally opens the door of the home, the heart, the nation, and all that is ‘mine’ to the other. The whole of Levinas’s writing effort—indeed a life-mission—had this single theme of exploring a disarming and peace-emanating intellectual edifice, an authentically pluralistic originary ethics, which he dedicated his efforts after having survived the Holocaust. In the final pages of TI he reiterates unequivocally that constructive peace cannot be achieved by shunning battles and building empires, but: ‘Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism’ (Levinas 1991: 306). In this, Levinas was not trying to explain violence but to see through the phenomenological eye ‘a world of infinite responsibility’ where future oppression would prove ‘inconceivable’ (Manderson 2006: 4). TI was a calm, collected phenomenological digging into the ontological violence of ‘totalizing’ and a huge statement for the infinitely inassimilable other to whom the ‘I’ owes an infinite debt of responsibility.

Hospitality spoken of in TI is more primary than the concrete and limited opening of the doors of home to the stranger. It is primarily welcoming the other, the face. Derrida’s reading of Levinas’s oeuvre as centrally concerned with hospitality is not a specialized reading. Levinas says in the preface to the TI: ‘This book will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality; in it the idea of infinity is consummated’ (Levinas 1991: 27). The other person, the stranger is inassimilable, irreducible to any concept or possession; he/she is infinitely other than the same, the self, and this ‘difference’ calls into question the self’s egoistic spontaneity in the primal ethical encounter with the other. It is in communication, language and conversation that the ‘I’ coexists with the other without infringing her alterity, and this cohabitation and sharing of the world is ethical in the sense that it ‘puts the spontaneous freedom within us into question’ (ibid.: 51) and metaphysical in the sense that here we are face to face with the infinitely transcendent other. Hospitality restricts the ego’s desire to satisfy itself in complete freedom and spontaneity. It is a transcendence that gives to the self ‘powers of welcome, of gift, of full hands, of hospitality’ (ibid.: 205).

‘Home’ is the site for the self to be completely separated and contended with its own enjoyment. It is the site of sensibility, which is the first human activity—before knowing, rationalizing, pattern-recognizing, generalizing and systematizing. Sensibility is complete non-transcendence. Home is the site of sensibility, of possessions, of security from the hostile and the elemental, of bringing the fruits of labour in and managing the world, and, importantly, of recollection, representation, inwardness, freedom, spontaneity, familiarity, intimacy and interiority—all markers of the ego’s separation. But the human is not only enjoyment and sensibility, but also desire—desire for infinity, for the inassimilable other. The intimacy and interiority of the home is always already breached because the home is already human and social. For Levinas, the ground for the opening up of interiority, of hospitality, is the ‘woman’, the ‘feminine alterity’. Such a welcome brings meaning to dwelling—‘it is a recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome’ (ibid.: 156). The ‘feminine’ here means the gentle, welcoming side of all humans, that one meets most often in the authentic home (ibid.: 158; Harris 1995).
Thus the feminine is the ‘welcome of the dwelling’.

In the home there is already this ‘relation with something I do not live from’ or enjoy—‘the discreet presence of the Feminine’ (Levinas 1991: 170). But in order that I be able to refuse enjoyment and possession, ‘I must know how to give what I possess’ (ibid.: 171). The encounter with the infinite other, challenges the self’s freedom and possession, accomplishes true hospitality of the welcome offered. When it thus blooms, hospitality is completely non-selective: ‘…no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home… The chosen home is the very opposite of a root. It indicates a disengagement, a wandering which has made it possible…’ (ibid.: 172). The other-seeking dynamism of the self, Levinas locates within itself by drawing on the notion of transcendence. In the accomplishing of hospitality, language plays a significant part: ‘The relationship with the Other, transcendence, consists in speaking the world to the Other’ (ibid.: 173). ‘…it puts in common a world hitherto mine’ (ibid.: 174).

In his later works, Levinas further radicalizes the notion of hospitality. The religious overtones of the Hebraic tradition are evidently clear and Levinas embraces them unapologetically, though in his more philosophical works this merely remains suggestive. What is suggestive in these works is made explicit in others such as Difficult Freedom (1963), where welcome offered to the stranger is spoken of as ‘the very content of faith. It is an undecidable responsibility… Before appearing to the Jews… the Stranger is one towards whom one is obligated… from the beginning, it (the Jewish faith) bears the entire weight of all other men’ (Levinas 1997: 173; italics as in the original). Eschatologically the Hebrew believed that every person is a sojourner in the land, whose owner is Yahweh. Leviticus (25: 23) reads: ‘Land will not be sold absolutely, for the land belongs to me, and you are only strangers and guests of mine’ (The New Jerusalem Bible 1985: 167). Moreover, the Hebrew’s historical memory of being an alien in a foreign land became a repeated divine injunction not to oppress the alien. Leviticus 19: 34 reads: ‘You will treat resident aliens as though they were native-born and love them as yourself—for you yourselves were once aliens in Egypt’ (ibid.: 159). This radicalization of hospitality, based on Hebraic ethos, is accomplished in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (1981: henceforth OB). TI says that ‘The subject is a host’ (Levinas 1991: 299); OB says that ‘A subject is a hostage’ (Levinas 1981: 112). TI says that in the subject there are open spaces for the infinite otherness, the ‘I’ is burning with responsibility for the other; OB says the ‘I’ is ‘Substitution’ for the other. The relation with the other is thus ‘substitution’, the basis for the burden of responsibility, ‘as being-in-one’s-skin, having-the-other-in-one’s-skin’ (ibid.: 114), the phenomenological foundation for any possible bit of human sacrifice for another (cf. Bernasconi 2002). So then, hospitality is not a one-time action or achievement, something done and completed. It is a permanent human condition as long as there is the other human. The subject is no more hosting the other but she is permanently the hostage of the other. ‘Adequation is impossible… To take hold of oneself for a present of welcome is already to take one’s distance, and miss the neighbour’ (Levinas 1981: 88). But why should it be so? For Levinas, this question ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ has ‘meaning only if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself’ (ibid.: 117). He is here speaking about the prehistory of the ego, which first comes into contact with the other in human warmth. He goes on to say that there can
be pity, compassion, pardon and proximity, the simple ‘after you, Sir’, the little of these that there is, is possible because of this primacy of being the hospitable hostage. Substitution is possible due to the primary desire arising out of sensibility. But it is a ‘non-erotic proximity’, ‘a desire of the non-desirable’, ‘a desire of the stranger in the neighbour’; it is ‘outside of concupiscence’ (Levinas 1981: 123). This primary ‘hostage-ability’ is the ground for responsibility, which is ‘what first enables one to catch sight of and conceive of value’ (ibid.).

Derrida’s late fascination with hospitality, as one of his many ethical/political themes (as against Levinas’s central pervasive preoccupation with the ‘hospitable welcome offered to the other’) towards the end of his astonishingly prolific career, was profoundly influenced by Levinas’s themes. In fact, we began this essay referring to Derrida’s analysis of unconditional hospitality. In his deconstructive treatment of hospitality (Derrida 2007), he skilfully demonstrates that there indeed is a double, a hidden contradiction within the very notion of hospitality: welcoming the loved and banishing the unloved stranger (hospitality/hostility). Pulling the concept to its limits, Derrida shows that authentic hospitality knows no bound, unlike Kant’s political hospitality enunciated in Perpetual Peace (Kant 1903).10 And to shower it on another in its fullest measure, one needs to shower it without the other knowing that it is being performed, for the moment the other knows, there occurs conditionality and the margins of power relations.

There must be a threshold. But if there is a threshold, there is no more hospitality. This is the difference, the gap, between the hospitality if [sic] invitation and the hospitality of visitation. In visitation there is no door. Anyone who is anyone arrives at any moment and passes without needing a key for the door. The customs are not checked for the visitation. There is a customs office and a police control for the invitation. Therefore hospitality becomes the threshold or the door. (Derrida 2007: 260)

Derrida does this deconstructive revealing elsewhere with several other similar themes as well (cf. Derrida 1992, for a deconstructive analysis of the notion of ‘giving’). Such is the taxing test of limits Derrida wants to exercise on human goodness, frail and circum-spect as it is.

Derrida, in line with Levinas, proposes the same anarchic hospitality. The difference between the foreigner and the absolute other is that ‘the latter cannot have a name or a family name, the absolute or unconditional hospitality I would like to offer him or her presupposes a break with hospitality in the ordinary sense, with conditional hospitality’ (Derrida 2000: 25). The unconditional law of hospitality,11 however, requires the particular laws of hospitality that limit it and make it impossible. Without these particular laws, the unconditional law would be utopian, illusory and the opposite of what it is. But they in turn threaten and corrupt the unconditional law of hospitality. There lies the contingency of the unconditional law of hospitality. Are we in a no man’s land? Derrida has expressed elsewhere his vision of cosmopolitan cities of refuge.

Our experience of cities of refuge then will not only be that which cannot wait, but something which calls for an urgent response, a just response, more just in any case than the existing law… I also imagine the experience of cities of refuge as giving rise to a place (lieu) for
reflection—for reflection on the question of asylum and hospitality—and for a new order law and a democracy to come to be put to the test (experimentation). (Derrida 2001a: 23)

We have noted earlier Derrida’s observation that Levinas never turned his eyes away from twentieth century’s violence to the refugee and the immigrant (Derrida 1999a: 64), though he seldom referred directly to this specific distress. Derrida is now referring specifically to that very alternative vision of peaceful coexistence that ever so characteristically exudes from Levinas’s writings.

**Openness to the Other as Hospitality**

After a brief review of the two philosophical accounts of hospitality, it needs to be emphasized that these are ‘philosophical accounts’, as they are primarily ‘visions of hospitality’, although they undoubtedly call for action. However, the former is referring to a tradition, which has relevance and certain vibrancy even today in certain sense, given that concepts are dynamic entities and do fit themselves into new situations and changing milieu. But the latter is seriously a critique of what is not, what is lost and a vision of what is to come. What is common to both these notions is an ‘openness to the other person’ and an already beneficent disposition, which goes before any act of hospitality as such. In this section, we shall show how the hospitable disposition of the latter and the hospitality acts of the former can compliment each other as an authentic openness to the other person.

Let us begin from Derrida’s very significant observation about the unconditional law of hospitality (a fundamental openness towards all creatures) being limited by the particularized laws of hospitality (a socially structured culture of hospitality) (Derrida 2000: 25). If we do not have a culture of hospitality, said or unsaid laws, the very unconditional law of hospitality itself will be defeated. But the particular laws in their turn may threaten and spoil the spirit of the unconditional law of hospitality. Hence the question, ‘is there any way of having particular laws of hospitality, a culture of hospitality, which truly integrates the unsullied spirit of the unconditional law of hospitality’? From a purely conceptual stance, this might seem impossible. But saying that and setting aside that question in that manner, was never the intention of Derrida’s penetrating analysis. His analysis truly had an ethical goal, which he occasionally expressed as in the text we have quoted above on cosmopolitan laws that would treat refugees and immigrants more humanely (Derrida 2001a: 23). Even Levinas’s generic ethics is not avoiding really the question of particular customs and culture of hospitality. They are in fact an effort at evoking in the reader a broader, open and humane sensibility of hospitality. The concrete manifestation of substitution, of being the hostage of the other, is not merely carrying in one’s heart a hazy thing called ‘a hospitable disposition’, which can never be tested possibly in the humdrum events of daily living.

It is not a gift of the heart, but of the bread from one’s mouth, of one’s own mouthful of bread. It is the openness, not only of one’s pocketbook, but of the doors of one’s home, a ‘sharing of your bread with the famished,’ a ‘welcoming of the wretched into your house’ (Isaiah 58).

(Levinas 1981: 74)

In another place he writes:
In proximity the absolutely other, the stranger whom I have ‘neither conceived nor given birth to,’ I already have on my arms, already bear, according to the Biblical formula, ‘in my breast as the nurse bears the nursling.’ He has no other place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the cold and heat of the seasons. To be reduced to having recourse to me is the homelessness or strangeness of the neighbour. It is incumbent on me. (Levinas 1981: 91)

Here we may note that while the political idea of cosmopolitan hospitality runs into practical hurdles within the framework of self-circling nation states, personal acts of hospitality have no boundaries. While Levinas and Derrida do refer to the political again and again, the ethical and the hospitable are at a certain level very personal and subjective. And at this level, it can truly become a practice. The absolute originary ethical bond of hospitality is posited as the base for conducting one’s daily living by cordially taking the other into account. While action is a must, it is not a yardstick either. Hospitality is a permanent disposition. This can be a very strenuous thing.

For unconditional hospitality to take place you have to accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything, or killing everyone. That is the risk of pure hospitality and pure gift, because a pure gift might be terrible too. (Derrida 1999b: 70)

If the offer is unconditional, expecting nothing in return, without an exchange value, a non-business, non-market, non-profit transaction, then the danger of ‘feeding the snake’ should be accepted and the deadly bite, if it happens, should be taken with equanimity. There is no ‘who’ to hospitality in the sense that it is owed to anyone who asks for it, in fact, to the ‘universal other’ just as to the ‘face’, it is unconditionally owed. Levinas was aware of such a predicament, for he says boldly: ‘Any man truly human is no doubt of the line of Abraham’ (Levinas 1994b: 99) and again: ‘All Israel is responsible one for the other’, which means: all those who cleave to the divine law, all men worthy of the name, are all responsible for each other’ (Levinas 2000: 226). Hence, while the general condition for ethics and hospitality is the primacy of relation between human persons, there is the practical calling to do ethical acts of hospitality. Without fulfilling them, the moral agent does not become truly human and truly moral. Being moral, at the same time, is an immeasurable thing, and there is no achieving of moral uprightness once and for all. Hence, the point about a fundamental guilt that is the ground for morality itself, and the primacy of humane hospitable disposition towards the other over and above any particular hospitable action.

Now, in the Indian ethos of hospitality we have studied above, the primacy of openness towards the other is the underlying spirit. In that section, we have pointed out at several places the spirit of unconditionality that is pervading that ethos. However, this conceptual framework of hospitality was then enacted and performed in a more-or-less strictly stratified, patriarchal caste-based society. The particularized laws of hospitality, homely hospitality, by which measure, the master of the house was the host and the guest was a receiver from his bounty, were a limitation upon the universalistic spirit of the hospitality ethos, expressed as hospitality offered to anyone seeking it (Taittirīya-Upanisad 2000: 257 [III:10:1]), offered even to the enemy (The Mahabharata, Vol. III 2008: [Book 12,
Santi Parva, Part I, Section CXLVI] 326) and giving up of everything to the guest like King Sudarśana and his chaste wife (The Mahabharata, Vol. IV 2008: [Book 13, Anusasana Parva, Part I, Section II] 7–10), hospitality in the spirit of generous liberality (The Rg-Veda 2002: 328, [X:V:CXVII]), offered as if to God (Taittirīya-Upanisad 2000: 245–6 [I:II:1–3]), and to all like Rantideva (Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 1992, Vol. 9: 659–73 [9:21:1–18]). This particular setting is now changing and the spiritual universalism of the Hindu religion, if seen without reference to the social order of caste hierarchy, can truly speak for an ethos of cosmopolitanism and a spirit of universal hospitality. Promilla Kapur’s study shows that Hinduism’s universalistic ideal can be a force in the modern world to unify humanity: ‘…its syncretic and pluralistic history and its concept of an ultimate Oneness provide an alternative outlook and an important balance to the divisive effect of modern systems and materialistic mind-sets’ (Kapur 2000: 9).

The question of reciprocity is to be addressed in studying the unconditional dimension of hospitality. Both Levinas and Derrida contested the notion of reciprocity. It is not that nothing reciprocal was to happen after an event of hospitality. But it was not one event but events after events and reciprocity was the other’s business and not that of the self. Derrida spoke of being hospitable to the other without the ritual of opening the doors, without the other knowing that the master was performing it but by just being open to the other most humanely. A same spirit of prodigality in being hospitable does pervade the Indian ethos. In the story of king Rantideva, the king gave all that he had to his guest, even to the least in his society. The sense of reciprocity in these writings comes as an aspect of understanding hospitality as a virtue. Every virtuous act was to give off a merit, which was an unavoidable part of the karmic framework in the early part of the vedic civilization,13 and later it was thought to be avoidable through a non-reciprocal disinterestedness even in the merit, as in the Gīta’s notion of Niskāmakarma. But a merely human reciprocity was never conceived. So a non-reciprocal and other-centric hospitality was the underlying theme.

Let us now come to the notion of the ‘self’ and its importance in the performance and reciprocating of hospitality. Derrida opposes the power-play that becomes visible in performatory hospitality. In speaking of oikonomia, the law of the household, he says:

… the patron of the house who defines the conditions of hospitality, welcome, he who receives, who is master in his home, in his household, in his state, in his nation, in his city, in his town, who remains the master of his home; there where consequently there can be no unconditional welcome, no unconditional passage through the door. (Derrida 2007: 245)

In the Indian practices of hospitality, the home was understood as the temple of hospitality, and unmistakably there is the giver and receiver of hospitality. The power relation here is evident. But in stories like that of kings Sudarśana and Rantideva, we also have self-negating hospitality ideals as we find in Levinas and Derrida. Still, should we think that the latter ideal is a sheer hospitality for its own sake, not even tinged by a spiritual sense of ultimate salvation, towards which goal, virtuous hospitality is but a step? For Levinas and Derrida, at the phenomenological level, hospitality as hospitality is purely other-centric, but it still is spiritually revelatory and liberative for the self. At least in Levinas, we find a
spiritualized monotheism, a universalized Judaism as the backdrop of his writings, where the human disposition of hospitality contributes to a spiritual liberation and rebirth (Levinas 1994b; 2000: 225–26). It is true that there is no mention of the self’s seeking of reciprocity; but there is still spiritual merit accruing from pure hospitality. Levinas says that the other’s ‘being “without resources” has to be heard like cries not voice or thematized, already addressed to God’ (Levinas 1987a: 167) and that substitution of one for another is a ‘witness borne of the Infinite, a modality of this glory, a testimony that no disclosure has preceded’ (ibid.: 169). So the spiritual dimension and merit of hospitality ethics is not denied in Levinas, though its primary impetus is human proximity. Of course, there is a singular ritualistic import and religious rather than human sense of duty in the traditional Indian hospitality ethos. It is for the self’s liberation, it is for the self itself that ritual is performed and knowledge is pursued. The Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad says:

> It is not for the love of a husband that a husband is dear: it is for the love of the self (ātman) that a husband is dear… It is the self that must be seen, heard, thought of and meditated upon: by seeing, hearing, thinking of and understanding the self, Maitreyī, all this is known. (Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad 2000: 40–1 [II:4:5])

Our quoting of this passage is in no way an attempt to label the Indian conception of hospitality to a ‘self’-centric one and that of the other conception studied here to an other-centric one. Rather the passage quoted here itself shows us the way to an other-centric hospitality. In the Upanisadic understanding, the self, ātman, is the real and everything is the ātman; it is Brahman (Māndūkyya Upanisad 2000: 404 [2]; Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad 2000:22 [I:4:10]; Chāndogya Upanisad 2000: 206 [VI:8:7]). In the practical Veda of Swami Vivekananda, this realization, instead of leading it to sombre disinterestedness of the world and its renouncement in meditation, leads rather to service of humanity and openness to every being. He says:

> Love everyone as your own self, because the whole universe is one. In injuring another, I am injuring myself; in loving another, I am loving myself. From this also springs that principle of Advaita morality which has been summed up in one word—self-abnegation. (Vivekananda 1987: 364)

Hence, the self-abnegating substitution of Levinas can be smoothly integrated into the Upanisadic philosophy as Vivekananda has shown, although from two different stances. For Levinas, it is total difference of the other that calls the self to substitution, but for Vivekananda, it is fundamental oneness of all humanity and all universe that is the ground for being the host of the other. Vivekananda’s humanism and egalitarian vision is yet to be realized even to a reasonable extent in India’s socio-political and economic context, but this vision can be viably merged with Hindu universalism and tolerance. Such a spirit is politically articulated in the Indian Constitution—a great first step for a young nation—though the aspiration of the Constitution is still an unreachable guiding light that is a long way off.

The saving grace of the Indian ethos of hospitality, if it wants to be a vibrant and comprehensive contemporary ideal, is the notion of self-cultivation that is central and somewhat unique to much of eastern and especially Indian spirituality. Indian
religion’s notion of self is not as dependent on the notion of God as it is in the Abrahamic religions. This gives room for self-cultivation through personal endeavour and self culture. Cultivation of the ‘self’ often does not amount to a self-circling project of liberating or saving oneself. In religions such as Buddhism, it is in fact a realization leading to the loss of self, the idea of the ‘I’, and in the Bhagavad Gītā, it is mindlessness of the fruits of one’s actions. If this notion is taken to its logical limits, there cannot be a more radical notion of self-abnegation as Vivekananda points out. Indian spiritual tradition is one of constantly being mindful of negating the ‘personal self’, and there lies, hence, an authentic possibility of opening that very abandoned self to the other, for possession of even the self is a hurdle to openness to the other. Such a possibility of self-cultivation is probably absent in Levinas and Derrida, and which, in turn, adds a finer dimension to the recapturing of authentic hospitality as opening of the self to the other latent in the Indian cultural ethos. For Levinas, maintaining the self in its separateness from the other is important for the self’s meeting with and welcoming of the other—indeed the very fact of ethical relation. While that truly differentiates his analysis from most other forms of ethics, he does not say how the separated self, revelling in its enjoyment, can truly be the opening towards the other. If the Levinasian insight is true that the separated individual’s freedom and spontaneity are called into question by the presence of the other, then it is necessary to see how the individual needs to build on this ‘original meeting with the other’ through deliberate self-cultivation.

Levinas and Derrida raise a concern for people without a country or home, the internally displaced, the refugee stepping over national boundaries, the immigrants, all those who suffer inhumanity in the name of race, caste, religion or such other labels, and hence their whole philosophical engagement with unconditional hospitality did have a cosmopolitan undertone. Such a pronounced concern—an outcome of the violent history of modern nation states in the West—is not really the stomping ground of the Indian hospitality ethos. Levinas recalls this context in his dedication to OB: ‘...the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism’ (Levinas 1981: v). But neither the repeatability of this context anywhere nor the meaning of inhumanity done to the other person under all shades of ideologies and labels should be taken to be unique. Indian hospitality ethos, universalistic in intent, was practiced in a limiting way. In a village system there was complete familiarity among people and everyone knew every other in some way. No one could really hide his or her identity and operate. The social customs dictated the way of life of people and there was little that one could individually do to break free of the beaten path. Hence, who requests whose hospitality was in some way determined by the social rules. But the overall spirit of goodness to the other prevailed when it comes to offering basic hospitality (giving of food and shelter) to any person. The ethos of hospitality prevailed over the neatly drawn social boundaries in the sense that the spirit of non-injury towards all beings and their great harmony, and tolerance of people of all persuasions were marks of the Indian ethos. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyer, the Indian statesman and indologist, observes: ‘The greatest contribution to posterity made by the Hindu tradition was the broad-mindedness, sympathy, and tolerance of different viewpoints exhibited almost alone in India amongst the civilized communities of earlier day’ (Aiyer 1967: 262; cf. Dhavamony 1990). Nevertheless, the inegalitarian social structures, dominated by
the hierarchies of caste and class in the Indian scenario, calls us to remodel a hospitality ethos which is an openness to every other person, the individualized other unobstructed by any generalized social label.

Here, the issue of caste inequality should not be overlooked. Amartya Sen observes that the spirit of *swākrīti* (acceptance that people are ‘entitled to lead their own lives’) and tolerance of difference, deeply rooted in Indian culture and inspirational for political equality within democracy, has not therefore translated into social equality or distributive justice. ‘Inequalities related to class, caste or gender can continue vigorously without being trimmed in any way by recognition or *swākrīti*’ (Sen 2005: 36). It is this contradiction of ‘generous tolerance of inegalitarian structures’ that we need to be wary of and the ethos of ‘hospitality as openness to the other’ should overwhelm. Caste inequality in particular often overtakes the Indian social scenario in ways unimagined, unsuspected and in such depth that it defies sight. As modernity (and yes, also its ‘post’) gradually sets in, the idle busying in being ‘politically correct’ further dims the defying of sight of the many hues of caste in India. And yet, the dimming effect of modernity on caste-sociality has remarkable visibility for the most vulnerable, the least visible. Stories are still being told—and many stories are never told as well—of people prevented from drawing water from the village well and others polluted by the unholy human touch. Caste and other inequalities, warm hospitality, acceptance and tolerance of differences—such impossible mixtures—coexisted in India on the assumption that one really deserved one’s lot. Change has been slowly ushered in with the theistic *Bhakti* movement and other reform movements. There have also been vigorous reinterpretations of tradition and culture. However, there is still the unwanted burden of a past in many Indian hearts, a tyranny of history and memory. Social anthropologist Susan Bayly points out that as per research findings people of clean caste origins in India consistently feel, despite constitutional outlawing of untouchability, that the Harijans are ‘permanently polluted and unclean in ritual terms, without any further differentiation between them’ (Bayly 2005: 340). It takes a complex analysis to lay bare the still more complex relations within a cultural ethos of the difficult mixtures of the opposites: a sublime belief in the presence of the ultimate in everything, the call for a generous liberal hospitality and the many layers of inegalitarian indignity. In this context, extending the hospitality ethos already available to India in the spirit of *Upanisadic* universalism, with inspirations from the unconditional, non-localist, non-autochthonous hospitality of Levinas and Derrida, can become a smoothing balm to this smarting Indian cultural wound. A socially consistent egalitarian sensibility is yet to capture Indian imagination. But it can, as India makes yet another tryst with history and destiny, by recapturing its core cultural ethos in spirit and intent.

**Conclusion**

As the world becomes smaller in proportion to the expanding processes of globalization, openness to the other person as hospitality, regardless of social labels imposed on her, is a tremendous ethical value. The political ethics of cosmopolitan hospitality, discussed widely today, is to focus in letter and spirit on the inhumanity meted out to the other person in the name of social branding. Derrida summarizes cosmo-political hospitality as one of the key themes of Levinas’s oeuvre: ‘…a hospitality that comes to take on a much more radical value than it does in the Kant of *Toward"*
Perpetual Peace and of the cosmo-political right to universal hospitality’ (Derrida 1999b: 68). Both thinkers underscore the idea of ‘transnational or universal hospitality’. How does the Indian hospitality ethos measure up in this context? First of all, starting at the level of the individual, the householder, small acts of hospitality can unfold in the spirit described above. But then what happens to the one who cannot enter the State and request food and drink and home? Indian ethos of tolerance and hospitality, extended as genuine openness towards the other person, is inspirational in this context. In fact, such a prospect is already being worked out today in scholarly attempts in search of an authentically cosmo-political hospitality. The Indian cultural heritage, with which we dialogued through the lenses of certain specific concerns of our time, raised by Levinas and Derrida, is not something to be left behind or overcome. In Derrida’s own reflections, ‘heritage’, which is not chosen but which ‘violently elects us’, is to be appropriated, reaffirmed, relaunched and kept alive. In doing so what we need to do is to filter, reinterpret and thus transform it (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004: 3–4) This dynamic understanding of heritage is necessary to revitalize and reconceptualize a tradition. We cannot today appropriate and replicate the Indian cultural ethos of hospitality in toto because its social, economic and political context is being transformed unrecognizably day by day. To revitalize this still available and living tradition is to think ourselves in context and to look at the core of that ethos: an unconditional and unrestricted openness to the other person.

NOTES

1. Shundo Tachibana writes: ‘Such ideas about liberality and hospitality prevailed in India even previous to the rise of Buddhism; in other words, almsgiving, which is frequently enjoined in the Pita.aka, was a common practice among the Brāhmanic community’ (Tachibana 1994: 203).


3. In the ethical system of varnāśrama dharma, brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya and śūdra are castes with specific duties for specific stages in life, namely, brahmacarya, grāhastha, vānaprastha and samśāra. The pancha mahayajña are: (i) homage to the seers through the study and teaching of the Vedas (brahma yajña), (ii) homage to the gods and elements of nature through the hōma sacrifice (deva yajña), (iii) homage to the ancestors through offering pinda and water (pitr yajña), (iv) homage to the beings or creatures by giving bali offerings to the animals (bali yajña), and (v) homage to the guests, the homeless, the brahmacaryas, and so on (manusya yajña).

4. Jamison also adds that wife’s presence was a must in domestic forms of hospitality and her absence was insulting to the guests.

5. Read with the biblical injunctions against ill-treatment of these three categories of the less privileged. See, for instance, The New Jerusalem Bible (1985: 238 [Deuteronomy 10: 18–19]; 256 [Deuteronomy 27:19]; 1582 [Zechariah 7: 10]). All biblical quotes, except those quoted within excerpts from other sources, are from The New Jerusalem Bible (1985).

6. Levinas writes: ‘To shelter the other in one’s own land or home, to tolerate the presence of the landless and homeless on the “ancestral soil,” so jealously, so meanly loved—is that the criterion of humanness? Unquestionably so’ (Levinas 1994a: 98; Quoted in Derrida 1999b: 73).
7. TI challenges western ontology, culminating in Heidegger, and all understanding of knowledge as representation as essentially violent. Derrida engages Levinas on this point in his famous essay ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ (cf. Derrida 2001b). However, our preoccupation here with hospitality does not allow us such an engagement.

8. Levinas quotes this passage approvingly in a 1970 essay (Levinas 1987b: 148), referring to the Hebraic ethos. His interpretation is: ‘… the condition (or the uncondition) of being strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt brings man close to his neighbour. In their uncondition of being strangers men seek one another. No one is at home. The memory of this servitude assembles humanity’ (Levinas 1987b: 149).


10. Derrida discusses Perpetual Peace as a limited political understanding of universal hospitality, which can be further extended and made unlimited. For Kant, hospitality is not philanthropy but right of strangers ‘to present themselves in the society of others by virtue of their right to communal possession of the earth’s surface’, and this right can gradually lead to countries entering ‘into peaceful mutual relations which may eventually be regulated by public laws, thus bringing the human race nearer and nearer to a cosmopolitan constitution.’ Kant compares this hope with the ‘inhospitable conduct of the civilized states’ and gives colonization of India as an example: ‘In East India (Hindustan), foreign troops were brought in under the pretext of merely setting up trading posts. This led to oppression of the natives, incitement of the various Indian states to widespread wars, famine, insurrection, treachery and the whole litany of evils which afflict the human race.’ (Derrida 2007: 246–7; see Kant 1903: 137–42, for the third definitive article of perpetual peace: ‘The rights of men, as citizens of the world, shall be limited to the conditions of universal hospitality’.)

11. The formulation of the unconditional law of hospitality is:

Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female. (Derrida 2000: 77)

Note that Derrida does not limit the offer of hospitality as a human-to-human trait. For that would be limiting hospitality to the condition of humanity. To any creature, the human can offer hospitality.

12. Levinas says: ‘I am responsible for the Other without waiting for his reciprocity… Reciprocity is his affair…’ (Levinas 1985: 98).

13. A ritualistic understanding of hospitality that we see in Vedic religion was indeed reciprocal as all ritual was intended to be acts of reciprocating for past and future blessings of gods. See Jamison and Witzel (2003).

Perhaps the most obvious of the motivating ideas of Vedic religion is the Roman principle of “dō ut dēs” (“I give so that you will give”), or in Vedic terms, “give me, I give you” dehi me dadāmi te…—that is: reciprocity. The ritual oblations and the hymns of praise that accompany them are not offered to the gods out of sheer celebratory exuberance. Rather, these verbal and alimentary gifts are one token in an endless cycle of exchanges—thanks for previous divine gifts, but also a trigger for such gifts and favours in the future. (Jamison 2003: 94)

14. The ambiguity (and thus difficulty) of merging the egalitarian and humanistic vision with the actual social, political and economic context of India was visibly felt by the great saint himself. Amiya P. Sen writes in his critical biography of the saint: ‘While accepting the inevitability of change, Vivekananda remained somewhat uneasy and apprehensive about the possible fallouts of the impending class struggle’ (Sen 2003: 78). For a critical account of Swamiji’s attitudes towards social revolution, see Sen’s fifth chapter: ‘Swami Vivekananda on Society and History’ (ibid.: 63–79).

15. Amartya Sen too refers to the same liberal tolerant tradition. But reflecting on contemporary scenario, he points out that the current Hindu political activism wants
to forget about this generous liberal tolerant tradition, which allowed persecuted people of bygone days to come and live peaceful lives in India—a tradition that found modern expression in the writings and works of political figures like Mahatma Gandhi, literary figures like Tagore and Hindu leaders like Swami Vivekananda (Sen 2005: 49).


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