

## BENJI AND NANJI: WHERE EAST MEETS WEST: A DIALOGICAL ANALYSIS

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### INTRODUCTION

Nanji was the first great Indian *diasporic* personality to enjoy unparalleled popularity in the first half of the twentieth century in Gujarat. Similarly, Benjamin Franklin stands tall as the most remarkable and perfect exemplar of a *self-made man* during the later part of the nineteenth century. Both strove for moral perfection and Benji's thirteen points of virtue find identical parallels with some of the thoughts penned by Nanji in his autobiography **Dream: Half Expressed**. It would be interesting to compare the belief systems of the two. Both seem to form their own scripts around the idea of self-examination Vs self-improvement. Both recognize their faults and the potential to correct them without feeling guilt-stricken. A proposal is thus made to draw parallels between the virtues listed by Ben and that which can be inferred (*anumana*) in the Autobiography of Nanji.

#### (i) Temperance

Benji begins his list of virtues with **TEMPERANCE** because he felt that it was the virtue that would develop the self-discipline necessary to adhere to the remaining twelve virtues. Temperance calls in for a man to avoid overindulgence in food or drink. Similarly, "Eat Pig and Become a Beast," Nanji might say as a staunch vegetarian. In another context Nanjibhai says,

*Disappointments and failures dishearten us in the midst of struggles but a man of enterprise has to pass through the critical period with great patience and cheerfulness till he gets his well-deserved returns. (Dream: Half Expressed: 179)*

The idea of Temperance is again no different from the idea of *Sthitha-pragna* – the state of equal-mindedness referred to in the **Bhagvad-Gita** (Chapter 2, Verse 54). The temperate man would maintain his equipoise irrespective of the blessings or the blows of fate. Benji says:

*There are two ways of being happy; we may either diminish our wants or augment our means – either will do – the result is the same. (<https://www.themarginalian.org/2013/01/17/benjaminfranklin-on-true-happiness/04.02.2022>)*

Nanjibhai similarly says in his Autobiography,

*I knew that there was many a slip between the cup and the lip and I found that dreams were easy to dream but it was quite different to translate them to reality. Yet I was not discouraged or cowed down by the pressure of circumstances. I have always felt and realized that the struggle which is waged between the two extremes of dreams and realities make 'men; of us which imperceptibly moulds our personality. (164) ...if God willed and the spirit attempted, there is nothing in the world that could not be accomplished. (164)*

A person maintaining his mental equipoise does not succumb to the pressure of circumstances. In effect, both Nanji and Benji understood the *educare* concept of **Ceiling of desires**.

#### (ii) Order

Order, according to Benji is the *planning of time and organizing of resources as well as society*. In his Autobiography, Benji showed the way with a touch of humility and a dollop of hope. He wrote that he was *incorrigible with respect to Order* but though he *never arrived at the perfection* that he desired, he was *a better and a happier man* for the effort. So **order**, of all the virtues, was the one I relished. (<https://benfranklincircles.org/order/a-vision-of-order#:~:text=In%20his%20autobiography%2C%20Ben%20showed,was%20the%20one%20I%20relished.>) Nanji, too implied 'Order' when he said in his Autobiography, *Do not be panicky; get along with your business with a steady and firm mind and pursue your work.* (p. 285) In fact, we all need order in our respective spaces, whether it is the domestic front – our home or the professional front – our office, structuring space and time as **Order within** implies **Order without**. One's home is the outer manifestation of what is going on inside the person. In effect, **Order** implies Obedience, Discipline, Honesty, Hard-work, and Patience.

#### (iii) Silence

Benji's precept for Silence was *Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling conversation.* (<https://benfranklincircles.org/silence/the-sound-of-silence#:~:text=His%20precept%20for%20silence%20was,sure%2>)

[Ofits%20our%20modern%20reality/11/02/2022](https://ag-thrive.com/practicing-the-good-life-with-ben-franklin-virtue-4resolution/#:~:text=PRACTICING%20THE%20GOOD%20LIFE%20WITH%20BEN%20FRANKLIN%20%E2%80%93%20VIRTUE%20%234%20%E2%80%93%20RESOLUTION&text=%E2%80%93Resolve%20to%20perform%20what%20you,without%20fail%20what%20you%20resolve.%E2%80%9D/17/02/2022)) One can observe that the maxim is very contextual in contemporary times. His goal was very simple *Not to gossip and avoid unnecessary speech*. This was a virtue that could be improved by the use of **ears** rather than the **tongue**. In other words, Benji was advocating the Buddhist idea of **Right Mindfulness** (*Samyak Mana*) at all times. Similarly, Nanjibhai in appreciation of the Japanese culture of work writes, *Do not be panicky; Do ...your work Quietly and with integrity* (**Dream: Half Expressed: 285**). Silence or Quietness provides one the space to self-reflect, self-analyze, and eventually improve our decision-making skills with improved mental clarity. In other words, Silence calms one's mind allowing one to feel more peace and less stressed out. Thus, distractions are avoided for better concentration, creativity, self-awareness, patience, and health.

#### (iv) Resolution

Benji states, *Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.* (<https://ag-thrive.com/practicing-the-good-life-with-ben-franklin-virtue-4resolution/#:~:text=PRACTICING%20THE%20GOOD%20LIFE%20WITH%20BEN%20FRANKLIN%20%E2%80%93%20VIRTUE%20%234%20%E2%80%93%20RESOLUTION&text=%E2%80%93Resolve%20to%20perform%20what%20you,without%20fail%20what%20you%20resolve.%E2%80%9D/17/02/2022>) Benji included **Resolution** as the fourth virtue for ensuring its attainment would help the other virtues to completion. It is the firm determination to achieve what one sets out to do. Throughout history, only a few people have succeeded because their resolution was firm. Similarly, Nanjibhai writes, *For I knew if a man sat idle and did nothing, he would not be able to achieve anything. Even thinking when put to practice showed its strength and power* (86)...*Nothing great could be achieved without hard-labour, self-restraint, and strength of character.* (86) Quite clearly, one can see Nanjibhai's firmness of resolve in the above quotes. The elemental components to have a firm resolution too have been well articulated in terms of sustained effort, self-control, and immaculate character.

#### (v) Frugality

Benji describes **Frugality** thus, *Frugality: Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself i.e., waste nothing* (<https://benfranklincircles.org/frugality/frugality-paying-theprice#:~:text=Benjamin%20Franklin%20describes%20frugality%20this,say%20to%20be%20a%20tightwad/17/02/2022>)

As such, practicing frugality carries connotations of not wasting money; in other words, having a sound financial method in place. However, Benji's virtue of frugality extends to every aspect of life. It is more expansive in thought & character.

In fact, there were a number of factors contributing to Nanjibhai's success as an industrialist: his patriotism, rationalistic and ethical approach to life, civic spirit, common sense, and the practice of frugality.

#### (vi) Industry:

Benji by nature was highly industrious, spending his time improving himself and seeking to be useful to others. And while the term industry has become synonymous with the production of

goods and services, as a virtue, **industry is simply spending your time pursuing worthwhile and important goals**. Developing the virtue of industriousness not only frees more time for civic involvement, but it also helps develop the **work ethic** needed to contribute to the public welfare. Nanjibhai appropriately states, *For I knew if a man sat idle and did nothing. He would not be able to achieve anything. Even thinking when put to practice showed the strength and power* (**Dream Half-Expressed: 36**). *Nothing great could be achieved without hard-labour, self-restraint, and strength of character* (**Dream Half-Expressed: 83**).

Both Benji and Nanji laid emphasis upon hard work and industriousness. In effect, the effort and the process is important not the outcome.

#### (vii) Sincerity:

Benji defined the virtue of sincerity as, Use no hurtful deceit. Think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly. (<https://benfranklincircles.org/sincerity/rememberingsincerity#:~:text=Ben%20Franklin%20defined%20the%20virtue,likely%20to%20hear%20about%20strategy/17/05/2022>). Benji reminds us that being sincere is a virtue or a character trait to strive for. A genuine sincerity moves us in the direction of the golden rule – treating others the way we'd like to be treated. Sincerity as a virtue is gentle and genial and involves genuine goodwill. *With innocence and justice as our guiding ideals, we can toss out the idea that sincerity is saying whatever we like. Sometimes even the most well-meaning honesty can be unpleasant to hear. But a sincere person strives to help and tries not to hurt. Similarly, Nanjibhai was told by no other but the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi himself that he had no doubt about the sincerity of his intention in the making of Kirti Mandir* (<https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhiliterature/mahatma-gandhi-collected-works-volume-90.pdf/18/05/2022>) To Nanji, Sincerity is the virtue of one who communicates and acts in accordance with the entirety of his feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and desires in a manner that is honest and genuine.

#### (viii) Justice:

Benji's notion of justice lay in the idea of Treating people fairly and generously in all aspects of life. Franklin was a man of business first, but he developed a reputation for fairness and trustworthiness. Having been treated poorly as an apprentice he did the opposite. He did justice to others even at his own expense. From hospitals to schools to being a volunteer at the fire department, he dedicated his life to the betterment of his fellow citizens. He also helped protect his community from outside dangers. He said, *Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.* (<https://www.artofmanliness.com/character/behavior/the-virtuous-life-justice/18/05/2022>) In fact, Justice is one of the four cardinal virtues in classical European philosophy and Roman Catholicism. It is the moderation or mean between selfishness and selflessness – between having more and having less than one's fair share. Nanjibhai too laid emphasis on having a moral sense of Justice. To him Justice was a moral virtue; a principle or a value of human conduct that leads us to the realm of our end. It is a complete virtue that embraces personal and public life. Virtues are the means of our

end i.e. happiness, and through justice, we can achieve our ends, that is the reason of saying that justice is a moral virtue.

**(ix) Moderation:**

Benji’s most important virtue is moderation, without it many individuals could get disorientated to the point where stimulation dominates their daily lives. Benji said, *Avoid extremes*. Moderation is the process of eliminating or lessening extremes. It is used to ensure normality throughout the medium on which it is being conducted. Moderation is defined as avoiding excess or extremes. When you want to eat 10 chappatis and you eat only 1, this is an example of moderation. Moderation in eating suggests dietary habits that avoid excessive consumption. Epicurus too said that it was only moderation that made individuals enjoy the desires of everyday life. Nanjibhai used to say *The better and more profitable course is to expand business within the limits of one’s capacity and personal supervision*. (Dream: Half-Expressed: 138). Nanjibhai always felt and realized that the struggle which is waged between the two extremes of dreams and realities makes ‘men’ of us and eventually moulds our personality. Plato too spoke about moderation as the harmony between reason, spirit, and desire. Aristotle too advocated that moderation was the way to attaining happiness. He believed that virtue or ethics was a mean between excess and deficiency. In fact, Aristotle’s principle of Golden mean finds exemplification in the writings of both Benji and Nanji.

**(x) Cleanliness, Tranquility, Chastity, and Humility:**

Benji’s idea of cleanliness implies that we strive to practice good hygiene habits personally and in social environments. Cleanliness means washing often, keeping your body clean, and wearing clean clothes. It is putting into your body and your mind only the things that keep you healthy.

Benji wrote, *Be not disturbed at trifles or at accidents, common or unavoidable*, and demonstrated tremendous wisdom about the power of acceptance. (<https://benfranklincircles.org/tranquility/tranquility#:~:text=Be%20not%20disturbed%20at%20trifles,about%20the%20power%20of%20acceptance/20/05/2022>) Trifles, accidents are common, inevitable even, and so, Benji suggests, we can make the conscious decision not to be *disturbed*. Thus, tranquility is the ability to remain undisturbed in spite of *unavoidable disturbances*.

Chastity or purity of self and humility were the last two virtues advocated by Benji. Nanjibhai too laid great emphasis on all the above four virtues. He said, *Although India has enough to present to Europe, it would be more profitable for us to learn as much as possible from them and add to India’s knowledge and experience. We have to learn from them and add to India’s knowledge and experience. We have to learn from them the virtues like National Unity, self-respect, gentility, practical skill, courage, spirit of enterprise, patriotism, punctuality, regularity, self-help, and industrious habits. There would be no harm but an endless gain if those virtues were learnt from them.* (Dream: Half-Expressed: p. 184)

All the thirteen virtues are inter-connected and both Benji and Nanji have not merely spoken about them but have also practiced these virtues in letter and spirit. And this is precisely what we need in contemporary times. To practice what we preach. Truly, if

*Eastern wisdom and western light  
Join if hands future would be bright  
Words of seers if mingle with science  
For all mankind it would be nice.*

**THE COMPARATIVE VIRTUE CHART**

Virtue No.	Name of the Virtue	Key Indicators-Benji	Key Indicators-Nanji
1	<b>Temperance</b>	Self-discipline	Equal-mindedness
2	<b>Order</b>	Planning of Time & Resources	Steady & Firm Mind
3	<b>Silence</b>	Avoid Unnecessary Speech (Use of Ear-No tongue)	Work Quietly and with Integrity
4	<b>Resolution</b>	Firm Determination	Hard-work and Self-restraint
5	<b>Frugality</b>	Waste Nothing (Be good to others)	Ethical approach to life
6	<b>Industry</b>	Work-Ethic	Strength of Character
7	<b>Sincerity</b>	Innocence	Honesty and genuineness
8	<b>Justice</b>	Fairness and Generosity	Moral virtue/A principle of Human conduct
9	<b>Moderation</b>	Avoid Extremes	Golden mean
10	<b>Cleanliness</b>	Good hygiene	Power of Acceptance
11	<b>Tranquility</b>		
12	<b>Chastity</b>		
13	<b>Humility</b>	Purity of self	Self-application

**Work Cited:**

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