

# Core Aspects of Indian Culture

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The word 'culture' is derived from the Latin root *cultura*, which means 'cultivation'. Culture, thus, refers to a set of information, knowledge, wisdom, languages, customs, traditions, ideology and attitudes that assist in cultivating those aspects in the human nature to make him evolved, selfless and ideal.

To become cultured person is a natural urge in human beings. We must also be able to find in every time-period in history, and at every region in the world, a culture from which we can learn. In this context, we need to ask ourselves the important question: Is there something we can learn from the Indian culture? We shall try to understand the unique ways in which India has contributed to the world culture.

## Looking Inward rather than Outward

One can safely conclude that the practice of meditation, i.e., the art of looking inward, originated from the Indian culture. Verses from the Vedas and seals from the Indus valley civilization corroborate this. The key idea here is to try to understand the nature of our own mind and self. This process has led to the discovery of several profound truths in nature. Such discoveries have not only strengthened Hinduism, but have also led to the development of other Dharmic religions like Buddhism and Jainism.

One of the greatest discoveries made is that man is beyond his ego, and that he is

essentially a divine being. This has been the foundation for many of the principles in Indian culture. One such principle is that one can be a lamp unto himself, and this had made spiritual aspirants to be independent seekers of truth rather than being believers in a dogma.

This naturally leads to extensive logical reasoning about the nature of self and the world. We can find a myriad of philosophical traditions in attestation of this. Thus, India is one of the very few cultures where there have been extensive questioning and logical reasoning to attain the Truth. This also fostered a very liberal atmosphere, where people were allowed to follow their beliefs as they wished. Consequently, we can see in India even today many sects and religions living in peace and complementing each other.

## Renunciation and Service

Another aspect of Indian culture is its idea of not claiming anything as our own. Everything belongs to God. The result is that one can be unselfish and be concerned for others' happiness. Thus, India has never been a country greedy to conquer other countries for material benefits. Hu Shih, former Ambassador of China to USA, said, 'India conquered and dominated China culturally for twenty centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her border.'

Another key aspect of the India's contribution to the world culture is the grand

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philosophy of service and unselfishness. From a description of the saints of India, one can clearly see that they were men of tremendous compassion, and love for others. This was one of the important virtues required to be cultured. Living with an ideal to put the priorities of the family above the individual, state above the family and nation above the state is an important part of this exercise.

### **Karma Yoga**

Influenced by their introspective nature, the Indian sages questioned and analyzed their motives and actions. They discovered the law of Karma, according to which an individual's actions are responsible for what he receives from others. Therefore if one performs positive actions, one reaps the benefits in due course.

With this, the ideal of Karma Yoga evolved. The ideal of Karma Yoga is that one must carefully choose with unselfish intentions. Once this is done, one must diligently work for the cause, without getting anxious about results. After a detailed study of the human psychology, the Indian saints concluded that no action is superior or inferior by itself and that the intentions of actions are more important than the action itself.

### **Seeking Ultimate Truth**

Indian culture has always given the highest priority to learn from Nature. One of the greatest maxims given for seekers of truth is that, 'Whatever is ultimately true must be so independent of time'. The central ideal of life should be such that it is applicable not just in the present, but also in future, no matter what the circumstance were or would be.

Their deep understanding of truth had also resulted in creation of value systems (*smritis*) and discoveries (*shrutis*), which stand the test of time. The greatest example

is Hinduism itself, which continues to survive while adapting to changes to time, for thousands of years. Some institutions within Hinduism itself which have survived the test of time are the Varnashrama system, the institution of arranged marriage, Vedic chanting, Indian epics, rituals in temples, Sanskrit language, literature, traditional learning of Vedanta and the institution of Sannyasa.

This was in spite of repeated foreign invasions by the Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Persians, Portuguese and the British. Further, most foreign invaders had immense hatred and prejudice against the Hindu customs. On the other hand, the civilizations of Greek, Roman, Persian, Inca, Egyptian and Babylonian, who were at the peak in some point of history, have been unable to withstand the onslaught of time that they have become objects in museums. Swami Vivekananda remarks (CW, 3: 106),

Civilizations have arisen in other parts of the world. In ancient and modern times, wonderful ideas have been carried forward from one race to another...But mark you, my friends, it has been always with the blast of war trumpets and the march of embattled cohorts. Each idea had to be soaked in a deluge of blood. . . Each word of power had to be followed by the groans of millions, by the wails of orphans, by the tears of widows. This, many other nations have taught; but India for thousands of years peacefully existed. Here activity prevailed when even Greece did not exist. . . Even earlier, when history has no record, and tradition dares not peer into the gloom of that intense past, even from until now, ideas after ideas have marched out from her, but every word has been spoken with a blessing behind it and peace before it. We, of all nations of the world, have never been a conquering race, and that blessing is on our head, and therefore we live. . .!

In the light of above, one can appreciate the tenacity with which the sages held on to truth and helped in designing systems, which would withstand the test of time.

### Quest for Knowledge:

Any impartial student of Indian culture can observe a big fountain of knowledge in the Indian culture. As Indians themselves value spiritual knowledge over other forms of knowledge, one can find extensive number of works in the Indian culture focusing on spiritual knowledge based on lives of men who have lived a truthful life. The classical works on philosophy are Vedanta, Yoga, Sankhya, Mimamsa, Buddhism and Jainism. In the modern works, lectures of Swami Vivekananda, and lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Ramana Maharishi, etc., have reinvigorated Indian culture.

Indian culture has in no way given a lesser priority to secular knowledge. The great spiritual saints also deeply studied secular sciences, as material development is a part of total development. Says A. L. Basham, the well-known Indologist,

Indian theories lacked an empirical base but they were brilliant imaginative explanations of the physical structure of the world, and in a large measure, agreed with the discoveries of modern physics.

Thus we find Taxila, recognized as the oldest university in the world, which had around 10,000 students where 60 subjects were taught. Some of the contributions include:

- ❖ Mathematics: Discovery of zero and modern decimal system, trigonometry, Pythagoras theorem
- ❖ Science: Atomism
- ❖ Ayurveda: Earliest school of medicine
- ❖ Surgery: Knowledge of anesthesia and cataract and plastic surgeries.

❖ Navigation: An advanced knowledge of boat making and navigation.

❖ Astronomy: Calculation of eclipses, earth's circumference, heliocentric theory of gravitation

❖ Great diversity in music and dance shows a very refined sense of taste of the Indian culture.

Observing the historical monuments in India, we can also see the knowledge of metallurgy and architecture our ancients had.

India has been among the top three economically strong nations from 0 CE till 1700 CE, before the British plunder of India (which is well-documented) and due to other global factors. This persistent dominance in the economic front historically can be attributed to the use of natural resources like land, water, vegetation and mines in a sustainable manner. Also, wealth was generated in the villages, which supported the towns and that it was not acquired by plundering any other region. In the subject of polity, we also find the roots of ideas of democracy in the Indian culture.

### Conclusion:

India has a long history, gifted with geniuses in all walks of life. There are sufficient reasons for any Indian to be proud of it. Swami Vivekananda opined that one can contribute effectively to the nation and attain inner peace only when one's ideals are aligned with the national ideals. It would be very tough to flow against the tide flowing for thousands years of our history. It is, therefore, important to recognize ourselves as a part of this historical culture, which would help us in understanding ourselves better. Only with this understanding, can we understand the world around us.

Any attempt to supplant our latent ideals with ideals contrary from other parts of the worlds would be destructive and perilous. □