

# The Spiritual Basis of Indian Culture

SWAMI BRAHMESHANANDA

## The Foundation of Indian Culture

Culture is like the foundation of a building; civilization is its superstructure. Culture is like the subconscious and unconscious mind; civilization is like the conscious mind. Just as the subconscious mind governs and guides the conscious mind, civilization is governed and guided by culture which is, as it were, the collective unconscious. So, the question: What is the nature of Indian culture? What is the foundation of Indian society? What constitutes its conscious mind? What constitutes the subconscious mind? What are the motives and direction in which India has been moving and acting through the ages?

The principles, which form the foundation of India's cultural heritage, were established as the result of observation, study and experiment of facts of human existence. We call this study as religion. Religion, in the Indian sense, is a science, the highest one at that. The Mundaka Upanishad declares that that science is the greatest which makes man know that which never changes and by knowing which everything is known. It was this science, the science of the soul, that became the national characteristic,

the vitality of the Indian race. Even in the two known non-Brahmanical movements—Jainism and Buddhism—this characteristic is maintained. This science, especially the principle of spiritual



A former editor of Vedanta Kesari, the author is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, now living at the Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, Varanasi. He wishes to thank Mr. A.P.N. Pankaj of Chandigarh for his suggestions and help in preparing this article.



oneness underlying the great variety of creation, is the basis of Indian culture. It not only resolved all contradictions and the differences, but it also embraced life in all its aspects and formed the basis on which social organizations were founded.

### A Historical Survey

The Indian cultural history can be studied under four phases or periods.

In the *first phase*, the Aryans and Dravidians interacted with each other and Sanskrit language and the Vedas came into existence. The Rishis put before the Hindus four *purusharthas* i.e. legitimate goals to be pursued in life: *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*—righteousness, wealth, fulfilment of desires and freedom or ultimate liberation. Enjoyment and acquisition of wealth were considered legitimate but they must be pursued in accordance with the rules of social conduct and fulfillment of social responsibility or *dharma*. The idea was that, while acquiring wealth and fulfilling desires is important from the viewpoint of leading life in the world, they must be done within the rigours of *dharma*—righteousness and social sanction. Thus the individual will gradually realize that such engagements gave partial and temporary satisfaction and would finally seek *moksha*, or absolute spiritual freedom. Thus, the whole Indian culture was aimed at the final *purushartha*, the *moksha*, spiritual emancipation.

It is not that every Indian all the time was a philosopher or a man of the spirit; nor that wealth (*artha*) and pleasure (*kama*) were not pursued by people in India. But there seems to be something in her very soil and air which makes a man at some stage or the other in his life realize the futility of finite ends and seek for righteousness (*dharma*) and then, *moksha*, the final infinitude.

The *second phase* of Indian cultural history is dominated by the two great revolts against the Vedic culture by the two streams of Shramana culture: Jainism and Buddhism. In fact the seeds of these revolts can be seen in the Upanishads themselves. Indian soil and its spiritual roots could not, as it were, bear the decline of spirituality in the form of excessive emphasis on Vedic ritualism and associated animal sacrifice with a view to achieving happiness in heaven. It will be improper to assess the spiritual basis of Indian culture only by the study of the Brahmaical culture. The Shramana culture is as much spiritual as the Brahmanical culture, if not more. While in the Brahmanical culture, the four *purusharthas* are advocated, the Shramana culture, whose representatives Buddhism and Jainism are, emphasizes *moksha* or *nirvana* as the only goal of life. Asceticism and total renunciation, both internal and external, are considered essential.

While Buddhism does not believe in a soul, it does believe in a state called *nirvana* which is beyond all suffering, as the goal of life. Jainism does accept a conscious entity, soul, and advocates its liberation from non-conscious material (*pudgal*) as the goal of life. In other words, both these cultures are spiritual. Millions and millions of Jains and Buddhists have been struggling and trying to attain those coveted goals. Every Jain for example, asks himself this vital question when he comes of age: 'Can I take up the life of total renunciation, *sannyasa*, to attain salvation?' When he finds, on introspection, that he cannot embrace such a rigorous life of *sannyasa*, he opts for the second alternative, the worldly life. In some of the sects of Buddhism, children and adolescents live as recluses for some years with the idea of getting a taste of the monastic life as well as for their own personal assessment whether they can take up the monastic life

permanently. Thus, the Shramana culture has contributed to the spiritual store of Indian culture and is akin to Brahmanical culture.

It must be remembered that the concept of Indian nationhood was never a political one but cultural, which in turn was inspired by spirituality. If Rama and Krishna, the Divine Incarnations, were born in the North, their great proponent Acharyas—Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, and Vallabha—all were from the South. Preceded by the great Advaitist, Acharya Shankara, they too carried the message of spirituality across the length and breadth of the country. Our illustrious saints, Bhikkus, and Tirthankaras never stayed at one place but went from one part of the land to the other and thus reinforced spirituality.

In the *third phase*, we find ancient Indian culture—a product of Vedic, Jain and Buddhist spiritual traditions—grappling with violent and aggressive Islam. There was virtually no political resistance to Islam in India. Of course, the great Shivaji and Sikh Gurus offered in what may be termed as socio-spiritual resistance and it largely helped the populace to remain spiritually strong. India responded to this challenge by what is now recognized as the Bhakti Movement. A galaxy of saints were born during this period in almost every part of the country: Nanak and Farid in the north-west, Chaitanaya and Sri Shankar Deva in the east, Alvar saints in the South, Surdas, Tulsidas, Kabir, Ravidass, Dadu Dayal, Meera and others in the Central India. In the Western India, we had Jnaneswar, Tukaram, Eknath, and other Varkari saints of Maharashtra, and Narsinh Mehta in Gujarat. Sufism was the product of the interaction between the spiritual elements in Islam and Hinduism.

In the *fourth phase* of the Indian cultural history, India had to face British rule and western materialism. Again, India responded

to this challenge spiritually. Brahma Samaj in Bengal, Arya Samaj in the West, Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra and Theosophical Society and other such spiritual-social attempts were made to assimilate the unavoidable western civilization and Christianity. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sri Aurobindo, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan and others were the products of this age of spiritual renaissance. In fact the leaders of Indian struggle for independence, barring few exceptions, were spiritually inspired.

One might speak of the present phase as the fifth phase of Indian Cultural history of future. It is the age of globalization. Now Indian spirituality has no more remained confined to the geographical boundaries of the country. It is out-reaching the remotest corners of the world through the newly laid down channels of communication. Hindu temples have come up in every continent of the world and Ashramas of various sects of Hinduism and even Jainism have mushroomed everywhere. One may find scores, if not hundreds of websites on Indian spirituality. People from all over the world are thronging Indian religious cities like Hardwar, Rishikesh, Varanasi, etc., in search of spirituality. After all, spirituality is the core of Indian culture as Swamiji said repeatedly.

Spiritual life is the true genius of India. Those who make the greatest appeal to the Indian mind are not the military conquerors, not the rich merchants or the great diplomats, but the holy sages, the Rishis who embody spirituality at its finest and purest. India's pride is that in almost every generation and in every part of the country, from the time of her recorded history, she has produced these holy men who embody for her all that the

country holds most dear and sacred. Though they generally remain away from the main stream of life, kings and commoners pay reverent homage to them and take their advice in the problems of their personal lives as well as in public affairs. By their lives they teach us that pride and power, wealth and glory, are nothing in comparison with the power of spirit.

### The Varnashrama System

Apart from the four purusharthas, the Hindu society is constituted on the basis of four Varnas and four Ashramas, expressly for the ultimate spiritual goal in view. Whether one was a student or a householder, a retired person or a monk, of whatever caste: Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra, he or she was encouraged and expected to follow his or her codes of conduct prescribed by the *varna* or *ashrama*, and finally attain spiritual excellence. Hindu scriptures are replete with stories how a housewife or even a butcher obtained the same spiritual benefits which an ascetic had gained through yogic practices.

According to Swami Vivekananda, human society passes through four successive ages: Brahman age, Kshatriya age, Vaishya age and Shudra age. Each of these ages or Yugas has its strengths and weaknesses. The strength of a Brahmin is intellectual and spiritual power. In the Kshatriya age, the royal power is with the king; in the Vaishya age, money is the power and finally in the Shudra or the labour age, there is the collective might of the people.

It is the spiritual genius of India that in each of these four ages, the might or the power of each one was directed towards spiritual or religious goals. Whenever the caste in power became selfish and narrow-minded, and did not pursue the responsibility of nurturing the

spiritual core of the country, it was replaced by the next caste.<sup>1</sup>

### The Indian Way of Living

For a Hindu, religion is not merely a once-a-week-affair or a mere ritual. A Hindu's whole life is religious. He wakes up religiously and goes to bed religiously. He eats, does his daily chores and duties religiously. A Hindu child is conceived religiously, born religiously, starts his education religiously, marries religiously and even dies religiously. Nay, even his life beyond is observed religiously. Every major event of his life is a sacrament. An Indian's whole year is studded with religious festivals and observances. The two major harvesting periods of the year are religiously celebrated as Navaratri, characterized by fasts and vigils, charity and worship, gaiety and joy.

We may also learn about the spiritual roots of Indian culture if we travel around the country and go to the villages where the nation lives. On the bank of every little pond or lake in the village, we would find a small temple dedicated to Lord Shiva, Divine Mother or the local deity. Villagers coming for bath or to collect water pay obeisance to the deity. On enquiry, we shall be told the legend behind the little shrine: that a great sage practised severe austerities and had spiritual realization at the spot or that the deity had appeared to one of the devotees in dream and had beckoned him to build the temple there. This is why when Swami Vivekananda was asked how he considered India after visiting the materialistically advanced West, he had said,

India I loved before I came away. Now the very dust of India has become holy to me, the very air is now to me holy; it is now the holy land, the place of pilgrimage, the Tirtha!<sup>2</sup>

## Art, Music and Sculpture

In art, music, sculpture and literature, we find indelible marks of the spiritual core of India. Apart from the Vedic Rishis who were *Kavis*, poets, India's greatest poets were all saints: Surdas, Tulsidas, Meera, Kabir, Nanak and the rest. And the themes of their poetry were naturally spiritual. In the Gita (8.9), God Himself is designated as Kavi—a Poet.

If one were to review the ancient Indian paintings, one will find without exaggeration that 80 to 90 per cent of the paintings depict the religious and spiritual themes in general and the lives of Krishna and Rama in particular. One has simply to visit Ajanta and Ellora to be convinced that it was the case even with Buddhism—art and sculpture even in Buddhistic era were spiritually based. What more proof does one need than the Jain temples of Ranakpur, or the Dilawara temples of Mount Abu to establish that Jain architecture and sculpture were spiritually oriented! The architecture and sculpture of the massive temples of Goddess Meenakshi at Madurai, Lord Ranganatha at Srirangam, Lord Shiva at Rameshvaram are proofs enough of the same.

Samaveda is the source of Indian music and is therefore ranked first among the Vedas. Sri Krishna says (Gita, 10.22): 'Among the Vedas, I am Samaveda'. Indian music, at its finest, like other Indian arts, welled forth out of the mystic experience. This art 'springs from spiritual realization and what it creates and expresses at its greatest is the spirit in form . . . the universal and cosmic individual in suggestion but not lost in individuality.'<sup>3</sup> It has not the 'ideal physical or emotional beauty but the utmost spiritual beauty and significance.'

It is with this insight that a whole system of acoustics has been built up in the Tantras—a magnificent practical science of *Nada, Bindu,*

*Tanmantra, Dhvani, Mantra and Sphota.* This same cosmic vision underlies Vedic music. The singers were in possession of a high mystic idea. This mystic and occult vision is found in later music also. As recently as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we meet Muthuswamy Dikshitar whose every song was a mantra. This is found in the best of Indian musicians who have always been mystics in



search of the eternal. Thyagaraja, one of the finest musicians the world has known, has sung: 'Is there a religious path without music and adoration?' This adoration is Bhakti. Bhakti is the life breath of the Vedic adoration of Rudra and Vishnu, the Prabandhams of the Vaishnavites, the Thevarams of Shaivites (both of south India), the Abhangas of Maharashtra, the Devaramanas of Karnataka and the Bhajans in general. The ecstatic mystic devotional music of Ramdass of Bhadrachala, Purandardass and Thyagraja are unparalleled in the history of music. The songs

of Chaitanaya, Jayadeva, Annamacharya, Meera and Kshetranya are some of the finest of this kind.<sup>4</sup>

Bharat Muni, the author of Natya shastra, tells us that Natyaveda was created by Lord Brahma himself. Thus Indian dramaturgy, at its core is spiritual. A large number of Sanskrit



dramas are based on Vedic and Pauranik themes or on Ramayana and Mahabharata. As for the Indian classical dance, Lord Shiva and

Goddess Parvati are the performing deities of the Tandava and Lasya dance.

### Conclusion

Let us conclude with the poignant statement of Sri T.M.P. Mahadevan:

Each civilization seems to have a genius for some particular aspect of life. Ancient Greece was devoted to art, and Rome to politics. But while these civilizations, and others pursuing similar ideals, perished and form now but dead chapters of history, India has stood like a `Rock of Ages', weathering many a fierce storm, because her foundations are the eternal values of philosophy and religion, and not the shifting sands of the secular arts of beauty and governance. . . Even if the average man would forget this higher call, there have appeared in India, in an unbroken succession, spiritual leaders to remind him of his true end and show him the way. The greatest men of India have always been the messengers of the Spirit who appeal to the fundamental unity of all in the basic Reality which is spiritual, and a comprehensive outlook which knows no narrow distinctions. They are the true bearers of culture which is sweetness and light—sweetness that expresses itself as universal love, and light that is spiritual wisdom. Their call is not to 'my clan' or to 'my community', but to the whole humanity. Their message is not for a particular country or age, but for the entire world and for all time. Such seers as Yajnavalkya and Uddalka, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, Gandhi and Ramana, who are the salt of the earth, have been the saviours of India and the custodians of her culture. They are a blessing not only to the country of their birth, but to the whole world.<sup>5</sup> □



### References

1. cf. Swami Vivekananda's article: *Modern India*, CW, 4
2. *Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2.152
3. John Woodroffe, *Garland of Letters*, p 236
4. cf. *The Bases of Indian Culture*, Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, Calcutta, 1971, p.508-9
5. *Cultural Heritage of India*, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Volume I, pp. 163-64