

India's Timeless Culture

Its Power and Charm

Here is an old anecdote with a contemporary significance:

'Sir, how did you find Indians?' asked a tourist official to a departing foreign visitor in an Indian airport. 'Where are they?' the visitor snapped back. 'I met Tamilians, Kannadigas, Telugus, Malayalis, Bengalis, Punjabis, Marathis, Gujaratis, Assames . . . but "Indians"? Well . . . did not get to meet many.'

Perhaps, something similar would be said of Indian culture. Where is Indian culture, which part of India? There is culture specific to Tamilians, Kannadigas, Telugus, Malayalis, Bengalis, Punjabis, Marathis, Gujaratis, Assames, and so on, but which is the *Indian* culture?

It is plain fact: while regional colours of India's cultural tapestry are quite visible, the national character of Indian culture is not easily discernible and understandable. This is true not only of the fascinated visitors from outside India but also of most Indians themselves.

Nor is it easy to get a truly pan-Indian view of Indian culture.

India! Diversity is thy name. With a mind-boggling variety in customs, manners, beliefs, traditions, languages, ceremonies, arts, dances, music, architecture, cuisines and family values, and a history spread over several millennia, is it easy to fathom and evaluate India's cultural heritage for an ordinary

person? It requires much patience, sympathy and effort to uncover the real nature and character of the Indian culture. And despite its diversity, there is an underlying unity, an ever-present thread that runs through all forms of its cultural heritage—south Indian or north Indian or any other Indian. There is influence of regional, historical, geographical and other factors on its forms and expressions, but a silent spirit of unity pervades the whole of Indian culture.

Deep, profound and lasting, this unique culture does not lend itself so easily to curiosity-seekers and observers-in-a-hurry. But once it does, it captures their hearts. Forever.

Swami Vivekananda pointed it out more than a hundred years ago,

To many, Indian thought, Indian manners, Indian customs, Indian philosophy, Indian literature are repulsive at the first sight; but let them persevere, let them read, let them become familiar with the great principles underlying these ideas, and it is ninety-nine to one that the charm will come over them, and fascination will be the result. Slow and silent, as the gentle dew that falls in the morning, unseen and unheard yet producing a most tremendous result, has been the work of the calm, patient, all-suffering spiritual race upon the world of thought.¹

This, then, is the first thing to remember about Indian culture—its spiritual nature. It is like gentle dew, silent and unseen. Like spirituality, it is beyond gross eyes. And in



understanding the Indian culture, let us seek help and guidance from Swami Vivekananda about whose grasp of this subject was succinctly expressed by Rabindranath Tagore, when he advised French Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland, thus:

If you want to understand India, study Vivekananda. In him everything is positive and nothing negative.

Indeed, 'everything is positive' in Swamiji.

Seeing Through Swami Vivekananda's Eyes

If one needs Swamiji to understand India, one also needs, first, to understand Swamiji himself, in some measure at least. Writing of the factors that shaped Swamiji's thoughts and world-view, Sister Nivedita stated in her introduction to the nine-volume *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*,

These, then—the Shastras, the Guru, and the Motherland—are the three notes that mingle themselves to form the music of the works of Vivekananda. These are the treasure which it is his to offer. These furnish him with the ingredients whereof he compounds the world's heal-all of his spiritual bounty. These are the three lights burning within that single lamp which India by his hand lighted and set up, for the guidance of her own children and of the world.²

These 'three lights', which mingled in a powerful lamp called Swami Vivekananda's mind, are:

First, he had his spiritual training under the great Master, Sri Ramakrishna. It is Sri Ramakrishna who nurtured and gently stoked

young Naren's divine spark to a flame. And Sri Ramakrishna himself was 'consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people.'

Second, Swamiji's keen and uncompromising intellect led to his study of scriptures, questioning and analysing them, understanding the central theme of India's timeless wisdom contained in their words. And he left no area unexplored.

Third, Swamiji himself went along the length and breadth of India, mostly on foot, mingling and living with the people of all walks of life and thus gathering first-hand the experience of the diversity and richness that is Indian culture. Swamiji's Indian tirthayatra finally brought him to Kanyakumari, in the southern-most tip of India, where he sat for three days—immersed in the thought of India, 'the queen of his adoration.' Swamiji's biography says,

There, sitting on the last stone of India, he passed into a deep meditation on the present and future of his country. He sought for the root of her downfall. With the vision of a seer he understood why India had been thrown from the pinnacle of glory to the depths of degradation. Where only wind and surf were to be heard, he reflected on the purpose and achievement of the Indian world. He thought not of Bengal, or of Maharashtra, or of the Punjab, but of India and the life of India. The centuries were laid out before him. He perceived the realities and potentialities of Indian culture. He saw India organically and synthetically, as a master-builder might visualize in the concrete an architect's plans. He saw religion



to be the life-blood of India's millions. 'India', he realized in the silence of his heart, 'shall rise only through a renewal and restoration of that highest spiritual consciousness that has made her, at all times, the cradle of the nations and cradle of the Faith.' He saw her greatness: he saw her weaknesses as well—the central one of which was that the nation had lost its individuality. To his mind, the only hope lay in a restatement of the culture of the Rishis. Religion was not the cause of India's downfall; but the fact that true religion was nowhere followed: for religion, when lived, was the most potent of all forces.³

Thus, who else could guide us to understand Indian culture better than Swamiji!

What Swamiji Said of Indian Culture

Swami Vivekananda was very proud of Indian culture. But he was no emotional, impulsive admirer. Far from being an upbeat fan, his understanding was based on a deep study of the hard facts of history and core issues of Indian culture. Added to it was his spiritual training and personal experience.

He said of India,

The debt which the world owes to our Motherland is immense. Taking country with country, there is not one race on this earth to which the world owes so much as to the patient Hindu, the mild Hindu . . . Civilisations have arisen in other parts of the world. In ancient times and in modern times, great ideas have emanated from strong and great races . . . In ancient and in modern times, seeds of great truth and power have been cast abroad by the advancing tides of national life; but mark you, my friends, it has been always with the blast of war trumpets and with the march of embattled cohorts. Each idea had to be soaked in a deluge of blood. . . This, in the main, other nations have taught; but India has for thousands of years peacefully existed. Here activity prevailed when even Greece did

not exist, when Rome was not thought of, when the very fathers of the modern Europeans lived in the forests and painted themselves blue. Even earlier, when history has no record, and tradition dares not peer into the gloom of that intense past, even from then 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.⁴

Nor is Indian culture restricted to its present landmass called India. It extends beyond its political and geographical boundaries. The whole of Southeast Asia has something in common. Since 1940s, the term *Southeast Asia* has been used to refer to the common culture that pervades this vast area. Southeast Asia means the area to the east of India and to the south of China, which includes the Indo-Chinese Peninsula, the Malay Archipelago and Cambodia, roughly forming a circle from Burma through Indonesia to Vietnam. Before the term *Southeast Asia* became common, the region was often described as *Greater India*. The history of Indian cultural expansion covers a period of more than fifteen hundred years in these areas. The famed Angkor Wat temple complex, largest of its kind in the world, in Cambodia, and the Prambanan Shiva Temple in Indonesia are two impressive examples of this.

Culture—Its Deeper Meaning

The word culture cannot and should not be limited to cultural programmes and fests! It is much more pervasive and closer. Culture, beginning from 'personal culture' to 'collective or racial, social, national culture' contains within it many shades and colours. Of course, the one simple meaning of *culture* is 'to cultivate', to refine and to evolve. In



this sense, it covers one's manners, etiquettes, festivals, food, dance, architecture—practically all aspects of our day-to-day life. If culture is a growth and a process of refinement, it's most immediate manifestation is in the word 'civilization' (i.e., material aspect of life, and organized living and working). According to Swamiji, spirituality is the core of culture, and culture is the core of civilization. He said,

The more advanced a society or nation is in spirituality, the more is that society or nation civilised. No nation can be said to have become civilised only because it has succeeded in increasing the comforts of material life by bringing into use lots of machinery and things of that sort. The present-day civilisation of the West is multiplying day by day only the wants and distresses of men. On the other hand, the ancient Indian civilisation, by showing people the way to spiritual advancement, doubtless succeeded, if not in removing once for all, at least in lessening, in a great measure, the material needs of men.⁵

Swami further said,

It is culture that withstands shocks, not a simple mass of knowledge. You can put a mass of knowledge into the world, but that will not do it much good. There must come culture into the blood.⁶

Spirituality and Indian Culture

Spirituality is the outcome of living a life centred in dharma.

What is dharma? 'That which holds life together'. Dharma is not a set of dogmas and beliefs but the working of a universal cosmic order which keeps life together, leading man to ultimate freedom from all limitations. And Swami Vivekananda believed that freedom is what every religion tries to aim at. He traces how the whole journey of man's dream of freedom finally finds its fulfillment in experiencing the Self:

The search for freedom is the search of all religions; whether they know it or not, whether they can formulate it well or ill, the idea is there. Even the lowest man, the most ignorant, seeks for something which has power over nature's laws . . . Everywhere we see this assertion of freedom, this freedom of the soul. It is reflected in every religion in the shape of God or gods; but it is all external yet—for those who only see the gods outside. Man decided that he was nothing. He was afraid that he could never be free; so he went to seek for someone outside of nature who was free. Then he thought that there were many and many such free beings, and gradually he merged them all into one God of gods and Lord of lords. Even that did not satisfy him. He came a little closer to truth, a little nearer; and then gradually found that whatever he was, he was in some way connected with the God of gods and Lord of lords; that he, though he thought himself bound and low and weak, was somehow connected with that God of gods. Then visions came to him; thought arose and knowledge advanced. And he began to come nearer and nearer to that God, and at last found out that God and all the gods, this whole psychological phenomenon connected with the search for an all-powerful free soul, was but a reflection of his own idea of himself. And then at last he discovered that it was not only true that 'God made man after His own image', but that it was also true that man made God after his own image. That brought out the idea of divine freedom. The Divine Being was always within, the nearest of the near. Him we had ever been seeking outside, and at last found that He is in the heart of our hearts.⁷

This grand idea of religion is at the root of Indian culture.

Spirituality and culture are synonyms in the Indian context. To be cultured, in the highest sense, is to be spiritual. The more advanced a culture becomes, the more spiritual



it becomes because spirituality is the hallmark of a highly evolved mind. Spirituality is the manifestation of the fruits which mankind gains when it seeks the infinite, tries to breakdown all limitations and barriers. It engulfs all mankind in its embrace and excludes none. A spiritually strong person and nation naturally becomes tolerant and inclusive. As Swamiji put it,

The world is waiting for this grand idea of universal toleration. It will be a great acquisition to civilisation. Nay, no civilisation can long exist unless this idea enters into it. No civilisation can grow unless fanaticism, bloodshed, and brutality stop. No civilisation can begin to lift up its head until we look charitably upon one another; and the first step towards that much-needed charity is to look charitably and kindly upon the religious convictions of others. Nay more, to understand that not only should we be charitable, but positively helpful to each other, however different our religious ideas and convictions may be. And that is exactly what we do in India . . . It is here in India that Hindus have built and are still building churches for Christians and mosques for Mohammedans. That is the thing to do. In spite of their hatred, in spite of their brutality, in spite of their cruelty, in spite of their tyranny, and in spite of the vile language they are given to uttering, we will and must go on building churches for the Christians and mosques for the Mohammedans until we conquer through love, until we have demonstrated to the world that love alone is the fittest thing to survive and not hatred, that it is gentleness that has the strength to live on and to fructify, and not mere brutality and physical force.⁸

Hence, in the Indian perspective, one cannot demarcate or separate culture from spirituality. Whenever one refers to Indian culture, one is invariably referring to spirituality in its various forms. In this sense,

bharatiya samskriti, Indian culture, is *manava samskriti*, the culture of Man for spirituality is the search for, and attainment of, the essential nature of man which is divine. To destroy Indian culture, thus, is to destroy spirituality itself! This, of course, cannot happen. As Swamiji said,

Shall India die? Then from the world all spirituality will be extinct, all moral perfection will be extinct, all sweet-souled sympathy for religion will be extinct, all ideality will be extinct; and in its place will reign the duality of lust and luxury as the male and female deities, with money as its priest, fraud, force, and competition its ceremonies, and the human soul its sacrifice. Such a thing can never be. The power of suffering is infinitely greater than the power of doing; the power of love is infinitely of greater potency than the power of hatred.⁹

In another place Swamiji mentions¹⁰ 'All poetry, painting, and music is feeling expressed through words, through colour, through sound. . .' And when the heart, the seat of feelings, is purified, all poetry, painting and music will exude purity, exude spirituality.

Beyond the Popular Culture

Despite all materialism and consumerism that seem to engulf Indian society and political and economic thinking, this timeless culture continues to survive, nay, thrive. It has a powerful presence.

Yet there are many questions to be answered. 'Where is Indian culture? Where is it to be found? Is there any thing called "culture" still left?'—a young Indian, working in MNC or software industry might ask today. Yet when he meets his parents or marries or sets up a home or has to perform last rites of his dear ones, his inherent Indian roots sprout

up.¹¹ Not only when he is in India, but also when he migrates to other lands in search of better prospects.

Let us remember that there is a culture beyond what the popular films and politics depict or deplore. Highly adaptive and assimilative and yet extremely orthodox, conventional and stubborn, this timeless culture has assumed and will continue to adapt to new forms. Whether it is learning Indian classical music through Skype, or digitising Upanishads or Puranas, or revival in spoken Sanskrit, or devising ways to help the non-resident Indians through e-pujas or e-darshans, or creating new Bhajan and Vedic websites, opening of Indian restaurants, or building temples in Washington, Chicago, London, Australia and so on—there is no dying for this timeless culture. The more the materialism, let us be sure, the more significance and appeal Indian culture will have to people across the world.

Rubbing its shoulders with modernity and progressive models of living, the Indian culture is a living force. Despite several false notions and accretions that may have covered its pristine beauty in places, the matchless appeal of Indian culture is a fact of experience. Having firmly established itself in spirituality, the Indian culture continues to live and thrive. And, like spirituality, it will continue to live and thrive for eternity.

A Special Issue

This special issue of the Vedanta Kesari attempts to put together many aspects of Indian culture. Of course, we have the scholarly and comprehensive eight volumes of the *Cultural Heritage of India*, published from the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, and many other works of value and depth. But what we have tried to do in this issue is what the popular Hindi proverb says, *gagar main sagar*—‘putting ocean in a pitcher!’ How can a vast and diverse culture such as Indian culture be put in a slender volume as this!

Yet there is a need which has to be met—considering the fast-paced life today’s generation has faced with. The fundamental ideas and ideals of Indian culture such as Upanishads, Yoga, meditation, and so on have been presented. There are also articles on the influence of Indian culture on economics, architecture, tradition of dining and so on. We thank the contributors for their valuable writings. This issue also tries to provide snippets of Indian culture through short write ups under the column, *Imprints of a Living Culture*. Prepared at the Vedanta Kesari office with generous input from Wikipedia, the popular online encyclopaedia, they are aimed at the young or time-starved readers who wish to get a bird’s eye-view of the Indian cultural traditions. For the first time in the history of our monthly, we are bringing out the entire issue in multicolour.

We are glad to dedicate this issue to Swami Vivekananda on his 150th birth Anniversary that is being celebrated across



References

1. CW, 3:110
2. CW, 1:xvii
3. *Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 1.341
4. CW, 3:106
5. CW, 6:463
6. CW, 3:291
7. CW, 2:401-2
8. CW, 3:188
9. CW, 4:348
10. CW, 7:31
11. see *Becoming Indian: The Unfinished Revolution of Culture And Identity* by Pavan K. Varma, Penguin