

Uniqueness of Indian Culture

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Culture Means Refining

Gold is available in the bowels of the earth. Metals and oils too are hidden in it. But they are not in a condition for consumption. They are raw, crude and impure. They require to be purified and refined. In other words, they need curing or culturing. Similarly, cultivation is a process to produce grains and fruits. Cooking is a process to make dry grains edible. Butter is a product brought out of a long process called churning of milk.

In the same way, man has God hidden in him. Perfection is latent in him. Love is inherent in him. Knowledge is imbedded in him. Bliss is stored in him. They are all to be brought out through a process called *culture*. Initially, despite the hidden treasure, man is rude, unrefined, uncivilized and uncultured. Over a long period of time, through a process of curing and cultivating (in the form of good *samskaras*) he is able to attain the status of a cultured person of coveted divine traits. As gold is precious, culture is of intrinsic value. As butter cannot be reversed and mixed with milk, buttermilk, curd or water, culture cannot afford to be contaminated with anything. It should not be adulterated. It should remain pure and precious. As metals can be moulded and shaped into tools and ornaments, culture is known to shine with its adaptability in any form of civilization.

Culture and civilization are like gold and ornaments, content and the container. It is culture that is of greater value. Civilization gains in status only when it has the precious culture at its core. The value of the jewel is based on the gold with which it is made. The shape and design of ornaments may not withstand blows, but gold can. Indian culture is unique, for it has withstood many a blow till now. Blows have only brightened it.

Culture and Perfection

The word 'culture' is used to denote the unique and intrinsic talents or traits in their perfected form in a community or country, a society or a nation. Each culture is unique since it reflects the intrinsic character of the respective people. Also, peoples belonging to different cultures develop their arts and sciences, habits and lifestyles reflecting their own cultural traits. In the Indian cultural tradition, we find many such refinements. In music and dance, food and drinks, aptitudes and attires, traditions and customs and a host of life-skills and styles including the goals of life, one finds the perfected form of their respective cultures. For example, in the tribal dances, there is a state of perfection reflecting their tribal culture. Similarly, Carnatic music reveals the perfection of that art in tune with a refined culture. Bharatanatyam, Kathakkali,



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Manipuri, Kuchupudi, Yakshagana and such forms of dance have reached a unique expression of perfection, displaying the cultural traits of the respective areas where they have evolved. To tamper with them is but a vain attempt.

Culture and Civilization

Culture and civilization are like character and conduct. The core of conduct is character and the expression of character is seen in conduct. *What* we are is character; *how* we are is conduct. Even an ordinary behaviour or prosaic nature with sound character is like a gold biscuit with decoration. Preferably, character and conduct should be in tune with each other. Civilization shines in proportion to its intrinsic preciousness of culture. Scarcely should the civilization be contrary to culture. Character should always be unchanging, in tune with the intrinsic divinity of man. Civilizations, now and then, may undergo a few changes but without affecting the essential cultural moorings—that is the true test of a well-developed culture. In India, in spite of foreign invasions and reigns and the advent of their styles of living, the core values of its culture have remained untouched.

Of course, there have been some changes in the civilization, in the externals. In dress, in language and in a few habits one may find changes in Indian civic expressions due to globalization. But at the core, India retains its unique culture. Though India has had its share of influence of Western civilization, the core character of Indian culture remains the same. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Ramana lived during the British rule in India. They

were least affected and they retained their precious gold-like divine culture. Neither the foreign language nor a material lifestyle had affected the national culture in India in general and Indian spirituality in particular. English language was used for presenting Indian culture much more beautifully by stalwarts like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. The all-embracing nature of Indian culture became well-known and better understood through it.

Culture, in the sense of refinement, remains constant despite the diverse expressions of civilization as gold continues to be the same pure gold in spite of its expressions in various ornaments. Also, Indian culture, like the ocean which remains unaffected by the inflow of many rivers, remains the same in spite of the various civilizations flowing into it. Since Indian culture is divine in content and outlook, it considers everything and everybody as God. Every visitor is a guest and every guest is God. It is again Indian culture to deify all including the elements of Nature. Everybody deserves to be worshipped, according to Indians. Hospitality is to be showered on every visitor. Showing hospitality is culture; the 'how' of that hospitality is civilization. A few hundred years ago, a guest might have been shown hospitality in one way and now in a different way. If milk was given to the guest long ago, it may be coffee or some other drink now. Whatever may be offered, it is to be done with a holy attitude. To a truly cultured Indian everything is a divine act and everybody is a divine being.

Conquest of Nature

Nature may be viewed in two ways: The external nature consisting of the five elements—earth, water, fire, air and space; and the internal nature consisting of the three Gunas (the Tamasik or idleness, Rajasik or dynamism and Sattvik or serenity) in the mind. [Of course, Vedanta speaks of all Nature to be an expression of three Gunas but for the sake of understanding culture, let us assume to look at nature in these two ways.]

For a comfortable physical well-being, external nature is to be balanced. For a peaceful life, internal nature is to be poised, composed or balanced. If external nature is conquered without the internal conquest, it will be a lopsided achievement. We have external comfort and internal restlessness!

If external conquest is construed as civilization, internal conquest is culture. In the Ramayana, Ravana was able to command the five elements of Nature. He subdued them and built civilized society in his kingdom where the five elements of Nature, represented by various powerful men built a gorgeous Lanka. In scorching summer, Ravana was able to enjoy the cool breeze and the pleasant moon in his bedroom. But in spite of all his achievements in the external world, he was not peaceful at heart. He was often disturbed and agitated in the mind because of his lust. It was a clear indication that he was unable to control his mind or internal nature. Despite a flourishing civilization, he was deprived of restful sleep.

It is culture that brings peace. When the internal nature is controlled or

conquered, external nature too can be enjoyed meaningfully. Indian culture advocates and practises conquest of internal nature. The rishis and yogis of this country gave priority to the conquest of the internal nature or mind. This conquest of the internal nature is able to make man in India contented, accommodative and loving in outlook. Hence the basic propensity of the Indian mind is to live in tune with Nature and not interfere with it. In other words, when the mind is controlled, it is at rest. And such restful mind can live in tune with Nature. Therefore, India did not crave for external conquest. Indian culture is unique in the sense that it turns the mind inward and makes life lovable, live-able and peaceful under all circumstances, fluctuations of fortune and vagaries of nature. India recognised long back the need to respect, and not exploit, Nature. Nature should be used and not abused. Today we see how environmental pollution, sound pollution and visual pollution have collectively made our lives so difficult.

Magnanimous and Modest

Swami Vivekananda is of the view that modern civilization touches only the surface of human life. He said (CW, 3.291)

We all know in modern times of nations which have masses of knowledge, but what of them? They are like tigers, they are like savages, because culture is not there. Knowledge is only skin-deep, as civilisation is, and a little scratch brings out the old savage.

Yes, scratch a little, the beast pounces up. Such was the kingdom of Ravana; there was plenty of civilization such as well-ventilated rooms, splendid buildings and gardens and

so on—all signs of civilization. [Now use of computers is held as the sign of growth!] Despite the devices, man may not have



peace of mind like the demonic Ravana. Civilization without culture is like a monkey or a donkey with decorative costumes and ornaments. Culture without civilization may be like a majestic lion of courage and a mighty elephant of strength without any ornaments. They need no ornaments. And monkeys and donkeys cannot improve their traits in spite of the jewellery. Therefore, adherence

to intrinsic divinity is more important than transient trappings.

Recognising the innate divinity as basis of all-embracing love and modesty is the hall mark of Indian culture. This brings in magnanimity and majesty in life. Thus we find in the Ramayana, Sri Rama as an embodiment of magnanimity and modesty. When Ahalya was brought back to normalcy by the grace of Sri Rama, she extolled him in glowing terms. But Sri Rama, the embodiment of true spirit of Indian culture, maintained his modesty and replied,

O Mother please do not attribute any healing powers to me or redeeming features to my toes. I am an ordinary man with normal abilities. If my feet had the ability to transform stones into women, all the pebbles that came in contact

with my soles should have become women by now. I came all the way walking from Ayodhya. No stone elsewhere was transformed into a lady. You have been in a stone-like state of stoicism with prayers all these years. It is but a coincidence that my toes came in contact with you at the time of your fulfilment. I am but an instrument fulfilling a task assigned to me by the providence.

This is typical of Indian culture. Performing one's duties with commitment but without attachment is the characteristic trait of an advanced culture.

Sri Krishna in the Mahabharata is considered to be a great God. At the time of Yudhishtira's Rajasuya yajna in Indraprastha, Sri Krishna is offered to be the chief guest and accordingly he goes forward to worship Sri Krishna's feet. Shishupala, a cousin of Sri Krishna, objects to this. Then Yudhishtira explains how Sri Krishna deserves to be the chief guest. He says that it was Sri Krishna who received every visitor as not only a guest but a God. He welcomed all and honoured all. Therefore, he deserves to be respected by all. He, who loves all, deserves to be loved by all. He, who respects all, deserves to be respected by all. He, who worships all, deserves to be worshipped by all.

The uniqueness of Indian culture lies in the fact that it is based on divinity of man. This means respecting and loving all. Its innate spirituality is its uniqueness. □

