

# Why Be Proud of Being an Indian?

## *Twelve Major Achievements of Indian Civilization*

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### **Patriotism versus National Pride**

We all wish young Indians to be proud of belonging to this nation, and, indeed, if asked, most of them loudly assert a sense of pride. But there is some confusion between pride and patriotism: cheering the national cricket team is a sign of patriotism, not pride. Patriotism is a universally shared feeling, but there is no guarantee that it is bound to be a positive one: Germans under Nazi Germany or the Japanese during World War II were highly patriotic—with the consequences we know. Patriotism is rooted in the national ego (hence its aggressive nature) and, generally, in ignorance; at bottom, it is little better than the animal's pack instinct. National pride, on the other hand, is—or at least can be—a positive

feeling founded on knowledge: an awareness of one's country best achievements and highest contributions to humanity. It is rooted in the soul of the nation, not its ego.

In India's case, the picture is complicated by the fact that India is more than a nation in the modern sense of the word: it is a civilization and it is in this perspective that we must assess her 'civilizational balance sheet'.

In what follows, there is no attempt to glorify India. No one can be happy with the knowledge that fifteen Indians commit suicide every hour, or that nearly three lakh Indian farmers have killed themselves in the last two decades. India perhaps holds a world record in terms of the numbers of female



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foetuses aborted every year (about five lakhs). According to Interpol, 'In South Asia, the "black" or parallel economy is 30 percent–50 percent of the "white" or documented economy.' Figures apart, we all agree that the levels of civic consciousness and ecological awareness are appallingly low. National pride cannot be blind to those dark spots, but they do not in themselves negate a sober assessment of India's major achievements. In fact, the latter may help find solutions to the former.

## Twelve Major Achievements

### 1. Indus-Sarasvati Civilization

Let us, then, begin our journey through time—and there is no better place to start from than the Indus, or Harappan, or Indus-Sarasvati Civilization. At its peak (from 2600 to 1900 BCE), it extended over one million square kilometres, gave rise to planned cities with an advanced sanitation system, bathrooms for most inhabitants, standardized weights, brick proportions and writing system, and a high civic order.

The Harappans were skilled craftsmen who exported their goods all the way to Mesopotamia, but they perhaps also practised an early form of yoga and meditation, as evidenced by seals and figurines. Their sacred symbols and iconography—from the swastika to yogic postures and the namaste with folded hands—formed a rich legacy which has endured to this day. Although their rulers were not depicted, they effectively integrated the whole of northwest India and today's Pakistan without the use of military force, and created a fairly prosperous and generally peaceful society. It may have been a less flamboyant civilization than the Egypt of the Pharaohs, but its achievements were nonetheless of a high order.

### 2. Democratic Structures and Concepts

The next stage of India's urbanization—the Ganges civilization of the first millennium BCE—saw the rise not only of kingdoms, but also of democratic structures and concepts. The sixteen Mahajanapadas of Buddhist times functioned effectively with an elected, not hereditary, king and a system of assemblies. Although kingship did become hereditary later, those democratic traditions, which extended to self-governing villages, remained embedded in the Indian mind. In the last analysis, they were based on a one-word unwritten constitution: not on rights, but on dharma—the individual, social and cosmic order which bound the rulers to the ruled and limited abuse of power: absolute monarchy was an unknown concept in pre-medieval India. 'It is especially remarkable,' writes the Canadian historian Steve





Muhlberger, 'that, during the near-millennium between 500 B.C. and 400 A.D., we find republics almost anywhere in India that our sources allow us to examine society in any detail.' Even later, inscriptions give us elaborate details on the working of assemblies (as in the case of Uttaramerur for the Chola administration).

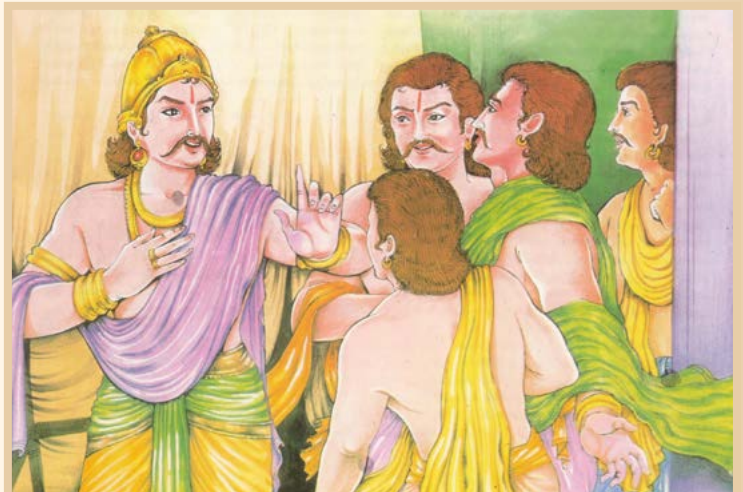
### 3. Integration

Our third achievement is the integration of the enormous landmass and human mass of India. We take it for granted by repeating such slogans as 'unity in diversity', but too often forget what made the 'unity' possible. 'The country that lies north of the ocean, and south of the snowy mountains, is called Bharata,' asserts *Vishnu Purana* (II.3.1), and we find designations such as Jambudvipa or Bharatavarsha in the early literature, but how did this integration take place when the comparable landmass of Europe could not achieve it? Scholars agree that the spread of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism across the land, and the resulting sharing of a spiritual culture are among the chief factors of integration.

In practice, the two Epics played a major role, spreading the ideal

of dharma to every nook and corner of the country. There is perhaps no region of India that does not 'remember' having been crossed by Rama, one of the Pandavas or some great rishi. Besides, a dense network of tirthas and other holy sites created a sacred geography for India, making use of the institution of pilgrimage: witness the Char Dhams at the 'four corners' of India, the twelve Jyotirlingas or the 51 Shakti Mahapithas—not only is the whole map carefully covered, but the land becomes a metaphor for the body of the Mother. The beauty of this cultural integration is that it was an organic process controlled by no authority or caste or political power, and that it stamped out no local culture. In effect, we may empirically define Hinduism as the interface between Vedic and regional folk and tribal cultures.

Contrary to a common misconception that wants the Indian nation to have been the British rule's creation, the above integration was not merely cultural: it was political as





well. The Mauryan Empire extended to the whole of India and Afghanistan, minus the far South. Later empires never quite recovered this extent, but always strove towards it, and ended up sharing concepts and norms of governance and administration across India.

of manuscripts—knowledge, more than gold or jewels, was India’s chief item of export. Her spiritual and intellectual systems left traces in Christianity and found echoes in Greek thought, even if the linkages remain somewhat speculative. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* gave rise to literary and artistic traditions owned by much of Southeast Asia. Indian architecture found sublime expressions in Borobudur’s Stupa or Angkor-Vat’s temple, besides myriads of smaller temples all the way to Vietnam and Korea. The *Panchatantra* influenced the *Arabian Nights*, while Ayurveda travelled all the way to Rome and Japan. All in all, the world was left a richer place for India’s multifaceted contributions.



#### 4. Interface with Other Civilizations

India’s interface with other civilizations was rich, of long-standing and remarkably peaceful barring a couple of military campaigns. The Harappans travelled to the Gulf, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Two thousand years later, Indians traded with the Romans and also eastward, exporting spices, jewels, timber and textiles. Culture often followed trade: Hinduism and Buddhism spread across Asia and the Mediterranean world. When the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-tsang returned from India in the 8th century ce, he was accompanied by a white elephant gifted by King Harsha, whose load consisted mostly

#### 5. India’s Ecological Traditions

Her ecological traditions are our chosen fifth great achievement. ‘Heaven is my father; my mother is this vast earth, my close kin,’ asserts the Rig Veda, rejecting any gulf between the creator and the created. The universe was compared to a ‘thousand-branched tree’, mountains and rivers turned into gods and goddesses. Practices such as sacred groves, animal sanctuaries, medical treatments for plants and animals, and extensive networks of water harvesting and management, some of them going back to Harappan times, were the practical outcome of this attitude. It preached the interconnectedness of all creatures, the milking—not ‘conquest’—of nature (the Mahabharata compares the whole earth to a cow), respect of all life forms and simplicity of living: India cultivated the art of being happy with little, Western consumerism that of being unhappy with much.

## 6. Svabhava and Svadharna

The all-important concept of svabhava and svadharna is our next stop: the recognition that everyone has his own distinct nature and therefore his own distinct spiritual needs and path to self-fulfilment—any existing path, or a new one if necessary. From this acceptance of the 'Other' (not tolerance, a much-abused and now meaningless term), spiritual freedom and pluralism ensued, to a degree unthinkable in the three monotheistic Abrahamic religions. There lies, clearly,



the solution to many current national and world conflicts—provided the attitude is reciprocal.

## 7. Her Creativity in Scientific and Technological Fields

India's creativity in scientific and technological fields is as enormous as

it is overlooked, or else misunderstood—especially by us Indians! We have all heard the names of Aryabhata, Brahmagupta or Bhaskaracharya, but there is little awareness of their actual contributions, of their predecessors and commentators. India's share in the revival of mathematics in Europe, channelled there through the Arabs, is also under-represented. Mathematics and astronomy apart, feats of metallurgy (wootz steel, rust-resistant iron,

zinc distillation, among others) and other technologies (gemmology, crafts, textile, shipping, etc.) are also poorly known to the average Indian.

## 8. Spiritualization of Art and Literature

It has often been said that India has attempted to spiritualize every aspect of life, to the extent that there is little that may be called 'secular' in the real sense of the term. The spiritualization of art and literature is especially conspicuous, with the creation of numerous traditions of sacred dance, music, painting and architecture, all of them celebrating the divinity of life and its multifarious forms of beauty.

## 9. Systems of Yoga

The ninth achievement in our list is the creation of systems of yoga, possibly India's greatest gift in the field of self-exploration and realization. It has generously expanded beyond India's borders, conquering Western nations, where yoga instructors and practitioners abound, clearly filling a void left by the retreat of institutionalized religion there.

## 10. Renaissance in Spirituality, Art and Science

Our tenth and eleventh items require little elaboration: the first is the 19th-century renaissance in spirituality, art and science, an unexpected but powerful Indian reaction to the colonial invasion of minds, which saw the emergence of great figures from Sri Ramakrishna to Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Abanindranath Tagore or Jagadis Chandra Bose.

## 11. Rejuvenation of 19th-century Western Literature and Thought



It is important to note that India made significant contributions to the rejuvenation of 19th-century Western literature and thought, following the first translations of Sanskrit and Pali texts into European languages.

European and American thinkers and writers, from Schopenhauer or Michelet to Emerson and Thoreau found in Indian thought and spirituality a fresh source of inspiration. India, vanquished at home, for a time humbled Europe by revealing to her an older and richer civilization. Physicists, too, such as Tesla, Schrödinger, Heisenberg, Oppenheimer or Bohm, found in Vedantic concepts stimulating leads and hints.

## 12. India's Continuity

The twelfth and last achievement of Indian civilization is that it survived at all. It

need not have: it could have followed the path to disappearance that ancient Egypt or Greece took. The reasons for this survival are many and complex; in the last analysis, one may state that its deeper roots perhaps made the whole difference.

## What India Did Not Contribute

The above list claims no finality; it is merely illustrative and open-ended. But it needs to be supplemented with contributions India never made: wars of religion, colonial conquest and plunder, slave trade, genocides, world wars, concentration camps are unknown to India's past, but have left large red stains over the history of Western civilization.

India and the West have much to learn from each other, but the latter more so, if our world is to fulfil its potential. □