

## *Simhâvalokanam*

From the Archives of THE VEDANTA KESARI

(May, 1970, Pp. 47)

# Dharma, the Basis of Indian Culture

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In Sanskrit language, culture may be called *samskriti*, the refined perfected state of our character, in which *buddhisatvam*, the principle of intelligence in human personality, functions in harmony with the Universal Spirit, that is Satyam-Sivam-Sundaram (Truth-Benignity-Beauty) Infinite. This high state of human perfection where character attains its full blossom is the fulfillment of all human aspirations and endeavour to become full by realising the unity of all life in oneself, the supreme spirit divine. . .

The term 'culture' may be better understood by its Sanskrit equivalent Samskriti (*Samskara*); Indian culture is Bharatiya Samskriti. The Sanskrit root *Samskri* means to refine, to purify, and Samskriti is the state of having been refined, having been made pure, having become free from all dross. The word 'culture' conveying the same sense, is derived from its Latin root *cultura*, meaning tillage, improvement, or refinement, as is seen in the term agriculture. *agri* (*agre*) is land (soil), and culture is the process of tilling and refining the soil by the removal of weeds, thorns and stones so as to make it suitable for the growth of food-crops. Again, pure metal is extracted from the ore by the removal of foreign elements through different processes of refinement—powdering, sieving, melting, blowing, etc.

Similarly, when the term culture is used in relation to human beings, it should mean the refined, purified state of the 'being' of man, his *sattvam* as expressed in Sanskrit. What is this *sattvam*, the being of man, which is subject to refinement? And to what extent is a refinement of it possible? On the answer to these questions depends any right definition of 'culture'. Naturally, thinking men differ in their understanding of the terms, the being of man, the extent of its refinement, etc., and hence we have different views in the matter. Without clear insight, deep and broad enough to view life in its totality, no healthy definition of culture, universal in its application, can be given. Only Vedanta, the Upanishadic thought of India, has that vision of oneness, the vision of the unity of all life in One Eternal Principle of Life. It is therefore worthwhile to study the implications of culture in the light of Vedanta, the traditional Indian view-point.

According to the view of Vedanta, the Atman, or the Self of man, the real essence of our being, is ever-pure, eternally perfect and unchangeable. It is 'Sat-Chid-Ananda (Truth-Knowledge-Bliss Infinite). The *sattvam*—to be more exact, the *buddhisattvam*—is the upadhi, or the limiting adjunct which constitutes man's apparent being as an individual, and determines his character and conduct in relation to the world of objects outside. In this worldly life of subject-object

relationship, the buddhisattvam, with 'I'-consciousness as its *Magde, the embodiment of faculty* of man to carry on the various subjective functions of perceiving, using, judging and acting, knowing, acting and reacting. It is therefore called the *antarindriya*, or *antahkarana* — the inner organ of man.

There are various other terms in Sanskrit to denote, partially or wholly, the different functions of this inner being of man: for example, *chitta* — the mind or mind-stuff, *hrid* (*hridaya*)—the heart, *chetana*, — the conscious life-principle or the soul, — all these terms represent the buddhisattvam in its different functions.

It is also sometimes called *sukshma sharira*, the subtle body, or the psyche, as distinct from the gross physical body of matter. All that is expressed in the character of man as true knowledge and bliss, all that is beautiful and sublime, all that is good and great, really belong to the Self which is Spirit Divine (Sat-Chid-Ananda-Atma).

The buddhisattvam, by virtue of its intrinsic serenity, reflects, as it were, the glory of the Atman, and finds expression as omniscience, omnipotence, perfect peace and bliss. This original state of purity *par excellence*, where the character of man is perfection all-round, is the ideal state of our being, the end and aim of all life; it is the realisation of the unity and harmony of all life in oneself. . .

In sub-human species in whom the willpower of *sattvam* is not developed, evolution takes place involuntarily and is governed by natural laws. But, in human beings in whom the will and reasoning faculties are developed, conscious effort is required, and the progress of evolution depends on the proper exercise of the will-power. Hence the need of relentless struggle for cutting asunder the binding force of ignorance.

Vidya which is true knowledge *par excellence* is the counter-force to avidya. When, by earnest and concentrated effort, and by proper training in the path of Vidya, the impure element of ignorance is removed, *sattvam* attains its mature state of refinement, and manifests the glory of the Spirit Divine in all its perfection. The effort to purify the *sattvam* by the application of Vidya is real Education—Vidyabhyasa, and the resulting state of purity and perfection is Culture. In Sanskrit, it is called *Sattva-samsuddhi* or *Sattva-samskriti*. We may, therefore, reasonably define culture as the refined, perfected state of human character in which it functions in harmony with the Universal Spirit that is Sat-Chid-Ananda—Existence, Knowledge, Bliss Infinite.

This is the ideal of culture India has been holding, not only for her national life, but for all humanity; in that ideal is to be seen the end of the whole process of cultural evolution by the fulfilment of all human aspirations in the endeavour to become perfect. □



*Trimurty, Elephanta Caves, near Mumbai*