

The Meaning of Samskriti or Culture

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Samskriti and Culture

Let us first understand what we mean by the word 'culture.' Since it is being widely used as the equivalent of the Sanskrit term



samskriti, it is better to study this word first, its connotations and implications. The verbal root *kr* (to do) can give rise to several nouns when associated with certain prefixes. Out of these, three words have a direct bearing on our subject: *prakriti* (basic matter or condition), *samskriti* (re-

financed matter or condition) and *vikrti* (modified or decayed matter or condition).

These can be explained further with suitable examples: A block of stone is *prakriti*, the basic raw material. When it is sculptured into a beautiful image, it becomes *samskriti*. Hence, a lump of gold is *prakriti*; an elegant ornament made out of it is *samskriti*. Raw

food articles like rice and sugar are *prakriti*, whereas a delicious pudding prepared out of them is *samskriti*. On the other hand, if the block of stone is broken into chips, or the gold lump reduced to powder, or the food articles get putrefied, they become *vikrti*.

The English word 'culture' is derived from the Latin term *cult* or *cultus*, meaning, 'tilling, care, refinement and worship.' In sum, it means cultivating and refining a thing to such an extent that its end-product evokes our admiration and respect. This is practically the same as *samskriti* of the Sanskrit language.

The word 'cultivation,' also derived from the same Latin root, as generally applied to the cultivation of crops from the earth, involves several processes such as tilling and preparing the ground, sowing the seeds, watering and manuring as also removing the weeds and destroying harmful insects. This will ultimately result in reaping a good crop. This word also fits in very well with the concept of *samskriti*.

Another expression current in the Sanskrit language is *samskara*. It refers to the process of cultivating, preparing or refining (though the word *samskara* also means an impression on the mind which any action one does). The abstract quality in the end product of refinement is called *samskriti*. But very often the two words are used as if they are identical.



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Culture and Human Beings

The culture of a society depends on the culture of the individuals comprising it, as also the relationship they have among themselves. Hence great attention has to be paid to the growing and nurturing of the basic values of culture in an individual.

Contrary to the vociferous assertions of the materialists or the dry philosophers, a human being is the conglomeration of several parts, apparently different from one another, but acting cohesively for a common purpose, that of the *jivatman* or the individual soul (a conscious entity) inhabiting them. They are: the physical body including the sense-organs, the faculty of speech, the mind and the spirit. A proper training in culture has to tackle each one of these singly, but in a way that it does not interfere or overshadow the natural faculties of the others. For instance, the arms should not be developed to such an extent that they become a burden for the feet to carry them, or allow the nose to develop at the cost of the eyes and the ears! It is a balanced development and a harmonious combination of all the limbs and faculties that conduces not only to the health of the body but also to the well-being of the personality as a whole.

Such a training, as envisaged by a holistic attitude towards the development of the human personality, can be on the following lines:

- ❖ Meticulously observing the rules of health and sanitation. Physical culture including *yogasanas*.

- ❖ Cultivating the faculty of speech through the study of languages and grammar of those languages.

- ❖ Practising the art of speaking the truth at the right time and place, including the knack of presenting even unpleasant truths in a manner that is gracefully accepted.

- ❖ Training the mind in developing discretion and discrimination so that the right decision can be taken at the right time within the limitations imposed by the circumstances.

- ❖ Exercising the intellect by the study of science, philosophy and logic.

- ❖ Fostering a sense of justice.

- ❖ Trying to develop a taste or interest in some of the arts such as classical music and dance, good and elevating literature, drawing and painting, drama and other theatrical arts that can rouse our finer sentiments and so on.

- ❖ Faith in God and a regular prayer.

Culture and Society

Coming to the social aspect of the training for culture, one should start with greater and more intimate association with one's own family members. Though this suggestion may appear a little strange—since such an association seems to be taken for granted—it has become very necessary to bring about a sense of togetherness and cohesion within a family. Such a cohesion is almost absent now-a-days in most of the families, thanks to the industrialization and a mechanical way of life that it has engendered.

The royal secret of good human relationship with others is unselfish love and genuine consideration for the needs and feelings of others. This includes a sense of responsibility and duty towards others.

It goes without saying that this 'charity that begins at home' should gradually be extended to the neighbours, friends and relatives as also other people, leading ultimately to the highest ideal of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* ('the whole world is my family', cited in *Panchatantra*).

And it can be assured that a cultured and refined individual will easily succeed in his efforts at being in peace and harmony with the

society for the very reason that he is a cultured and refined individual!

Basis of Culture

In the Upanishads—the canonical texts of Vedanta—we sometimes come across the basic question, ‘What is that by knowing which, everything else is known?’ In a similar vein, we can ask, ‘What is that by possessing which, culture can be possessed automatically?’ The answer as given by our Rishis, our wise ancestors, is ‘spiritual wisdom.’ (And it should be remembered that this spiritual wisdom, in the ultimate analysis, evolves out of spiritual experience and *not* out of book-learning!)

This question may be asked from another angle too: ‘In what way does advancement of culture (or *samskriti*) lead to spiritual evolution culminating in mature spiritual wisdom?’ A corollary from this question is: ‘What is the basic norm referring to which the evolution of cultural values is estimated?’

The answer is ‘*moksa*’ or emancipation through *atmajnana* or Self-realization. This itself is *adhyatma-vidya* or the science of the Self within. This is the norm for evaluation, nay, the final goal of life itself. And this point of view of our ancient leaders, the Rishis of yore, has stood the test of time!

Training in Culture

The great Rishis have advised us to follow the path of *satya* (truth that brings about the welfare of all) and *dharma* (righteousness) which are eternal values. For this they have given us two parallel paths: *pravritti* (activism) and *nivritti* (restraint). The ultimate goal of life can be reached by starting with the first and passing through the second, they being two phases and faces of life here. It is also possible to have a balanced combination of these two and reach the same (final) goal.

If the elite could learn about these truths by getting training in the gurukulas (forest academies), the masses were educated by the wise elders of the society through such popular devices as *harikathas* (musical discourses with ethico-religious themes), devotional music, folklore, folksongs and folk-dramas, recitation of mythological works and so on. In the modern context, we can make very good use of the various technical devices like the radio, the television and the films to propagate the eternal values taught by our sages, much more effectively, instead of abusing them and degrading the entire society.

That an ideal civilization-cum-culture can throw up an ideal person has been proved by the sage Valmiki in his celebrated work, the *Ramayana*. Apart from Sri Rama, the principal hero, we come across a galaxy of great persons such as Lakshmana, Bharata, Hanuman, Vibhishana, Sita, Sumitra and Mandodari, as also the sages like Vasishtha, Agastya and Atri.

Though *adhyatma-vidya*—or, to put it in the modern language, religion and philosophy—has been the primary basis of Indian culture, all other aspects of life here and now, that contribute to the attainment of peace and joy, have also been given their due place. For instance: social values; political institutions including the judiciary; economic ideas; educational system; physical, chemical, biological and health sciences; engineering sciences; arts like music, dance, drama, drawing, painting and sculpture, and so on.

It will be not only interesting and fascinating but also rewarding to undertake a panoramic study of all these facets of Indian culture. Such an attempt can boost our self-confidence and self-image on the one hand and, on the other, further inspire us to do even better, and usher in a new ‘cultured humanity’. □