

Is Indian Culture Spiritual?

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The Immortal India

Indian culture was, is, and will be spiritual for all eternity. Spirituality is the other side of Indian Culture. And India is destined to maintain and preserve spirituality. Referring to India's role, says Swami Vivekananda¹:

Just as you [the west-erners] are brave to jump at the mouth of a cannon with a hurrah, just as you are brave in the name of patriotism to stand up and give up your lives for your country, so are they [Indians] brave in the name of God. There it is that when a man declares that this is a world of ideas, that it is all a dream, he casts off clothes and property to demonstrate that what he believes and thinks is true. There it is that a man sits on the banks of a river, when he has known that life is eternal, and wants to give up his body just as nothing, just as you can give up a bit of straw. Therein lies their heroism, that they are ready to face death as a brother, because they are convinced that there is no death for them. Therein lies the strength that has made them invincible through hundreds of years of oppression and foreign invasion, and tyranny.

The nation lives today, and in that nation even in the days of the direst disaster, spiritual giants have never failed to arise.'

Vedic civilization is one of the older civilizations, if not the oldest. This great civilization flourished on the banks of the river Saraswati, some 11000 years ago. It is still a living, vital civilization.

Indian culture is the child of this great Vedic civilization.

The Beginning of the Quest

At the very dawn of life there arose the quest for solving the mystery of life and death.

We find a Rishi enquiring: 'What is That, knowing which all else is known. What is the real source of happiness? What is the goal of life?' With these questions began a new epoch in the history of Indian culture.

'But,' some people may object, 'does man need answers to these questions? Is there any harm if man does not solve these mysteries? Can one not carry on life?'

The answer is, 'No, man cannot live without knowing what is worth knowing.

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Sooner or later one has to face these mysteries of life.' If man does not know the Truth then *mahati vinastih*, 'there is really a great loss' as the Kena Upanishad says.

Thus went on our great Rishis. They were great researchers, as it were, in the nature of life and reality. They said that if man 'knows' the essence of life, the Atman, then he truly attained the goal of human life. If he does not know the Atman, then his life has been in vain. Hence arose a deep prayer from the very bottom of the Rishi's heart:

Lead me from the unreal to the Real.

Lead me from darkness to Light.

Lead me from death to Immortality.

The merciful Lord answered the prayers. These ancient Rishies came face to face with the core of their being, the Atman, and solved the mystery of life and death, and became immortal. On this sacred river of Saraswati rose the voice of the Rishi:

Hear, ye children of immortal bliss! Even ye that reside in higher spheres! I have found the Ancient One who is beyond all darkness, all delusion. Knowing Him alone you shall be saved from death over again.

This was the same voice, the voice of the greatest of the Rishis of our times, Swami Vivekananda, which echoed the same Truth at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

The Eternal Voice of Rishis

The Indian Rishis discovered long ago that the whole universe has come out of the One Reality or Divinity. It is the firm belief of every Hindu that each individual is a manifestation of Divinity. Since man is divine in essence, it goes without saying that the realization of this divinity hidden within is the only aim of life. They called this essence of man as God. By realizing God alone, who is blessedness and joy, man goes beyond all fear.

Hence Self-knowledge, or God-realization, is the goal of life.

The foundation of Indian culture lies in this spiritual discovery of the Rishis. This spiritual ideal has inspired countless saints and sages from time immemorial and continues to do so for all times.

From the most ancient period, destiny has entrusted India with the task of upholding this spiritual culture. A galaxy of great men and women down the long history of Indian culture stood firm for the fulfilment of these highest aspirations. There is not a single period of India's national life when India was lacking in spiritual giants, capable of moving the world. It is India's pride that in almost every generation and in every part of the country, from the time of her recorded history, she has produced these holy men who personify India's spirituality in their lives and teachings.

In recent times, Swami Vivekananda summarised this sacred spiritual ideal of India thus²:

Each soul is potentially Divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work or worship or psychic control or philosophy—by one or more or all of these—and be free. This is the whole of religion.

Since man has come from God, it is his destiny is to go back to Him. This going back to God is called evolution. Thus life is a journey from the many to the One; life is an opportunity to advance towards this goal of God-realization.

The Scheme of Life

According to Indian spiritual tradition, the journey to God has four stages. First man is taught the truth about himself and the world or *samsara* (i.e., he is asked to follow

dharma). Then he is helped through rituals, etc. (performance of *yajnas* or external rituals) to attain purity of the mind and gradually gain control over the body and mind. Thereafter he is taught how to direct and concentrate (*upasanas*) his mind on the higher truths. Finally, he is given the highest truth (the *mahavakyas*, 'the four great statements' such as 'I am Brahman'). He meditates upon it and this leads to moksha or liberation.

Every human being desires to achieve the four supreme values in life. These are Dharma (righteousness), Artha (money), Kama (legitimate enjoyments) and Moksha (spiritual liberation). This scheme of life is applicable to all. It was designed for the well-being of all and its implications were far reaching. The purpose of these values of life is to gradually lead man from the world of Maya to God. Maya is nothing but lust and greed (*kama* and *kanchana*). Maya consists of desiring wealth and enjoyment and forgetting moral and spiritual aspects of life. But if man excludes Dharma and Moksha from the scheme of values, he remains bound in the network of Samsara or worldly existence.

Again, to facilitate the attainment of these values, life is divided into four stages or ashramas. These are: life of a student (*brahmacharya*), life as a householder (*grihstha*), life as a recluse (*vanaprastha*), and life as an ascetic (*sannyasa*). These four stages of life are meant for leading man through a progressive scale of Self-realization.

In the first stage (*brahmacharya*), the student sits at the feet of a teacher and learns all about Dharma and how to put it into practice.

In the second stage (*garhasthya*), man puts into practice what he learned from his Guru at the Gurukula. If he lived according to the directions of the scriptures and the Guru,

he would have acquired purity of mind and sufficient mind-control.

In the third stage (*vanaprastha*), of life, he slowly withdraws from an active external life and practises *Upasanas* or contemplation.

When he progresses sufficiently he takes to a life of renunciation (*sannyasa*) and strives to attain moksha or liberation.

Again since all men are not born equal the Vedic tradition divides men into four classes solely depending on their qualities and actions (*guna* and *karma*). This division is based to help man travel from a lower stage to a higher stage. (Later on this division turned into the birth-based present day caste system leading to many an evil.) Indian tradition proposes four Yogas of Karma, Bhakti, Raja and Jnana to complete our spiritual journey. These Yogas are based upon the particular faculty that is dominant in man. These Yogas helps man unfold his potential divinity and realize his true nature and attain liberation.

Avatara or Incarnations of God

India is the birth-place of many Incarnations of God. Who can count how many times He descended in this sacred land to establish the Eternal Religion, the Santana Dharma, for the good of the whole world!

It is true that more often than not, men forget the purpose of life. They turn into veritable *asuras* or demons, leading a life of unbridled passions bringing untold suffering both to themselves and others. Whenever such a situation develops, the Divine Lord incarnates Himself. Says Sri Krishna in the Gita (4.7), 'Whenever virtue subsides and vice prevails, I come down to help mankind.'

The latest example of this assurance of Lord is the appearance Sri Ramakrishna whose life and teachings have reiterated the essential goal of life which Sanatana Dharma

laid down before us. Sri Ramakrishna was the living embodiment of this Eternal Religion. Echoing the ancient Indian tradition Sri Ramakrishna declared: 'The goal of human life is to love God. He is born in vain, who, having attained the human birth, so difficult to get, does not attempt to realise God in this very life.' Referring to this, Swami Vivekananda pointed out, 'Therefore my Master's message to mankind is: "Be spiritual and realize truth for yourself."' "

Sri Ramakrishna declared:

The Santana Dharma, the Eternal Religion declared by the Rishis, will alone endure. The various creeds you hear of nowadays have come into existence through the will of God and will disappear again through His will. They will not last forever.

Sanatana Dharma alone endures

There are four 'Gs' of Indian culture—Gita, Gaya, Ganga, and Gayatri. They unify Indian spiritual culture. So long as these are honoured the spiritual culture of India will last.

But sometimes, seeing the rising materialism everywhere, one asks, 'Will the spiritual culture of India die?' The answer is an emphatic, 'No!' As Swami Vivekananda says:

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.³

Such a thing can never be. . . The Indian nation cannot be killed. Deathless it stands, and it will stand so long as that spirit shall remain at the background, so long as her people do not give up their spirituality.⁴

Conclusion

Indian culture is predominantly spiritual. This, however, does not mean all Indians are spiritual. Far from it. As Lord Krishna stated only one among thousands strives for spiritual life. Most men are secular. Few, in truth, seek a spiritual life. What is meant is that India remains a land of spirituality. It continues to produce spiritual giants time after time in order to perpetuate the spiritual ideal in the world. No amount of secularisation is going to destroy or side-track her spiritual ideal. For saints, sages and Incarnations of God keep on appearing at all times to keep India's spiritual culture current for the good of the world.

This is the destiny which God Himself has ordained for India. □

References

1. CW, 4:157
2. CW, 1:124
3. CW, 4:348
4. CW, 4: 160