

Indian Culture and Indian Youth

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In 2012, *The Lancet*, an internationally reputed medical journal, published a study that brought out some disturbing patterns in India. Every year, it is said, around 170 000 deaths occur in India by suicide of which 40%

are men and 56% women—both in the age-group of 15 to 29.¹

Suicide is just one of the many ways of self-destruction to which the youths of India are driven. For example, in Bangalore, the Silicon capital city of India, depression amongst youth has risen steadily over the past five years. Youth make up 40% of Bangalore's total 9.6 million population.² Prof. H Chandrashekhar, Head of the Department of Psychiatry at the Bangalore Medical College and also the Secretary of the Karnataka State Mental Health Authority, points out that the average age of onset of depression has fallen from 18 to 13 years.

Substance abuses, rave parties, gang violence, plaguing suicides, all these which were a few decades ago considered as the ill effects of the Western society, have exploded among the Indian youth today. What is the reason and what can be the solution? Is this the unavoidable price we have to pay for the sake of 'development' and 'modernization'?

Apart from suicides and drug abuses, those who are 'in' in the youth culture, exhibit two varying trends. One is a shallow 'pop' culture and the other is a shallow 'radical' culture. And often these two intersect each other.

The shallow 'pop' culture youth sports a 'I do not care attitude', wears his or her

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irreverent attitude on the way he or she dresses and drinks an MNC drink and listens to the western music in the i-pod. The 'radical' variety can be identified by the Che-tee shirt, the eternally angry youth sitting in an AC room ranting against the 'injustices'. Often one can find the generation XYZ and beyond embracing Che tee shirt and MNC drink with equal ease. Fashion statements make up the youth world of such people.

Why this Tragedy?

Such is the youth of India today, and if we can look deeper into this generation-next culture, we may be able to discern a yearning. A youth who commits suicide is one who has found his whole life to be a wasteland. A youth who takes pride in his addiction to an MNC brand wants to connect to the world at large and wants to confirm and compromise his identity in exchange of that connectivity. A youth who goes for substance abuse is yearning for an inner adventure and there is none to guide him.

And here is the tragic irony: the culture which they breathe and live in is a culture that can provide them the adventure, the connectivity, the justice and meaning for their life in a *much more* comprehensive and holistic manner than all their fashion statements can ever hope to make. And it is the collective failure of the society that has alienated a sizable proportion of Indian youth from receiving inner nourishment for their needs from Indian culture.

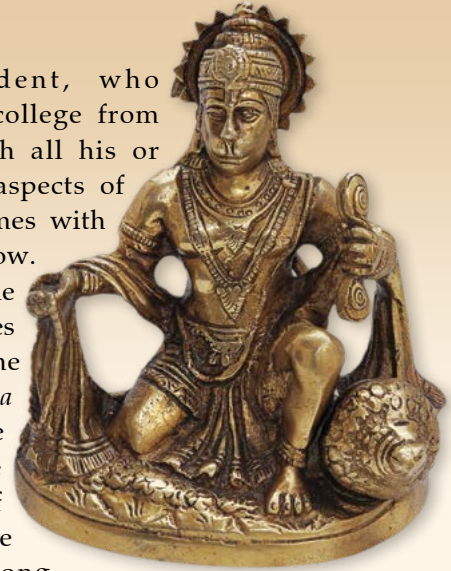
The Hanuman Therapy

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), the famous psychologist, speaks of an element of an individual's psyche namely the shadow. The shadow, according to Jung, comprises of the denied aspects of the self.³

The student, who comes to the college from the school with all his or her repressed aspects of early teens, comes with a lurking shadow. Unfortunately the student identifies himself with the superficial *persona* that hides the shadow. The sudden burst of freedom in the college life along with all the temptations, suddenly grabs the shadows from within and along with the shadows pulls down the entire personality into the abyss of destruction.

One can easily find a parallel between this and the episode of the slaying of Simhika by Hanuman in the Ramayana. Simhika, the demones, who lives deep in the ocean, always captures those who fly over the ocean by grabbing their shadows. She had devoured many before and only Hanuman was destined to overcome her. The ocean represents the vast and the dark realm of the unconscious and from there emerge forces which grab the shadow and pull down the entire personality from accomplishing its life mission.

Same is the case of students who fall prey to temptations leading to addiction. Simhika has caught their shadow. The therapists only see the external factor of drugs and bad influences as the reasons. But in reality the cause may well be the shadow grasper emerging from within the unconscious and bigger than the shadow—which means more repressed the shadows are, easier it is to grasp and destroy. Hanuman interestingly at once made himself small, entered the body of



the shadow-grasper and emerged enlarged destroying her.⁴ One important reason was that he was totally absorbed in the mission of finding Sita, in the service of Lord Rama.

Swami Vivekananda rightly observed to a young devotee who queried Swamiji what ideal one should follow now:

You have now to make the character of Mahavira [Hanuman] your ideal. See how at the command of Ramachandra he crossed the ocean. He had no care for life or death! He was a perfect master of his senses and wonderfully sagacious. You have now to build your life on this great ideal of personal service. Through that, all other ideals will gradually manifest in life.⁵

A youth today may not connect himself with singing *Hanuman Chalisa*, but a psychotherapy based on the way Hanuman overcame the shadow-grabber does provide us with enough scope to develop, what may be called, a Hanuman-therapy for our disturbed youth. This can greatly help them to overcome addictions and destructive tendencies which otherwise feeding on their own shadows destroy their personalities. Hanuman-therapy may involve making the suffering youth let go his false ego-assumptions which in turn make him feel guilty but discover himself or herself as a humble messenger of divinity engaged in a selfless mission. Hanuman-therapy can transform ego-trip into a journey to discover mother Sita. In other words, one should take up the idea of self-discovery, discovering the Sita within, the joy and peace within, to escape the clutches of Simhika.

Vedantic Humanism

Vedantic humanism as propounded by Swami Vivekananda has flowered into a holistic movement of empowering masses without the human tragedies which often accompany any radical movement that have

occurred in last 200 years. Swami Vivekananda forcefully spoke for the suppressed masses of India and thundered in support of their cause which shook the foundations of powers exploiting the masses. At the same time Swami Vivekananda based his radical voice on the firm foundation of a Vedantic humanism. While the political philosophies of socialism which came from the West only spoke economic or political equality imposed on the society by a group of political activists or theorists, Swami Vivekananda spoke of an equality that comes from individual enlightenment through education which enlarges one's vision of the Self. Swami Vivekananda says:

Men must have education. They speak of democracy, of equality of all men, these days. But how will a man know he is equal with all? He must have a strong brain, a clear mind free of nonsensical ideas; he must pierce through the mass of superstitions encrusting his mind to the pure truth that is in his inmost Self. Then he will know that all perfections, all powers are already within himself, that these have not to be given him by others. When he realises this, he becomes free that moment, he achieves equality. He also realises that everyone else is equally as perfect as he and he does not have to exercise any power, physical, mental or moral, over his brother men. He abandons the idea that there was ever any man who was lower than himself. Then he can talk of equality; not until then.⁶

One should remember that even the greatest proponents of socialism from the West during the corresponding period, could not rise above narrow confines of racism. At the most their view of socialism was a patronizing vision of advanced Western civilization guiding the 'less evolved' non-white races and cultures into a socialist utopia.⁷ However in Swami Vivekananda we find a proud call

for the collective heritage of all humanity that transcends all racial barriers:

What! Rise at the expense of another! I didn't come to earth for that! . . . If I am grateful to my white-skinned Aryan ancestor, I am far more so to my yellow-skinned Mongolian ancestor and, most so of all, to the black-skinned Negritoid!⁸

Here we should also emphasize that Swami Vivekananda was also skeptical and highly critical of racial interpretation of Indian social history by British through the Aryan race theory—a stand today vindicated by archeology and genetics.

Hence it is not surprising that from Bagha Jatin to Bhagat Singh, from Malaviya to Mahatma Gandhi, throughout Indian freedom struggle one finds all Indian nationalists embracing the oneness of humanity and never hating the oppressor but only the evil of oppression. Here a skeptical person may ask what if Swami Vivekananda was influenced by Western radicalism and not rooted in traditional Indian culture. To answer this question one just has to see the way the commentary of great humanist Acharya Sri Ramanuja on Bhagavd Gita explains the vision of equality emanating from within as applying to specific human situation. He says:

The self (Atman) which is of the form of knowledge, is alike and uniform, though distinct, in all beings, even though they may externally, and from the point of view of duty, be distinguished as Brahmins, Ksatriyas, householders, celibates, fair, tall etc. The immutable selves in all these perishing forms or bodies are unaffected by the fruits of actions. Such knowledge of the immutability of the self in all changing beings is Sattvika.⁹

Such an application of the equanimity of Atman by Sri Ramanuja created perhaps the first mass movement for the spiritual amelioration of the depressed classes of

people. He accepted peasants and depressed people into his fold. He led the first temple entry movement of Dalits into Vishnu temple at Melkote in Karnataka. He started the Bhakti movement—a mass movement with Vedantic kernel and devotional shell. This Bhakti movement spread to north India and was taken up by Sant Ramananda. This resulted in a lineage of spiritual-social reformers fighting against the stagnation that Indian society had to undergo under the heels of tyrannical and/or exploiting alien rulers.

In the context of Indian culture, one cannot be a 'Facebook radical' or a mere 'Tee shirt radical'. When the message of Vedantic humanism gets internalized then the person becomes a complete radical. He has to fight for justice and human dignity of the fellow human being without any hatred. In Sri Narayana Guru and Ayyankali (from Kerala) we find such real radicals. It is unfortunate that with such examples of love and benediction around us, the Indian youth have to seek their 'radical role models' elsewhere! Indian youth can easily connect with their humanistic heritage of Vedanta. Social emancipation rooted in Indian radical tradition does not need arms, ammunitions, loss of human life and freedom. It only demands heroes of vision and mission with a heart committed to the good of humanity.

India's Science Tradition

There is a section of youth who reject everything traditional in the name of science and another section that wants to see everything as already present in our culture. What is the relationship of science to Indian culture?

Indian religion has repeatedly positioned itself on realization rather than revelations. Unless one decides to experiment with and

experience the ultimate truth, religion as mere outer shell of beliefs and rituals is useless. From Nachiketa through Buddha to Sri Ramakrishna religion in India has been subject to a rigorous process of experimentation and has been transformed into an experience based phenomenon in India. However the Abrahamic influences during colonialism has made the general educated psyche think of Indian religious tradition as 'another belief system'. Swami Vivekananda stated the Indic position most forcefully applying the method of science to religion. He said:

Is religion to justify itself by the discoveries of reason, through which every other science justifies itself? Are the same methods of investigation, which we apply to sciences and knowledge outside, to be applied to the science of religion? In my opinion this must be so, and I am also of the opinion that the sooner it is done the better. If a religion is destroyed by such investigations, it was then all the time useless, unworthy superstition; and the sooner it goes the better. I am thoroughly convinced that its destruction would be the best thing that could happen. All that is dross will be taken off, no doubt, but the essential parts of religion will emerge triumphant out of this investigation. Not only will it be made scientific—as scientific, at least, as any of the conclusions of physics or chemistry, but will have greater strength, because physics or chemistry has no internal mandate to vouch for its truth, which religion has.¹⁰

Today the religious experiences are getting investigated in neuro-labs throughout the world. Brain scientists like Michael Persinger, Andrew Newberg and V.S. Ramachandran are investigating religious experiences and their neural correlates and are trying to get a complete picture of what may be the biological basis of religion.

Swami Vivekananda showed how a quest for oneness—rooted in Advaitic

philosophy—can provide a strong impetus for the advancement of physical sciences. In his 1896 New York lecture he said:

Take anything before you, the most material thing—take one of the most material sciences, as chemistry or physics, astronomy or biology—study it, push the study forward and forward, and the gross forms will begin to melt and become finer and finer, until they come to a point where you are bound to make a tremendous leap from these material things into the immaterial. The gross melts into the fine, physics into metaphysics, in every department of knowledge.¹¹

One remembers that this statement almost like a description of Quantum Mechanics was made almost quarter of a decade before Werner Heisenberg an assistant to Niels Bohr along with Bohr started building the edifice of quantum mechanics.

It should be noted here that some of the greatest achievers of Indian science like Acharya J.C. Bose, and physicist George Sudarshan have strong roots in Indian philosophical tradition and have been inspired by Indian Darshanas. For example, theoretical physicist George Sudarshan shows how the dynamic nature of atoms as revealed by modern science has some interesting parallels to Vaisheshika conceptualization of atoms than the Greek concept of atoms: He says,

The best example is the history of modern physics in this century. To start with the atoms were very substantial objects and one simply wanted to explain the laws of chemistry and certain of the laws of spectroscopy. But it brought about the invention of modern field theory in which objects are in fact complexions of an underlying entity which itself is never perceived. Even where substance predominates, as in the Vaisheshika system, tradition has it that they have to be given potentials and potentialities. Therefore these atoms that the

Vaisesika theorists expounded are more akin to chemical atoms than the sterile Greek atoms.¹²

However does an Indian youth get a rooting in Indian philosophical systems as does his western counterpart? As George Sudarshan himself laments:

The urban educated Indian youth is not aware of the philosophy of Kapila, Gotama, Yajnavalkya nor the science of Kananda. . . Aryabhatta, Bhaskara, Al-Biruni and Amir Khusro are strange names that he sometimes comes across in a scholarly book but their discoveries or worldview has no discernible influence on him.¹³

Such an artificial divorce of educated Indian youth from the native philosophical and spiritual traditions of Indian culture has made Indian youth either shun entire Indian culture as worthless and or fall prey to pseudo-scientific pseudo-spiritual charlatans who peddle 'miracles' as true spirituality.

Swami Ranganathananda (1908-2005), the 13th President of the Ramakrishna Order and an eminent thinker and speaker, has rendered a great service to the youth of this nation by illuminating the need to combine Indian philosophical systems with modern science so that fruitful achievements can be obtained. Today the nation needs thousands of such Swamijis and institutions which have made impressive contribution to scientific study of consciousness by bringing spiritual savants, philosophers and scientists in one platform.

Conclusion

Thus youth—the important section of society which is full of creativity and energy and vital vigour—need to be channelized by the pathways of Indian culture so that India, a nation of great human resources, can contribute as before or even better for the welfare and upliftment of all life in this planet. □



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- 6 CW, 8:94
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'Swamiji, how can I best help you?' asked a disciple to Swami Vivekananda. 'Love India!' was his instant answer. —cf. *Life of Swami Vivekananda By E. & W. Disciples*, 2.325