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## Indian Spirituality, Religion and Philosophy\*

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A most enigmatic phenomenon of the world history is the cyclic continuity of the Indian culture through millennia. And it may at once be said that the open secret of this enigma is the Indian spirituality. It is true that spirituality has played a role in every civilisation and that no culture can claim a monopoly for spirituality. And yet, it can safely be affirmed that India has been a special home of spirituality which has been developed into the Science of Yoga. The unique greatness of India can, therefore, be traced to her unparalleled experimentation, discovery and achievement in this vast field of Yoga. And not only has Indian culture recognised Yoga as the supreme occupation of man, but the entire spectrum of Indian culture, its religion, ethics, philosophy, literature, art, architecture, sculpture, dance, music, and even its polity and social and economic organisation have all been constantly influenced and moulded by the inspiring force of a multi-sided spirituality and its secret knowledge of Yoga.

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The true history of Indian culture begins with the vedas and the Upanishads which are truly a record of advanced research in Yoga. And it is important to note that the Vedas and Upanishads were looked upon by the seers not as a culmination but only as a great beginning of the Yogic endeavour. It is also important to note that even in those early times a distinction was made between Yoga or spirituality, on the one hand, and religion, on the other. And the records of Yoga were not regarded as revelations made once for all unverifiable, and unsurpassable. Yoga has, therefore, been looked upon as an advancing Science, Shastra, with its fields of inquiry and search always enlarging. Its methods have been not only intuitive but experimental, and there has been an insistence on rigorous verification by means of **abiding experience**.

As we cross the period of Vedas and Upanishads and enter into later periods of Indian history, we witness in the Yogic endeavour an increasing subtlety, plasticity, sounding of depths, extension of seeking—even though this endeavour has been less surprisingly lofty and less massive in power. During the long stretch of time, Yoga has developed a number of methods, disciplines, techniques, numerous systems of knowledge, and effective results, assured consequences of Yoga Siddhi. There has been throughout a spirit of research, and there have been systems of specialisation and systems of synthesis.

It may be noted also that there have been even exclusive claims and counter claims in this field of Yoga, claims of Jnana Yoga against Karma Yoga, of Karma Yoga against Bhakti Yoga, and of Bhakti Yoga against Jnana Yoga and Karma Yoga. There have been trends of conflict between the Vedantic Yoga and the Yoga of the Buddhistic

and Jain disciplines, sharp oppositions between the Vedanta and Tantra. Among these conflicts, the one that came to be powerful and perilous has been the trenchant opposition between Yoga and Life itself.

In the recent past, towards the close of the 19th Century, there also came about a stagnation and an arrest, even an obscurity of the knowledge of Yoga, a misleading confusion between Yoga and Religion, between Yoga and Occultism, and the rise of numerous superstitions, ignorant practices, mechanical pursuits of rigid and fixed formulae, and a lapse into darkness and inertia.

Yet a little light has always been burning, and with the renaissance India and with the great churning in our age of continual crisis in the East and in the West this light is growing and there is an attempt of Yoga to recover itself and to develop with fresh efforts of fundamental research to affirm itself on newer, bolder, loftier and even on unprecedented lines.

It is significant that as in the case of every great epoch of the Indian history, the modern renaissance in India began with the resurgence of spirituality and the affirmation of Yoga as the source of a new force of nationalism and the ideal of human unity. It was this affirmation that was contained in the great message that Swami Vivekananda delivered to the West, and it was this that rang through all the great and flaming leaders of the Resurgent India from Swami Dayananda to Sri Aurobindo. In one of the writings, Sri Aurobindo had declared :

“ We believe that it is to make the Yoga the ideal of human life that India rises today; by the Yoga she will get the strength to realise that freedom,

unity and greatness, by the Yoga she will keep the strength to preserve it".

And, indeed, it is significant to note that the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo, which has come to be known as the Integral Yoga, marks a momentous programme and project of Yogic research based upon a new discovery. It takes within its sweep all the domains of life, all aspects of culture, and all the systems of Yoga, so as to evolve an ever-growing methodised discipline for a transmutation of man into a new transformed humanity or superhumanity.

It is evident that the new message of India and of Indian culture will be message of the integrality of life, transformed by the integrality of Yoga. And it is in that message that we can hope to find a solution to the problems of the new international order of harmony and unity. We do not belong to the dawns of the past, but to the noons of the future; and we are at the head of the new age that will prepare the sunshine of the future noons. And in that process of preparation, all of us, the children of Mother India, have to participate dynamically and persistently. It is only by our devoted consecration to this task that we can be the true servitors of India and the true ambassadors of India to the world at large.

As we stand to day at the frontiers of knowledge, we find that the speculative methods of philosophy are being questioned, dogmas of religion are being set aside, and even the limitations of science are being admitted. The new future that opens up before us seems to demand from us a transcendence of the past modes of knowledge and a search into new dimensions of perception, apprehension and comprehension which are appropriate to the modes of the Yogic knowledge. And yet, as we strain ourselves to-



wards the new modes of knowledge and action, we are required insistently to understand more accurately and thoroughly the gains of the past religions, philosophies and scientific pursuits. And in this endeavour a deeper understanding of Indian religions and philosophies is an indispensable requirement.

For Indian religion and philosophy have something unique in them which can still be a great aid to the developing masses of humanity. And it is in this context that we may review, although very briefly and rapidly, some of the salient features of Indian religion and philosophy. One of the special characteristics of Indian religion has been a conscious recognition of its own limitations. It has indeed given system of dogmas, rituals, and ceremonies; it has even given a framework of an individual and social life; and it has also insisted sometimes very rigidly upon the observance of 'prescribed' acts. And yet, it has provided the gates of transcendence by which the individuals or even groups of individuals could be liberated from the imprisoning walls of religions. It has always recognised spirituality to be distinct from religion and given a higher place to spirituality than to its own dogmas, rituals and ceremonies. It has provided for standards of conduct which have varying applicability depending upon the varying needs of individuals in their growth and evolution. And it has created an organisation which is sufficiently flexible, large and supple so that the individuals and communities may not be suppressed by any kind of papal authority or tyrannical priesthood.

If we examine Indian religion in some depth, we shall find that it has been quite conscious of its own aim. This aim has been to divinise human life, and this is the

aim that was clearly understood even in the Vedic age by the celebrated Rishis. They have declared that man is on earth to conquer, darkness and death and enter into immortality. It may be that even physical immortality was perhaps conceived as a possibility: there might have been even experiments towards that end; there might even have perhaps been a practical success or failure in that direction; and yet there seems to be constantly an inherent urge to lead the entire culture of India towards a spiritual transformation of material life. It must be underlined that the Vedic culture was not negative in its approach to human life. It stresses persistently the need to develop and cultivate not only the mental life but even the vital energies and the physical being. It emphasised not only the idea of individual perfection but had glimpses even of the ideal of collective perfection. And therefore, even when at a certain stage the Indian religious and philosophical approach tended to become negative, the early positive approach was never fully lost.

It is true that the Vedic ideal could not be fully implanted into the large masses of humanity. For the mind of humanity at that time was still unripe and therefore, the Vedic Rishis gave to the people the Yogic and spiritual truths in the form of a religion which would contain in its core the fundamental Yogic perceptions but would provide at the same time in its outer framework a profusion of elements which would come nearer to the ordinary comprehension of the physical mind of the large masses of humanity. The Vedic religion had, therefore, on the one side a secret store of intuitive knowledge, and on the other side, a system of symbolic acts such as those of sacrifice, Yajna. The achievement of the Vedic religion, however, lay in this fact that the Vedic Rishis could succeed in stamping upon the

ordinary mentality the sense of the deeper realities and mysteries and the feeling that all activities of human life are the means of communication with the Incomprehensible and the Ineffable.

Throughout the history of Indian religion, there have come about periods where the inner truth of the Spirit has come to be insistently emphasised. And from this point of view one of the great epochs of Indian history was that of the Upanishads. The age of the Upanishads remains still to be understood. For it may be said that but for this age India would not have been able to retain the distinctiveness of its culture. But for this age, Indian mind which had already become heavily laden with ritualism so evident in the post-Vedic age of the Brahmanas the inner truths of the spiritual life and spiritual experience could have been lost. In fact, this kind of loss has been noted in the history of all the ancient civilisations such as those of Egypt, Syria, Chaldea. Among all these civilisations, there was a perception of mystery corresponding to the Vedic perception of mysteries. But soon after, there was among them a period of oblivion in which these mysteries were lost. We do not find in those early times parallel to the deep and profound movements of the re-seeking of the spiritual truths which is so clearly evident in the Upanishads. The Rishis of the Upanishads recovered, reaffirmed and even enlarged the discoveries of the Vedic age. The spirit of India reshone in the luminous experiences of the seers of the Upanishads. And what is extremely important is that the truths of the Vedas were even more clearly enunciated in the Upanishads. And it is this clarity and lack of ambiguity which became a powerful bedrock of the subsequent developments of Indian spirituality, religion and philosophy. It is this clarity which became the bridge bet-



ween the intuitive knowledge and the intellectual knowledge. And it is for this reason that the Upanishads became a profound and inexhaustible source of innumerable philosophies that developed in India.

Three fundamental truths or doctrines of Indian spirituality, religion and philosophy which emerged from the age of the Vedas and of the Upanishads, and which have been reaffirmed and again throughout the Indian history are : (1) that there is a Reality which is beyond this world, (2) that there is, within the individual himself, a portion which is divine and is either capable of becoming one with Reality or at least of a direct communion with that Reality, and (3) that this Reality can be realised by various **Paths**.

The transition from the age of the Upanishads is marked by the splendour of a high activity and expression of intuition, imagination, philosophical reasoning and ethical and aesthetic experience. It was during this period of transition to which we owe our two great epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, the emergence of Buddhism, and Jainism, the development of the philosophies of Nyaya, Vasisheshika, Sankhya, Yoga, Poorva Mimamsa and Uttara Mimamsa, and the efflorescence of a number of sciences and arts-all these leading upto the next stage which has come to be known as the Purano-Tantric age.

The Purano-Tantric age may be regarded as a definite enlargement of the original conceptions of Indian religion and spirituality, And it was definitely an attempt on the part of the spirit of India to awaken the deeper mind and the vital and aesthetic consciousness of humanity and to establish the spiritual truth in these occult parts of human psychology.



There are, as is well known, 18 Puranas, and they are divided into three categories : (1) Rajas Puranas, which advocate the worship of Brahma; (2) Sattwik Puranas, which advocate the worship of Vishnu; and (3) Tamas Puranas, which advocate the worship of Shiva.

It has been said that it was in these Puranas that the first seed of Vaishnavism and Shaivism were sown. This contention is, however, controversial, but there is no doubt that the Puranas did provide a powerful stimulus to Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Each Purana has five parts: (1) creation of the world, (2) destruction and recreation of the world, (3) reigns and periods of Manus, (4) geneology of Gods, and (5) dynasties of solar and lunar kings.

The most celebrated among the Puranas is the Bhagwata Purana. And some of the other Puranas are: Vishnu Purana, Rudra Purana, Garuda Purana, Vamana Purana, Markandeya Purana, etc.

The two fundamental ideas of the Puranas are those of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, and of the 'Avatara',

It may be noted that in Indian religion 'Avatara' is often understood in the context of the idea of evolution. Accordingly, there is not just one incarnation of God in the history of the world. God, according to this Indian idea, comes not merely to reveal Himself but to manifest and infuse Himself gradually in the world. As the world develops so the 'Avatara' develops; as the 'Avatara' develops, so the world develops too. The evolutionary character of the 'Avatara' is, therefore, represented in the idea of God manifesting Himself and incarnating Himself in the Matsya (the fish), and then in the Kurma (the tortoise) and

then gradually into Varaha (the boar), Narasimha (the lion-man,) Vamana (the dwarf), Parashurama ( the rajsik man ), Rama (the sattwik man), Krishna (the divine man), Buddha ( the transcendental man ) and Kalki (the perfect Integral Divine who conquers and transforms the earthly life into the life divine)

Puranas are full of stories and they are gigantic in their imagination and profound symbolism. And when we come to the Tantras, we find that there was a tremendous attempt of the spirit to utilise the vital and dynamic energies of life to open up the doors of the Divine for a triumphant mastery over the world activities. Tantras are regarded as anti-Vedic and so they are called Agamas. We do not know the exact number of Agamas, but sometimes it is estimated that there are 64 of them.

The Tantras contain accounts of the creation of the universe, the destruction and creation of the universe, methods of communion with Shiva, and the methods by which the 'Ashta Siddhis' (8 perfections) can be attained.

Tantra, in its etymological sense means a web. Later it came to mean a 'rule', then "system of practice" and, still later, the name of the book in which this practice is mentioned.

Tantra maintains that it is possible to realise the Divine not by the rejection of Prakriti, but by taking resort unto Shakti. In Tantras, Shakti is the most important truth. Shiva, the consort of Shakti, can be realised only by the propitiation of Shakti.

The Tantra was in itself a kind of a synthesis of various spiritual disciplines and its concept of Kundalini has

an all-embracing import. Kundalini, according to the Tantras, when awakened and raised through various Chakras, meets ultimately the supreme source which is the creative force of all existence. This concept of Kundalini is an extraordinary achievement of the Yogic science of India, and it has been woven in various forms in the cults and rituals of Indian religion.

The Purano-Tantric age melts in what has come to be known as the age of Bhakti. And it was during the middle stages of the Bhakti age that we have the incoming of Islam which marks one of the most important events in the history of Indian religion. It is an irony of history that India, where assimilation of all spiritual truths was the fundamental drive, found it difficult to assimilate within itself the impact of Islam. It is true that India at that time was suffering from a kind of an exhaustion of its vital energies. It is also true that the ascetic tendency which was particularly emphasised by Buddhism and Mayavada had reached a kind of a climax and therefore contributed to the weakening of the vital energies of the Indian life. And yet, it must be mentioned that there arose during this period great movements of Bhakti, and there came about a series of Bhaktas who attempted to direct the spiritual force into all the domains of the human being. And in this process they attempted also a fusion by which the truths of Islam could be assimilated in the large Indian fold. As a result, Islam has not remained a foreign religion in India. Guru Nanak and his Sikhism provided a tremendous bedrock for the unity of Islam with all the other tendencies of Indian religions. Akbar's Din-e-Ilahi also attempted to bring about this fusion. And there have not been wanting sages and saints to combine and synthesise all the Godward movements. And the culminating point of this movement is exemplified in



Sri Rama Krishna who, having practised various disciplines of traditional Hinduism, practised also the disciplines of Christianity and Islam. Also, in the modern movement of Theosophy, where an attempt has been made to synthesise all the religions, we find the beginning of a new era in which India may stand out as the dynamic field of the unity of various spiritual truths.

The story of the nascent India is fascinating, in so far as it has achieved a rapid and dramatic recovery of all its spiritual past and prepared a multi-dimensional route of a new spirituality which would dynamise the entire Indian life and culture. 'Dynamic spirituality' is the watchword of the Indian renaissance, and it has been the inspiring force of the religious and spiritual leaders like Raja Rammohun Roy, Dayananda, Sri Rama Krishna, Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo

Over-arching the problems that confront us today in India, we have the central problem of the future of Indian philosophy, religion and spirituality. And it is impossible to find a solution to this problem if we ignore the present climate of the intellectual, social, political and economic life of the world as a whole. There are several great challenges that need to be answered first and foremost. These are : (1) the conflict of religions, (2) the conflict of religion and science, (3) the conflict between science and philosophy, and (4) the conflict between asceticism and materialism.

It is evident that the conflict of religions cannot be resolved at the level of dogmas. For dogmas are themselves unquestionable, and if the unquestionables are in conflict, there can be no issue and no answer. It is only if we go behind the dogmas, as Indian religion has always attempted to do, in search of the living experiences which are at the

core of various religions, that there can be a hope of the resolution of the conflict. Not, therefore, the synthesis of religions, but the synthesis of spiritual experiences seems to be the answer. It is significant that in modern India, we have today—as fully exemplified in Sri Aurobindo—a puissant and irresistible drive towards the synthesis of spiritual experiences.

The conflict of religion and science can be resolved only if science expands itself into an inquiry of the 'invisible' actuality, and if religion enlarges itself and transforms itself into an impartial open search of the verifiable and repeatable spiritual experience. Here again, there are signs in modern India which promise a new orientation initiated by scientist like Jagadish Chandra Bose. This orientation, however, needs to be pursued much more rigorously than has been done during the last several decades. We have achieved much in the field of science, but we have still not related science to spirituality, and we have not yet seen how science itself can be enriched by the knowledge that spirituality can deliver.

The conflict between science and philosophy has grown in the modern intellectual world and the credentials of philosophy have been severely questioned. The modern Indian philosopher, sympathetic to the Indian philosophical traditions, attempts to reconstruct the Indian philosophy in the light of the modern trends of philosophical and scientific thought, but he finds himself in a grip of a most acute conflict and difficulty. There has, however, been one special element in Indian philosophy which promises to be a great aid in a possible resolution of the difficulty. For Indian philosophy has not really been merely speculative. This is not to say that speculation has been absent. There

is, we might say, even a profusion of it; the pure reason has been at full play and has been allowed to arrive at its own independent conclusions, and it can even be said that Indian metaphysics has been as powerful or even more powerful than any metaphysical systems in the world. But still, Indian philosophy has been primarily a darshana, a vision based upon spiritual experience and channelised into a metaphysical system by means of intellectual processes of reasoning. Even when intellectual speculations have been free both in regard to the premises and the conclusions, still the conclusions have never been accepted as authentic unless they have been found verifiable in spiritual experience or confirmed by the records of spiritual experience, *Shruti*. In other words, Indian philosophy has always recognised the claim of experience to be superior to that of mere intellectual reasoning, and it is interesting to note that the entire trend of modern enquiry seems to turn back to the primacy and superiority of experience over mere speculation and 'fictions' of reasoning. It is then in the recovery of this Indianness of Indian Philosophy that the future conflict of science and philosophy may be resolved in India, and this might probably benefit the entire movement of the world-thought.

But the conflict between asceticism and materialism will still remain to be resolved. And this is perhaps the most difficult issue concerning the modern India in its search of the new future. It is true that the economic, social and political necessities of our modern life have imposed upon us the necessity of a robust dynamism which is remote from the tenets of asceticism, but still the spirit of asceticism has been so deeply ingrained since the times of Buddhism and Mayavada that at every turn we feel confronted with the ideas of the illusoriness of the



world and of the escape from life as the very meaning of life. The present Indian scene is, therefore, divided and torn between the gripping invasion of materialism and the persistent whisper and call of the gospel of the renunciation of world and life. This conflict can be resolved only if it is discovered that Spirit is not negation of Matter, but that Matter itself is an expression of the Spirit, that Spirit is an underlying omnipresent reality of Matter and that Spirit is unfolding itself gradually in Matter so that there would be a total spiritual transformation of material life, here itself, *in eva*, in this earthly Earth. There is no need to renounce Matter in order to embrace the Spirit. Indeed, all life is an evolving expression of the Spirit, and therefore a truly spiritual culture embraces all life and transforms it into spiritual terms. A spiritual manifestation in the physical life would be the only possible and acceptable solution to this conflict between asceticism and materialism. And I believe that it is in this direction that India needs to move forward and fashion itself for the new future and for the new role that it has to play in the community of nations. Let us hope that we in India shall become aware of the implications of this task and re-dedicate ourselves in the service of Mother India.

