STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS OF INDIAN CULTURE*

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A

lthough the subject today is interesting and somewhat controversial, it will not be possible for me to give you the whole of the problems connected with the strength and weakness of Indian culture. But a brief outline, I hope, will give you some idea of the problems involved.

Before we step into the subject let us have some idea about what is meant by ‘culture’. I have noted down the latest definition of culture given in the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary. Without simply memorizing this definition I would like to read out a few sentences from this dictionary which will give the parameter of our discussion. It says : Culture stands for (a) art, literature, music and other intellectual expressions of a particular society or time, (b) an understanding or appreciation of this, (c) the customs, arts, social institutions, etc of a particular group or nation, (d) development through regular training, exercise, treatment, etc, (e) the growing of plants or breeding of certain types of animals to obtain a crop or improve the species. The last one we can dispense with. I confine my attention to three of the definitions stated above.

Generally, by culture we know art, literature, etc which are outward expressions of a man’s or of a particular society or time. At the same time, the inner appreciation is also indicated by expression, understanding and appreciation of this. But more than that, culture has a wider import than the dictionary suggests. Perhaps, the word ‘culture’ covers all the aspects of human activities. It covers the material aspects, creative aspects, intellectual aspect and, finally, the spiritual aspect. So with this broad definition we intend to proceed with our treatment of the strength and weakness of Indian culture.

Two words reveal the spirit of our culture. These two words are krishti and samskriti. Krishti is a very old word found in the Rigveda, but used in a different sense. Monier Williams has traced the development of the word krishti. Originally, krishti meant cultivation. In fact, culture also means cultivation. From cultivation we have inhabitation. That means people who cultivate stay at a particular place. From that perspective and reality various tribes who had been cultivating those places together were called krishta. In the Rigveda we find the names of such tribes. ‘Yadu’ is one of them. So that was the meaning of culture. But the meaning was modified when we came to the stage of Amarkosha. There culture has been given a wider meaning and suggests that when we do something for the purpose of gaining something, for instance, some knowledge or some ability, that is culture.

In English also ‘culture’ is combined with other words like agriculture, tissue culture, i.e. some meaningful, productive activity. But here we do not find any basic improvements in the culture and that is found in the word samskriti. In Aitareya Brahmana there is a passage : ātmar samskritika shilpāni chanadokhayam vāk etaiyatyajmā namātmanam samskurute. Shilpāni here means the mantras. The yajmāna, the sacrificer, utters these mantras for the purpose of ātman-samskriti, i.e improvement of his self. So ekaiva yajmānam—the sacrificer improves himself by chanting the mantras. So, you see this idea of improvement is involved in the word culture or samskriti. Polishing, refining, reforming—all these ideas are there. So culture, according to our ideas, would basically try to improve man, make a man a better man, make a man a superior man. So, those activities which debase a person cannot come within the purview of samskriti because those activities do

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not result in *samskāra* (reformation) but lead one to degradation. This we should remember.

Now we have to explain in which sense a culture should be considered strong or weak. If we have to find out the answer we have to say that culture is intimately connected with man himself. Whether people are good or bad, all that depends on the goodness or badness of a culture. Again, ultimately the strength or weakness of a culture depends upon the strength and weakness of the character of persons. If we accept this proposition we can cite for our own benefit the statement of Sri Krishna given in the *Bhagavadgitā*. In chapter XVI the Lord has spoken of both the divine and demonic type of people. There, a detailed discourse is given on *daivi mānava* and *āsuri mānava*. *Daivi mānava* or divine man is one who is actuated by great ideas like *ahimsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *kshamā* (forgiveness) etc. whereas the *āsuri* (demonic) type of man is very much selfish and self-centred. He wants to dominate others. He wants to punish others. A great distinction between these two types has been made in the *Gītā*. So whatever they do in promoting either a custom or art or literature, everything will be coloured by the nature of man.

In the next chapter (Chapter XVII) Lord Krishna describes three types of propensities in man, namely *sattvika*, *rājasika* and *tāmasika*. Under the influence of these *gunas* or propensities, man manifests three types of characters. Although we believe in the equality of man, but, in fact, many is not equal. He has got different *gunas* or propensities and these *gunas* colour and shape his activities. In the seventeenth chapter of the *Gītā* we find application of these *gunas* in the field of *āhāra* or food. There is the *sattvika āhāra*. There is the *rājasika āhāra*. There is also *tāmasika āhāra*. Similarly, *yajnah* (sacrifice), *tapah* (austerity) and *dānam* (charity), in different activities of man which are connected with cultural activities distinctly differ on the basis of human propensities. If he is good, his culture will be good. If he stands midway his culture will be neither absolutely good nor absolutely bad. Finally, if he is bad, that is to say, *tāmasika* or full of follies, his culture will be absolutely bad.

**Indian Culture**

Now look at Indian culture which incorporates different elements. Many years ago, possibly in 1964, our Most Reverend Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj delivered a lecture at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture on the Essence of Indian Culture. In that context he largely dealt with the Vedic culture and laid special emphasis on our Upanishads, Vedanta and so on. Only toward the end he mentioned briefly the other sources of culture such as the tribal society, Harappan society, Islamic culture, European culture etc.—only towards the end. But he gave a very magnificent discourse on the basic Vedic culture with special emphasis on Vedanta. But if we are to study Indian culture as a whole we cannot be satisfied with a truncated approach to culture; we should rather have a comprehensive outlook on Indian culture.

As for myself, I have found that there are certain stratifications in culture. Our culture remains embedded in certain strata—one after another. I have found some of the stratifications. First, I shall enunciate three stratifications and then try to link it with the tendencies. I shall also try to hint where these stratifications lead us to and ultimately assess the strength and weakness of Indian culture.

Of these I first speak of the chronological stratification which depends on time, starting from the age-old antiquity. We know that in Stone Age tribal people moved about hunting, fishing and collecting food. They were food-gathering people. They somehow learnt to live as some sort of community. They also learnt to believe in some Supreme Being under various names. They were particularly devoted to the cult of Mother Goddess. Then animals became their Gods. Totemism and worship of trees became popular. Some of these practices are found even today among our tribal people. Along with these they were also fond of music and dancing. They used a number of musical instruments all of which are depicted in their art forms in the Stone Age caves and other places, especially at Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh. So that is the basis of the lowest layer in this stratifications.

Then came the great urban civilization of Mahenjodaro and Harappa. However, this civilization was not confined only to the Indus region. It also shared itself to the Saraswati Valley which covered a vast area including Pakistan, Alamgimnagar near Delhi, and Lothal in Gujarat where a dockyard has been found. In those areas this great urban civilization had developed from village culture. Here we have found the remains of Islam culture—big cities, roads, houses, citadels, granaries, perfect system of sanitation and all sorts of things.

In the spiritual side they had conceived the great God which is a precursor of Shiva–Shiva Pashupati. We have got the seal were the three-faced God is seen in a squatting position and, on his head, there is sort of a crown made of horns of some animals. Around him are various animals including rhinoceros, deer, elephant, and also man. Marshall has identified this figure as Shiva Pashupati of the later days. Similarly, the small terracotta figurines of Mother
Goddess indicate the people’s respect for the Mother Goddess. Moreover, art itself is an expression of refinement. The figures which have been inscribed on clay seals etc. are absolutely perfect. Even in sculpture this refinement is obvious. For example the figure of the ‘Yogi’, is very impressive. Finally, we have got the dancing girl which is a very well-known figure. This is all about the second stratification.

Then came the great Aryan people. Whether they came from outside or not is still hotly debated. However, we have to remember that the Aryans had inherited some common cultural heritage from the other Indo-European groups. V. Gordon Childe, in his book The Dawn of European Civilization, has culled the common or similar words from various Indo-European languages—Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Celtic, Slavonic and so on—from this fund of common words and the Western scholars have tried to find out some cultural core or unity prevalent at the time when people speaking the Indo-European languages had been living together. The ideas of the ‘sky-father’, the ‘Mother-earth’ were there. Various types of nature-Gods such as Surya (Sun), Chandra (Moon), Marut (Air) were there. So ultimately they developed some noble spiritual ideas unknown to the Harappan people.

On the material side, although they were largely pastoral people, they had learnt cultivation. (Of course, cultivation was known earlier, because we have found from excavation some evidence of furrowed fields in the Harappan sites and these furrowed fields are kept in the National Museum in Delhi. I have seen that.) So cultivation was accepted by the Aryans and on that basis various aspects of culture evolved. The greatest facet of this culture was the emergence of Sanskrit language, the four Vedas and Vedāṅgas, the Upanishads which have contributed profoundly to the development of what is known as the Indian culture.

In the next stratification, interestingly enough, we find foreign elements coming in. The old nature-Gods were being given a subsidiary place. In their place personal Gods, such as Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti became triumphant. This was the beginning of what is now known as the Puranic religion that retained many of the earlier notions, yet the admixture of the two presented a new type of culture to the Indian people.

In the next stratum we find foreign elements coming in. Whether the Aryans were foreign or indigenous, I am not going into the question, but definitely foreign elements were these—Shalvas, the Yavanas, the Pallavas, and so on, and they all contributed to the cultural fabric of India and we notice that from the Yavanas perhaps we got the idea of Yavanikā in theatrical performances. In the realm of art, the Indo-Greek art, the Gandhāra school of art, is most important.

In the matter of spiritual speculation we find that the Greeks were adopting Indian thought. Kings like Milinda accepted Buddhism and he had debate with Nāgasena. A description of the debate is found in the Milindapanha. Not only that, even the Greek envoy Helidorus came to Vidisha (modern Besnagar) where he set up a Garuda pillar on which the words from the Mahābhārata had been inscribed. This shows how the process of cultural synthesis had been going on.

In the next stratum we had the Islamic infiltration in India. It was not the case of Veni Vidi Vici. Not that Islam came all of a sudden and conquered the whole country. The Arabs came much earlier in Sind but their presence was limited or pegged to that region. Later, when the Turks had come gradually, India came under the sway of Islamic people. But here also the idea of synthesis was introduced. We must not forget that our art and architecture—the Mughal school of art, the buildings like Taj Mahal, or Agra Fort, or the Delhi Fort etc.—all are products of the Islamic genre and these in turn influenced the architectural ventures of the Hindu rulers of Rajasthan and elsewhere. Similar things happened in music and with musical instruments. In dance like Kathak also the same thing happened.

Coming to the spiritual field, we find the Sufis exerted great influence on the thoughts of Indian people. In fact, we notice that part of our Vaishnava movement had been swayed by Sufism. Even in matters of dress, some of the earlier modes gave way to Islamic dress like ‘achlean’, ‘pyjama’ for women which we usually find today among Indian women. In food also this Islamic influence was witnessed. Who is not fond of Biryani and Kebab, and other delicious dishes? So, in this way a sort of synthesis had taken place.

Finally, in the modern strata we find the infiltration of European elements. You know pretty well how these elements have influenced the Indian psyche. So I need not elaborate. But, before closing this discussion on chronological stratification, I should mention that an international element has also been added to the fabric of modern Indian culture. Today we are globalizing our culture and as a result of that we find some sort of synthesis that has given a very great strength to our culture, making it varied as well as useful. But at the same time we must concede that it means weakness also. What is that weakness? The answer is, when there is a force of synthesis
the counter force of separation also acts simultaneously. I will give you two examples. Take the case of Vaishnava religion. Vishnu was originally a part of the concept of some God and later from that concept were derived Vishnu’s avatāras—Krishna, Rāma, and so on. So the original Vaishnava dharma was changed into the Rāma or the Krishna cult. Then cropped up the local varieties such as the Bhāgavata religion introduced by Sri Chaitanya in eastern India, and in South India by the Alvārs. In this way sometimes even the Tantric cult infiltrated into Vaishnava religion and it became so much separated from the original high conception of Vaishnavism that through this separation different sects had appeared and this led to the degeneration of the religion.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, although he was preaching the idea of ‘As many faiths, so many paths’, would not support the degenerated form of religion which had been presented to us by the later Vaishnavas. In the Kathāmrīta (the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna in English) there is a very interesting couplet which depicts the worldliness of the ordinary degenerated Vaishnavas.

Sri Ramakrishna says: ‘Worldly people will never listen to you if you ask them to renounce everything and devote themselves whole-heartedly to God. Therefore Chaitanya and Nītai, after some deliberation made an arrangement to attract the worldly. They would say to such persons, “Come, repeat the name of Hari, and you shall have a delicious soup of Magur fish and the embrace of a young woman.” Many people attracted by the fish and the woman, would chant the name of God. After testing a little of the nectar of God’s hallowed name, they would soon realize that the “fish soup” really meant the tears they shed for love of God, while the “young women” signified the earth. The embrace of the woman meant rolling on the ground in the rapture of divine love.’

Similar things happened in Buddhist religion as well. The original Buddhism was mostly a religion of ethics. It showed no respect for any God. It did not mention the name of any God either. Ironically, however, Buddha himself was made into a God particularly after the Greeks had come to India and Buddha’s image became the image of a personal God.

Later Buddhism split into Mahāyāna and Hinayāna and it was followed by various other sects such as Tantric Buddhism. Ultimately when perversion set in, Buddhism lost its moral fibre and faced a steady decline in India. In this way the original idea of synthesis suffered and it led to the degeneration of our culture. As a result various sects emerged and they started fighting among themselves. This is, in my view, one aspect of the weakness of Indian culture.

Coming to Islam we witnessed the same process while some feeble attempts of synthesis had been made in the beginning, for the purpose of political power and domination. Islam tried to maintain its own separate identity which led to the partition of our country and the problem is still going on. Everyday we read in the newspapers how the original idea of synthesis is shattered by the idea of separation. This is the weakness of Indian culture which we must take into account. Otherwise it may collapse some day or other.

Regional Stratification

The next is regional stratification. By ‘regional stratification’ I mean a difference that exists between micro-culture and macro-culture. According to the Webstar’s New Collegiate Dictionary, micro-culture is a culture that prevails in small areas like some village, or in some region, or among some tribes and so on, while macro-culture transcends or go as beyond the small areas. That is why I call it regional stratification. In micro-culture there are various Gods and Goddesses. People might call them by some special names. They are personal Gods. Nevertheless they believe in a Supreme God at the same time. This belief is consciously or unconsciously rooted in the Vedic saying—‘Ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti’. In other words, it is an example of unity in diversity which is the characteristic of Indian culture and which has been so much popularized in our Indian history. But here also the same tendency that I mentioned earlier is working. There is the idea of unity bringing together the different fields of culture—religion, thoughts, and expressions—but at the same time there is also the divisive principle which is weakening the Indian culture as a whole.

Today, what do we find? We find there is a scramble for a cultural identity among the Indian people. It is there in the Eastern region that covers Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya and even small groups like the Bodos are trying to hold their culture as supreme and are trying to rule their own areas and people according to that notion. Similarly, Jharkhand has been created. Today this clamour for distinctive identity of different groups which is an evidence of cultural diversities is actually spoiling the pristine unity or, if I may say so, the attempt of bringing together the cultural elements which had lent strength to the Indian nation and her people. So, in a sense, unity is very much in danger because of the emphasis on diversity, so much so that it is very difficult to think whether India would ultimately remain intact or not.
Next is what I call static-dynamic stratification. By static-dynamic stratification I mean the type of culture which is said to be sanātana or eternal as against which is confined to a particular point of time. In other words, it deals with the basic approach of Indian culture to continuity and change. Much of our culture is very much sanātana as it continues from time immemorial; from the tribal days perhaps we are having this type of culture. This has given some stability to our social approach. Quick changes are not there. As a result people know where they stand. That is of course one good thing. It has greatly strengthened our culture. But again if there is no change the problem is that ultimately one day our culture would be nothing but dead wood. The world is moving; it is dynamic and many changes are taking place. But if we stick to our old form of culture for all times, there is certainly a great danger for the society.

To solve this problem our ancient sages thought of four yugas (ages) and suggested the yogadharmas to be followed. What is yogadharma? It is the culture suited to a particular time, a particular age, and that is very important because we are to grow with time. If we remain static, our society ultimately will also be stagnant and we would not be able to proceed at all. In our various dharmashāstras we find the word ‘parivarjana’, which means leaving or abandoning. In Kalikāla (in the age in which we live) certain customs followed previously are to be discarded. For instance, the niyoga prathā. That was a practice by which a childless widow could be a mother. You find in the Mahābhārata so many examples of this custom. But later, writers of Smritis and Puranas have pointed out that this system has to be avoided in Kaliyuga. The peculiar features of Kaliyuga would be found in many Puranas such as the Vishnupurāṇa and so on. So the idea is that although we must respect Sanātana dharmartha, absolute adherence to it makes us static. Therefore, dynamism is sometimes necessary in all fields of life, including culture.

Finally, in the matter of stratification I will speak of planned stratification. It has some approaches. First, social stratification which is planned by the guardians of our society. The social stratification is represented by the four varnas. Sri Krishna has said in the Gītā (4:13)– ‘Chaturvarnyam Mayā vrishtam gunakarmavibhāgashah’– ‘The four castes have been created by Me through a classification of the gunas and duties.’ But later we did not remain confined to the four varnas due to varnasamkara or intermingling of castes. As a result many sub-castes were created. In the Manusamhitā and in other ancient law-books we get a long list of these sub-castes. Even foreigners like the Shakas, Yavanas, Pallavas were taken to be fallen Kshatriyas and they were admitted into the Indian fold. This planning was good in the sense that people knew what his status was in society. There was no competition. Each varna or sub-caste had certain special duties to perform. This kind of arrangement gave an appreciable measure of stability in society. This stability was not like the one found in early American society where the white Americans had completely wiped out the native Red Indians. In India that did not happen. Well, that is good. But the dark side and the weakness of our social stability was that the glory of man was getting totally discarded. The best example of this degradation was the development of the notion of untouchability which certainly goes against the modern concept of human rights. Even when we stated in our Constitution that untouchability is henceforth abolished for all practical purposes, the condition of the outcast people in remote villages is still very much deplorable and inhuman. If such things continue even today, then certainly we have to remember the lines of poet Rabindranath Tagore–‘Hey more durbhāgā desh, jader korecho apamān, apamāne hobe hobe tāhāder sabār samān’. This is all about our social stratification.

Next comes personal stratification. By that I mean stages in life–brahmacharya, gārhasṭha, vānaprastha and sannyāsa. However, these stages were largely meant for the dvījas: great mass of the shudras or untouchables were not covered by personal stratification of life and ultimately this stratification is almost gone today. Finally, the fourfold ways of looking at life–dharma, artha, kāma and moksha–the chaturvarga as we know. The moksha portion is not meant for ordinary people. So that in many of our sacred literature only three vargas have been mentioned, namely dharma, artha and kāma. The idea was that man’s God should be a combination of this threefold objectives. In the Mahābhārata it is said that dharma, artha and kāma – that is, spiritual, material and sensual approach to life, should be utilized together, cultivated together. One who is devoted to only one aspect is a despicable person. In the Arthashastra of Kautilya we find similar expressions. It says, we are to follow trivargam in equal manner. Here we find a very comprehensive approach towards life. Certainly, spiritual element is good for man and spiritual culture is given topmost status in India. There is no doubt about it. But the truth is that man has to live by seeking all vargas. Apart from spirituality, man has to pursue three other purushārthas as well. Swami Vivekananda used to say that religious life in empty stomach is impossible. But if we are to fill our stomach we are to work and we have to produce wealth, we have to cultivate, we have to collect food, we have to produce various implements of utility.
There *artha* becomes necessary. Again, *artha* is not simply economy in the narrow sense but it combines politics also, because *artha* in a broad sense meant that a king or a ruler should be there to manage the affairs of the society. Then finally comes *kāma* which has to be controlled, for it cannot be totally eschewed. If this *kāma* idea is not there, there will be no family, no new birth, no children, and the whole society would collapse. Therefore we find in Indian culture a combination of all the four *purushārthas* have been enjoined. Of course, generally we do not follow this combination. We deviate from that.

I should conclude by making a special reference to the position of women. This is a very complicated problem in our society particularly from the angle of culture. From time immemorial we find Indians have taken a dual attitude towards women. On the one hand, women were equated with Mother Goddess in various forms—Kāli, Durgā, etc. Side by side they were also equated with demonesses. Rabindranath points out that when ocean was churned, two women came up—one was Lakshmi who is the good side of women and the other is Urvashi who became the enchantress of the Heaven. In *Rigveda* the two elements have been kept separate. We have the description of *Usha* and *Ratrisukta, Devisukta* and so on where woman is idealized and women become Goddesses. Side by side we have the dialogue between Urvashi and Puruva and Urvashi says that the heart of women are like that of the wolf and there I have found this double approach towards women not only in the *Rigveda*, but also in the Buddhist Jataka stories, in the *Mahābhārata*, in the *Manusamhitā*. In many ways we find this approach towards women. So this is the problem which we have to face. At the present time women have progressed much in our society. We have women Prime Ministers, Chief Ministers, ministers, judges and so on, but at the same time majority of women are still illiterate. They are being manhandled by their men folk. So on one side, there is great strength of the Indian culture, on the other side, there is weakness too. For that we should be ashamed of. So Indian culture is sort of a mixture. Constant fight has been going on between the *daivi* and the *āsuri* forces. What is the solution then? In the *Bhagavadgītā*, the Lord says the *asuras*, who follow the lower paths, and are always prompted by desires, anger and greed will ultimately go to hell. But today we do not believe in hell. Even in Lord’s time there were divine and devilish people side by side. Today we always witness the same thing in society. But how to solve the problem? Where is the Lord today? We do not know. This is the present state of our Indian Culture.