

INDIAN CULTURE

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FOR many years and repeatedly I have tried to discover the true meaning of Indian Culture. The ancients called this culture 'Dharma', which meant to them the sum total of all sentiments, beliefs, values, ideals and activities which made life worth living and literature and country worth loving. To-day, I am trying to piece my thoughts about it together, so that the soul of Bharatiya Vidya, as I understand it, may be laid bare.

The words 'Arya' and 'Aryan' have been used in different senses by different men at different times. Hitler's use of them has for the first time in history engrafted on the words implications, which, if true, would make us hang down our heads in shame. Coming nearer home, the word 'Aryan' as applied to Indians as a race may appear to involve the question of heredity; but as applied to culture it has nothing to do with race purity or Brahmanical exclusiveness. Who can say how much of Dravidian blood runs in the veins of the Brahmins of India? Many men of non-Aryan descent have risen to Rshihood. And in later times did not Kabir popularise it? And did not Rupa Goswami, Sanatana Goswami and their nephew Jiva Goswami, the principal disciples of Chaitanya, converts from Islam, found the Vrindavana school of Bhagavat Dharma, pure and undefiled? Let us shed prudery and face facts. Arya Dharma was created, upheld and propagated, among others, by men who, but for their cultural distinctiveness, could not have been called Aryans of unmixed descent. Aryan culture, thus, is Indian culture; the culture which has been built up in India on the thoughts, ideals and efforts of men and women who have consciously or unconsciously identified themselves with it.

But the word 'culture' is difficult to define and is very often confused with institutions which are only the dead material through which it works. Sir Henry Maine in trying to study social evolution in the Western world based his conclusions on the social conditions of Indians and certain primitive races. He and many authors after him confounded social conditions and institutions like the tribe, the patriarchate and the joint family as characteristic productions of Aryan culture. According to Maine, Hindus, by reason of their Smritis, were condemned to 'a feeble and perverted civilisation', while the Romans, having a code, 'were exempt from the very chance of so unhappy a destiny.' The generalisation is both ridiculous and unwarranted. The Romans and their culture which supported similar social institutions have disappeared from the face of the earth; the Hindus and their culture survive with a vitality which many younger nations might envy. European scholars and after them their Indian pupils have entirely misread Hindu Law and the culture it enshrines. In reality the social institutions which it deals with are common to human society in certain stages of its growth in all parts of the world; they are not the result of

Aryan conception of life. But they withered away elsewhere; in India they survived only because of the values which Arya Dharma gave to them. These values, therefore, constitute the culture and deserve to be noted.

The distinction between civilization and social conditions or institutions on the one hand and culture on the other has to be noted if the true meaning of culture has to be found. Culture is not civilisation.

Aryan culture is not the apparatus of life, not the stones by which the mother of the Vedic Rshi ground corn, not the canoe by which Rama and Sita crossed the Sarayu, not the 'charkha' in which many see the embodiment of its spirit. The civilisation of India, that is, its technological and institutional equipment, has varied, or, been borrowed from others from age to age. The bridges which span our rivers, the mills which weave our cloth and the legislatures which resound with our political hopes and disappointments are not ours by invention but by adoption. They are the permanent processions of mankind which influence culture, no doubt, but do not constitute it. Similarly our social habits, the caste, the family, the marriage system are but crusts of life, not life itself. Even the social and religious beliefs by which culture was propagated and preserved in Gujarat in the past do not in themselves constitute it. These change with time, with the civilisation of each age.

This culture, however, is to be found in the sense of continuity; in the consciousness of Indian unity in the permanent values in which the Indians have always seen the fulfilment of life; in the ethical and idealistic absolutes which have moulded the Indian outlook on the eternal questions: What is life? What is its purpose and end?

Thought, equally, is not culture, nor is knowledge by itself. Culture consists of certain values which are found to express themselves through rituals and myths; through modes of life and canons of conduct; through social traditions and institutions; through modes of expression in language and literature; through theories and ideals of life; through all the social, emotional and ideal factors which make a society a distinctive living organism. These values are created by the dominant ideas, persisting for ages in a society, which are not means to an end, but in themselves form the end and aim of life.

(यह लेख कन्हैयालाल माणिकलाल मुंशी की पुस्तक "Indian Unity: A call to Action" से लिया गया है।)