

Revisiting Indian Identity: A Cultural Perspective

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Human cognitive enterprises and value pursuits know no geographical confinements or boundaries or barriers, still there is something unique and distinctive in each individual culture across the globe. In this backdrop, Indian identity means Indian distinctiveness. In this paper I shall try to connect glorious ancient Indian identity with a modern Indian outlook.

Undoubtedly, even a genius cannot function in isolation, nor can one rise entirely on the experience of one's generation and culture, for what one observes and feels, and the manner in which one perceives, feels and expresses are coloured to some extent by the historical experience of a particular society. "The philosophy, which is so important to each of us", said William James, "is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos."¹

Even when one thinks further ahead of or differently from others, the latter conditions the former, since the ways of looking at and thinking about things are limited in space and time. So the origin and growth of identity of any nation can be adequately understood by taking into consideration the structure, attitudes,

1 James, *Pragmatism*, cited in K. Satchidanand Murty, *Indian Philosophy Since 1498*, Dept. of Philosophy, Andhra University, Waltair, Vishakhapatnam, 1982, p. 21.

beliefs, expectations and ideals of the society in which it has generated.² In other words, one's identity can be properly understood only in relation to the respective political, social and economic circumstances and prevalent ideologies.

However, no society is entirely homogeneous, because in every society there are various strata, and conflicting interests and impulses, and, hence there are different ways of looking at things and interpreting experience, and, thereupon, building up of knowledge. Not only different cultures, ages and societies have different perspectives, but the different strata in the same society may also have different perspectives, all of which mutually influence each other, and some of which may, at times, merge into the other.

Simultaneously, one should never forget that every person wills, sees things, and thinks from the perspective of the society to which one belongs. However, it is most remarkable that, in spite of this, many characteristics of the four thousand years old Indian civilization and habits, thoughts and beliefs down the ages have persisted and have blended themselves with what was received from the alien culture.³

Before delving into the details on the issue under discussion, I would like to elucidate briefly about culture. The word 'culture' has been derived from Latin 'cola' meaning 'to cultivate'. Sir Edward Taylor defines 'culture' as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.'⁴ Generally the word 'culture' is used in two senses. Narrowly, 'culture' is used for refinement of mind or maturity of mental outlook. It means something cultivated or ripened, and it is opposed to raw and crude. Broadly, culture covers all aspects of life, knowledge, belief, art morality, law, custom and habit. It includes our way of thinking and acting. In this sense it has two aspects, material and intellectual. Man acts to satisfy his material needs. Albeit material needs are necessary and important for him. But, no less important are the ways through which one procures or produces them. The objects and the procedure by which they are produced are man's material culture. But man has intellectual needs also. He pines for peace, and is interested in art, music, reading and religious discourses. All these come under man's 'intellectual' culture. Both the cultures – material culture and intellectual culture – come under the general term culture. So the

2 Ibid., p. 22.

3 Ibid., p. 30.

4 Edward Taylor, *Primitive Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2010.

culture of society is the way of life, material and mental, which is transmitted from generation to generation. But at the root of every culture lies the belief in certain values. In other words, man in his cultural quests shows his deep concern for what is valuable. He is not only a creator but also a reckoner of values. He acts according to certain values which he cultivates and obtains from different sources. Therefore, values are not only our perspectives but our beliefs, not only our ideas but our faith as well. One would, therefore, venture to say that values of life determine the nature of a society.

Ancient Indian society and culture was influenced by the Upanisadic vision which offered a world view, wherein every existent animate or inanimate was seen as the expression of the Divine. Cosmic brotherhood and the principles of live and let live have been the primitive mottos of Indian society. But unfortunately, since Vedic period, a dichotomy between theory and practice has been noticed. Inner contradiction is evidenced in Manu's classification of caste system as well. Undoubtedly intellectuals got the highest place in society. But can an intellect grow without the help of the other counterparts? Significantly, manual work is no less important. Both are inter-dependent. But due to wrong emphasis on established values of life (*dharmā, artha, kama, and moksa*), there appeared a dichotomy in the society. On the one hand, people worshipped Gods in the temples, and indulged in corruption outside. Spiritually we may be believers in *Advaita* (oneness) but, at the same time, we divide the society on the basis of caste and religion. In other words, such practices lead to the development of a dual personality. External influence also has been responsible to a great extent for the acceleration of this dichotomy.

India garnered political freedom 70 years ago, but its cultural freedom has been outweighed, resulting in social crisis at various levels. Invertebracy has been increasing among the average Indians. Matters relating to sanitation, education, industry and even social reforms, which could have been managed at the community level, are left to rely totally on the help and initiative on the part of the government. Now-a-days Indians bitterly complain about the inactivity on the part of the leaders but are oblivious of the elementary principles of progress. A feeling of helplessness and dependence has overwhelmed our people. It has left them sullen and resentful of those who held the reigns of the government.

Post independence, India could not take long strides in the field of economy, as the nation's economic condition has not been encouraging; social institutions and attitudes has progressed, but revolutionary change has not been evidenced.

Evils like illiteracy, child labour, untouchability, dowry system, exploitation of the weaker sections and some backward classes, inequality of sexes, linguistic and communal riots, irrational and barbarous practices including human sacrifice, starvation deaths, begging, corruption and nepotism, squalor and pestilence – have not yet been eradicated. However, after consistent efforts we are able to tame some of these, though fresh problems like Covid -19 pushed new obstacles on our way. Yet we evidence a general apathy towards the virtues, viz. honesty, hard work, discipline, devotion to duty, frugality and austerity etc. in the masses.

A political system can thrive only if ordinary people have the opportunity as well as the self-confidence and active participation/ involvement to bring their governments to account. Mahatma Gandhi often emphasized that *swaraj* would not come or Indian Identity would not regain proper recognition if a handful reel the power acquired from the British; only when all acquire the capacity to resist authority *swaraj* gets truly established. In brief, freedom would be real only if it meant independence of people and not just of their rulers.

Freedom is a state of mind wherein one is free to doubt and question each and everything. As such, it is so immense, active and vigorous that it casts aside all forms of dependence, slavery and acceptance. One would arguably say that freedom, in this sense, is freedom from one's own internal prejudice which has created bondage for one's thought structures.

In view of the foregoing, exclusive Indian identity would once again emerge only when the average person becomes conscious of the fact that he or she is the maker of one's destiny and that of the country and begins to act accordingly. "The question of identity presupposes an awareness of one's own existence as a person having positive self-image and the ability to think."⁵ Moreover, identity is an outcome of a complex interaction among various social, political, economic and ideological forces and conditions peculiar to that culture. The concept of identity is crucially important as it provides a locus for freedom which is a precondition of empowerment. Empowerment, in this context, is an accomplishment of the right to know.

Knowledge does not mean information (or knowing what) or just theoretical knowledge but that which makes one aware of their own existence as real human beings. It is that which liberates one from the old fetters of thoughts and provides

5 Meena Kelkar and Deepti Gangavane (eds.), *Feminism in Search of an Identity, The Indian Context*, Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 2003, p. 11.

wings to thoughts. At this level it is essential to know what one's identity is. Freedom to know, act and enjoy is a basic postulate of the socio-cultural world and is usually understood as freedom from exploitation, injustice and such other evils. Unless and until the possibility of having a stable identity and freedom is assumed, all deliberations regarding empowerment become redundant.

Verily the cultural identity of Indian nation has been much stronger than the political. The freedom or *swaraj* which India enjoyed was primarily cultural. Westerners attach inordinate importance to politics and consider 'political freedom' to be the primary one. However, 'cultural freedom' emphasizes upon the spiritual and intellectual advancement. Enormous respect for such abiding values made India prosper, at least, on intellectual level, despite enormous political upheavals. In spite of hundreds of years of political slavery, even during the so-claimed liberal British rule India maintained her 'Cultural Identity.' The following sentences of the British Major-General Sir Thomas Munro testify the idea:

If a good system of agricultural, unrivalled manufacturing skill, a capacity to produce whatever can contribute to either convenience or luxury, school established in every village for teaching. Reading, writing and arithmetic, the general practice of hospitality and charity, amongst such each other and, above all, a treatment of the female sex full of confidence, respect and delicacy are among the signs which denote civilized people – then the Hindus are not inferior to the nations of Europe, and if civilization is to become an article of trade between England and India, I am convinced that England will gain by import cargo.⁶

However, the rapid spread of English education affected the Indian culture tremendously. It produced Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, morals and intellect too. No doubt, social evils, such as sati and polygamy, to a great extent, have been cast aside under the influence of English education and culture. But the tremendous disadvantage brought by English education was so great that the good things were all weighed down. Education must be an assimilation of life building, man making and character making ideas. Devoid of it, mere information passed on to the young as knowledge is worthless. It is culture that provides prestige and resistance against odds. Knowledge without culture produces only savagery. Swami Vivekananda has said, quite rightly, that

6 Sir Thomas Munro, cited in P. N. Bose, *Swaraj – Cultural and Political*, Usha Publications, New Delhi, 1986, p.40

“Knowledge is only skin deep as civilization is, and a little scratch brings out the old savage... They will get information but something more is necessary; give them culture. Until you give them that, there can be no permanence in the raised condition of the masses.”⁷ Hence, we find that culture is closely correlated to knowledge of which education is a means.

Education is a means to this end. Evidently all knowledge is not desirable, e.g., the kind of knowledge which enables one to practice unfair means more efficiently and more scientifically is condemnable. From this point-of-view, the spread of knowledge of destructive devises (like guns and poisonous gasses etc.) is deplorable. Such knowledge has affected the culture of the entire world disastrously. It is the result of a delusion that the practical applications of physical science to the art of war would make wars less frequent and less destructive. The wars since last hundred years have frustrated this expectation.

This means that the end of education is right knowledge. But what is right knowledge? For ancient scholars, Eastern as well as Western, the goal of knowledge was ethical and spiritual advancement. They strove to keep the struggle for animal existence at the lowest point of animal necessity in order that one might be free from moral corruption, and, thereby, devote more time and energy to the higher and more arduous struggle for spiritual development than one would otherwise be able to do.

Modern Indian social attitude, basically being driven on the principle of the satisfaction of the sensual desires of man, led to commercialisation of education. It has affected, to a large extent, the old line of demarcation between education for culture and education for livelihood. The domain of knowledge has undoubtedly been expanding widely and rapidly, but paradoxically the domain of wisdom has been contracting proportionately as well. The Western litterateurs have, no doubt, widened the spectrum of knowledge to a great extent and, thereupon, have made people at large perplexed and bewildered. But, sadly speaking, they have failed to point out a rational goal of one's life. The inventive miracles of the West, however, have enabled the system to build up its colossal fabric of industrial civilization that has led to the exploitation of the weaker segment across the globe. From a purely material standpoint, therefore, it has gained, at least, temporarily. Though India has also gained from Western civilization but the losses due to it completely

7 *Selections from the Complete Works of Swami Vivekanand*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Calcutta, p. 282.

overshadow the gains. Its spread has led to physical and moral degradation. Moreover, it has contributed to the destruction of genuine village self-government; decay of indigenous industry and of communal concord. Striving for mere political freedom in the Western model, even if desirable, is totally futile. Therefore, the salvation of Indian identity depends upon the revival of its culture.

For the promotion of culture some educational organisations and institutions have been established across the country during the past 70 years. The sole purpose of such organisations have been the propagation of Indian culture, art and medicine. Emphasis is being laid on discipline in such institutions with the belief that simple living and selflessness can rescue Indian identity from the morass of militarism, malevolence, greed, selfishness and destitution etc. Without simple life and self-abnegation, genuine altruism, one of the characteristics of Indian identity, is not possible. The ideal of education in Indian context has been to produce a complete man – physically, intellectually and morally. Religion, morality, education and conduct have been considered as inter-blended ideals. These ideals benefit humanity on the whole, because the Indian social system, based on these ideals, has proved to be the bedrock of its continuity. The purport of this deliberation is to emphasize that Indian identity means the establishment of a non-exploitative and egalitarian society. Hence, the institutional arrangements and patterns of relationship should be in such a manner that the economy, polity and society are non-exploitative. Moreover, the weakest are enabled to participate in the process of decision-making and realize their fullest potential through the merit of self-actualisation. All these are possible only if the cultural aspect of the society, as discussed earlier, is emphasised.

In nutshell, Indian identity necessitates cultivation of those new values, which are beneficial to the society and ultimately to mankind, as well as to get rid of those old ones, which have turned useless in changed circumstances. In this way, there would be an amalgam of the old and new. It would create a new unified personality. The duality would be over, and Indian society, echoing its glorious past, would emerge.