

Indian Culture: Its Heights And Lights

By Swami Tathagatananda

Preface for the book: Light from the Orient

India has been held in high esteem of late by Western Oriental scholars. From the most ancient period, destiny has entrusted India with the supreme task of upholding spiritual culture. From a historical perspective beyond the reach of memory, Indian civilization reaches into the present with full vigor. A galaxy of great men and women down the long, checkered history of Indian culture stood for the highest aspirations of the Indian mind and this hallowed tradition helps to remind the common people of its supreme importance. The greatest men and women of India were messengers of the Spirit who taught through their elevated lives, the fundamental unity of all in Divinity. Their universal attitude of love and harmony, peace and enlightenment, renunciation and service, deeply imprinted in the minds of the people the dominance of Spirit over matter.

Civilization in India, therefore, is inseparable from the spiritual philosophy that permeates every aspect of India's culture, filtering through the uppermost to the lowest strata of India's population. Prof. Radhakrishnan rightly observes:

In many other countries of the world, reflection on the nature of existence is a luxury of life. The serious moments are given to action, while the pursuit of philosophy comes up as a parenthesis. In the West, even in the heyday of its youth, as in the times of Plato and Aristotle, it leaned for support on some other study as politics or ethics. . . In India, philosophy stood on its own legs, and all other studies looked to it for inspiration and support.

"The destiny of a nation as of an individual," S. Radhakrishnan writes, "depends upon the direction of its life forces, the light that guides it, and the laws that mold it." A Western observer elaborates on this theme:

But, beyond the political and scientific benefits that India has offered to man, and that she will undoubtedly continue to offer as her economy develops, there is something far more significant in the essential art of living, in the process of man's understanding of himself; in the subtler realms of mind and spirit are to be found India's greatest contribution.

The well-traveled Mark Twain (1835-1910) recognized that "India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend and the great-grandmother of tradition. Our most valuable and most instructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only."

THE INFALLIBILITY AND ANTIQUITY OF THE *VEDAS*

Max Müller recognized “the larger and deeper meaning” of the *Vedas* as *Sruti*, revealed scriptures:

The Veda is looked upon, from the earliest times of which we know anything in India, as superhuman; not as invented and composed, but only as seen by men, that is, by inspired seers, as eternal, as infallible, as divine in the highest sense.

The inspired seers, steeped in freedom of thought, were fearless. Müller greatly admired the untainted truthfulness and straightforwardness of these authors of the *Vedas*:

What I admire in Indian philosophers is that they never try to deceive us as to their principles and the consequences of their theories. If they are idealists, even to the verge of nihilism, they say so, and if they hold that the objective world requires a real, though not necessarily a visible or tangible substratum, they are never afraid to speak out. . . . The Vedantist, for instance, is a fearless idealist, and, as a monist, denies the reality of anything but the *One* Brahman, the Universal Spirit, which is to account for the whole of the phenomenal world. . . . They do not allow themselves to be driven one inch beyond their self-chosen position. . . . there is one thing which we cannot help admiring, and that is the straightforwardness and perfect freedom with which [the Indian systems of thought] are elaborated. However imperfect the style in which their theories have been clothed may appear from a literary point of view, it seems to me the very perfection for the treatment of philosophy. It never leaves us in any doubt as to the exact opinions held by each philosopher. We may miss the development and the dialectic eloquence with which Plato and Hegel propound their thoughts, but we can always appreciate the perfect freedom, freshness, and downrightness with which each searcher after truth follows his track without ever looking right or left.

This highlights the fact that the *Vedas* have no age or single author. Dr. S. N. DasGupta, in his *History of Indian Philosophy*, writes of the antiquity of the *Vedas* and their present influence:

When the *Vedas* were composed, there was probably no system of writing prevalent in India. But such was the scrupulous zeal of the Brahmins, who got the whole Vedic literature by heart by hearing it from their preceptors, that it has been transmitted most faithfully to us through the course of the last three thousand years or more with little or no interpolations at all.

The origin of the Vedic Age is lost in obscurity, enshrouded in the dim, distant past. It goes back centuries before the birth of Lord Buddha. In the absence of documentation, scholars must speculate in order to establish a date for the *Vedas*. They agree that their date in antiquity cannot be fixed. Müller arrives at a calculation of the date 1200 B. C. by generalization. Maurice Winternitz finds evidence of continuity in the Indian literature over a period of a few millennia before the era of Christ and places the origin of Vedic literature between 2000 and 2500 B. C. Using astronomical calculations from the *Rg-*

Veda itself, Mr. Tilak dates the hymns at about 4500 B. C. as does Hermann Jacobi, who also fixes the date close to 4500 B. C. This date is corroborated by P. C. Sen Gupta, who specifically calculates that an eclipse described in verses of the *Rg-Veda* (40.5-9) actually occurred on July 26, 3928 B. C.

S. Radhakrishnan gives the opinion of most modern scholars:

The Vedic period is dimmed by obscurity, but it may be placed approximately between 2500 and 600 B. C. This is the period during which the Aryans, having come down to India and Central Asia, settled in their new homeland and gradually expanded and developed their Aryan culture and civilization.

It is not the antiquity of the *Vedas*, but their perennial appeal and efflorescence in the Indian mind that is important. It is really a wonder that this vital tradition is not disturbed by foreign invasions, internal political upheavals, changes in the language, racial admixture and many other impediments of social, economic and political life. Indian culture is always inclined to spiritual values. India has a long tradition of preserving and impregnating them with fresh insights in regular succession. Above all, the rank-and-file Hindu venerates the Vedic verses. All these factors in the Indian culture keep the *Vedas* free from interpolation. "It is culture," says Swami Vivekananda, "that withstands shock, not a simple mass of knowledge." No other ancient literature has had its truths preserved in their original beauty for so long a period. The Vedic tradition is the singular exception in the entire history of religion.

Raimundo Panikkar, a Roman Catholic priest and professor of religious studies, writes that the revelatory knowledge of the *Vedas* "still resounds in the heart of man." He adds:

The Vedic experience introduces nothing alien to modern man, but helps him to realize his own life and emphasizes an often neglected aspect of his own being. In this sense the *Vedas* occupy a privileged position in the crystallized culture of Man. They are neither primitive nor modern. Not being primitive, they present a depth, a critical awareness, and a sophistication not shown by many other ancient cultures. Not being modern, they exhale a fragrance and present an appeal that the merely modern does not possess.

INTELLECTUAL CONQUEST OF THE HINDUS

India's spiritual culture and civilization have ever served to enlighten humanity. Recent excavations all over the world confirm this insight about the ancient Indian heritage of humanity, an insight that was hitherto unknown and ignored. Sir Charles Elliot noted India's global relevance in *Hinduism and Buddhism* and wrote of the failure of historians to appreciate the significance of her real conquest in philosophical thought:

Scant justice is done to India's position in the world by those European histories which recount the exploits of her invaders and leave the impression that her own people were a feeble dreamy folk, sundered from the rest of mankind by their seas and mountain frontiers. Such a picture takes no account of the intellectual conquests of the Hindus.

Even their political conquests were not contemptible, and are remarkable for the distance, if not the extent, of the territories occupied. . . . But such military or commercial invasions are insignificant with the spread of Indian thought.

Had Elliot been aware of several remarkable archeological discoveries of ancient Indian civilization that had just been made in Southeast Asia, he would have strengthened his position because these discoveries revolutionized awareness of India's many significant contributions to the world beyond the one of her spiritual philosophy. The excavations in India led by Sir John Marshall further gave humanity a greater archeological surprise—the impressive remains of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, which are known as the Indus Valley civilizations. Sir John Marshall assigned the period from 3,100 B. C. to 2,750 B. C. as the “Golden Age of Harappa.” The interested reader may get many surprises about these excavations at Mahenjo-daro and Harappa by referring to books related to these great discoveries. We do not want to elaborate here about the magnificent archeological techniques that led to these discoveries; we only quote Sir John Marshall's significant remarks made in 1931:

One thing that stands out clear and unmistakable both at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa is that the civilization hitherto revealed at these two places is not an incipient civilization, but one already age-old and stereotyped on Indian soil, with many millennia of human endeavor behind. Thus India must henceforth be recognized, along with Persia, Mesopotamia and Egypt, as one of the most important areas where the civilizing processes were initiated and developed. . . . The Punjab and Sind, if not other parts of India as well, were enjoying an advanced and singularly uniform civilization of their own, closely alien but in some respects even superior to that of contemporary Mesopotamia and Egypt.

**THE SELF-PERPETUATING VEDIC RELIGION:
“ENTIRELY NURTURED BY NATIVE AIR”**

Whenever and wherever man reflects upon truth, the question of metaphysics arises. Kant rightly admitted, “That the human mind will ever give up metaphysical researches is as little to be expected as that we, to avoid inhaling impure air, should prefer to give up breathing altogether.” Indian thought was born, nourished and continues to perpetuate itself on Indian soil.

India had reached her zenith before the advent of the Greeks and Romans. These and other great empires did not last. Though India, like these and other civilizations, became a cultural admixture, she tolerated and absorbed the various civilizations that entered her borders without losing her own spiritual identity as a nation. Max Müller noted that, “the Vedic religion was the only one the development of which took place without any extraneous influences, and could be watched through a longer series of centuries than any other religion,” and gave the reasons why:

We know the difficulty of finding out in the religion of the Greeks what is purely home-grown,” and what is taken over from Egypt, Phoenicia, it may be from Scythia, or at all

events slightly colored by those foreign rays of thought. Even in the religion of the Hebrews, Babylonian, Phoenician, and at a later time Persian influences have been discovered, and the more we advance towards modern times, the more extensive becomes the mixture of thought, and the more difficult the task of assigning to each nation the share which it contributed to the common intellectual currency of the world. In India alone, and more particularly in Vedic India, we see a plant entirely grown on native soil, and entirely nurtured by native air. For this reason, because the religion of the Veda was so completely guarded from all strange infections, it is full of lessons which the student of religion could learn nowhere else.

India's ancient spiritual traditions continue to provide the Hindus with the reason for life, the values of life and the clear message of life's goals throughout the ages. In *Why Religions Die*, American professor J. B. Pratt points out that Hinduism is "the Vedic way . . . a self-perpetuating religion . . . the way of constant spiritual reinterpretation leading to life, which is self-perpetuating, self-renewing and which for the individual and for the world may be eternal." Pratt continues:

That which is not vital and true, cast off the old shell and clothed itself in more suitable expression, with no break in the continuity of life and no less in the sanctity and weight of its authority. . . . Mutually contradictory creeds can and do keep house together without quarrel within the wide and hospitable Hindu family.

Max Müller's affectionate words about India and its significance for the correction and welfare of humanity come to mind:

If I were to ask myself from what literature we, here in Europe, we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw that corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human, a life, nor for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life—again I should point to India.

And in that study of the history of the human mind, in that study of ourselves, of our true selves, India occupies a place second to no other country. Whatever sphere of the human mind you may select for your special study, whether it be language, or religion, or mythology, or philosophy, whether it be laws or customs, primitive art or primitive science, everywhere, you have to go to India, whether you like it or not, because some of the most valuable and most instructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India, and India only. . . . The Aryans of India [were] the framers of the most wonderful language, the Sanskrit, the fellow workers in the construction of our fundamental concepts, the fathers of the most natural of natural religions, the maker of the most transparent of mythologies, the inventors of the most subtle philosophy, and the givers of the most elaborate laws.

**SANSKRIT, PRISTINE AND PURE,
THE "GREAT, GREAT GRANDMOTHER" LANGUAGE**

The continuity of tolerance and unity, which are the essential characteristics of India's religion and culture—the “warp and woof” of the entire fabric of Indian life—that continuity is conveyed by the “great, great grandmother” language of Sanskrit. In *What Can India Teach Us?* Max Müller wrote:

Yet such is the marvelous continuity between the past and the present in India, that in spite of repeated social convulsions, religious reforms, and foreign invasions, Sanskrit may be said to be still the only language that is spoken over the whole extent of that vast country.

Sanskrit is the linguistic wonder from India whose form and purity remain unspoiled. It has kept its original, unchanged structure over many centuries. Though Sanskrit remains the resident, as it were, of India, the land of its birth, it has conveyed India's sacred literature abroad and is, therefore, the sacred emissary of India's spiritual culture. Adapting itself to every circumstance of civilization, in peaceful coexistence with neighboring languages, its silent reign affects humanity much like a serene, benevolent ruler under whose watch the spiritual and cultural welfare of the people is secure. Sanskrit has always been venerated and worshipped. Sanskrit's spiritual kingdom, which encompassed South and Southeast Asia from the beginning of the Christian era to 1000 A. D., is the kingdom of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, of all the Vedic sciences, of India's literary marvels in prose and poetry.

Sanskrit's historical antiquity began with the discovery of two documents discovered outside India that attest to its existence as a sacred language in the middle of the second millennium B. C., the Vedic Period. It was a refined version of the spoken language at that time, Old Indo-Aryan. The earliest historical evidence of Sanskrit as a vernacular language is Panini's grammar, the *Astadhyayi*. Panini recorded not only his own local dialect of Sanskrit, he included its other regional variations, especially those east and north of his region. According to Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat in *The Sanskrit Language: An Overview*, Sanskrit was, therefore, a living language spoken throughout the Indo-Gangetic Plain.

Panini's Sanskrit was the Sanskrit of the ancient Vedic sages of India. But it was not a language exclusive to the sages; Panini's vocabulary covers a wide variety of subjects—arts and crafts, all manner of secular and commercial interests, law, all the known sciences, farming and agriculture, aesthetics, morals and ethics, and every interest and emotion of the common people. It was also a practical, communal language that was used by the people independent of grammarian authority—a creative, robust and powerful language of common vitality. The world's first language is comprised of sixty-three sounds and letters in its alphabet. By comparison, the Russian alphabet has thirty-five letters, the Spanish thirty-five, the Persian thirty-one, the English twenty-six, the Greek twenty-four and each of the Latin and Hebrew alphabets, twenty. Panini's grammar of Sanskrit is, according to Filliozat, an “invaluable document on the cultural awareness of an educated Indian of antiquity,” and he “let his language enrich itself with material from other languages.” Panini may be regarded as the master sculptor of the “chiseled beauty” of Sanskrit. This is still evident later, when in Patanjali's time,

Sanskrit had become a spoken language of the *sistas*, the educated, elite classes. His *Vyakarana-mahabhasya* is a testimony to the marvelous capacity of Sanskrit to assimilate all it borrowed from neighboring languages. Patanjali secured the future of Sanskrit for the educated classes when Prakrit, the language of the common people, was developing. After Patanjali, Sanskrit was no longer spoken.

Swami Vivekananda's appreciation of Sanskrit sums up its eternal value: "This Sanskrit language is so intricate, the Sanskrit of the Vedas so ancient, and the Sanskrit philology so perfect, that any amount of discussion can be carried on for ages in regard to the meaning of one word." The spiritual value of Sanskrit remains significant in modern times, as does its purely practical value. Forbes Magazine reported in 1987 that Sanskrit is the most suitable language for computerization.

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