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## Spiritual Dimensions of Indian Culture

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*Introduction-* Civilization and Culture are hall- mark of the collective life of man. Civilization signifies the moral evolved state of the society, which embraces activity of mental life, including arts and learning. According to Sri Aurobindo civilization is harmony of spirit, mind and body- the harmony of the inner and outer man. Will Durant has defined civilization, in his monumental work 'The Story of Civilization, to mean social organization, moral order and cultural activity. Four elements constitute civilization: Economic provision, political organization moral traditions, and pursuit of knowledge and arts. In a nut-shell we may comprehend civilization of people as an advance stage of its social development.

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# Spiritual Dimensions of Indian Culture

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Civilization and Culture are hall- mark of the collective life of man. Civilization signifies the moral evolved state of the society, which embraces activity of mental life, including arts and learning. According to Sri Aurobindo civilization is harmony of spirit<sup>1</sup>, mind and body- the harmony of the inner and outer man. Will Durant has defined civilization, in his monumental work 'The Story of Civilization, to mean social organization, moral order and cultural activity. Four elements constitute civilization: Economic provision, political organization moral traditions, and pursuit of knowledge and arts. In a nut-shell we may comprehend civilization of people as an advance stage of its social development.

Culture is the discipline by which man's moral and intellectual nature is elevated. According to Sri Aurobindo, culture comprises various activities of the cultivated aesthetic being<sup>2</sup>. Will Durant has defined culture as the sum-total of a people's institutions, customs and arts. The UNESCO- sponsored book 'Traditional Cultures of South East Asia' gives the definition of Culture thus: Culture means the total accumulation of material objects, ideas, symbols, benefits, sentiments, values and social forms which are passed on from one generation to another in any given society. "In short, Culture signifies refinement of minds and manners as also cultivation of aesthetic faculties in a particular society.

Spirit is the non- material, animating and immortal part of man. According to Sri Aurobindo, Spirit is the self -existence being, with infinite power of consciousness and unconditional delight<sup>3</sup>. All contacts with the Spirit or Self, the Higher Consciousness and Divine are termed as 'spiritual: For man to become divine in consciousness, and to act and live inwardly and outwardly the Divine Life, is meant what is meant by Spirituality. As explained by Sri Aurobindo. Elsewhere he has further defined Spirituality as "the attempt to

know and live in the highest self, the divine, the all-embracing unity, and to raise life in all its parts to the divinest possible values."

Indian culture is a continuing culture –a living factor – in the life of nearly one- seventh of the human race , unlike the ancient cultures, e.g. Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, roman and former Chinese, which are now of the historical value only. As Swami Ranganathananda has said in his enlightening tone 'Eternal Values of a changing Society' (Vol. I) "how the Indian culture arose nearly five thousand years ago, how it developed and was come down to us as a rich human legacy, is a very fascinating and rewarding study."

We get a glimpse of the initial stage of Indian culture- of both of its aspects. Viz. material and mental- in Rig- Veda, which is the first written record of mankind. Historians tell us that Indians of the Vedic age, also called Indo- Aryans, were an energetic race of people. On the material front they exhibited love of life and indulged freely in poetry and war. On the mental plane they were deeply spiritual and were adepts in bold philosophical speculation. Spirituality was during those times the essence of Indian culture. The Vedic Rishi excelled in devising mystic and metaphysical disciplines for realizing the immortal and divine self of man, "of which life and death are but shadows"- the Rig Veda (X-121-2) says. In this context Sri Aurobindo has said thus: "The Veda was to these early seers the World discovering the Truth and clothing in image and symbol the mystic significance of life. It was a divine discovery and unveiling of the potencies of the world, of its mysterious revealing and creative capacity, not the word of the logical and reasoning or the aesthetic intelligence, but the intuitive and inspired rhythmic utterance, the 'mantra. <sup>4</sup> "

The guiding principle of the spiritual pursuit of the Vedic Indians was: "known thy soul"- that found expression and exemplification in the variegated forms of the Vedic lore, viz. the Upanishads, Brahman treatises , Aranyakas, Karakas, Dharshans, Sutras and Smritis. The Indo –Aryans envied an optimistic view of life. There is no touch of pessimism in the Vedic lore.

The Vedic Rishi held the view that the universe is dynamic- not –static- and is susceptible of an incessant evolutionary process. They discovered that in spite of all speculative knowledge the universe remained a mystery and that the mystery deepened with the advance of knowledge. They were endowed with a deep

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<sup>1</sup> See The Foundation of Indian Culture.

<sup>2</sup> Ideal of Human Unity

<sup>3</sup> Essays on Gita

<sup>4</sup> See The foundation of Indian Culture(Centenary Vol. 14) P- 260

passion for truth, ananda and welfare of all beings. "The entire world is but one family" and "Devotion to the welfare of all beings"- were their watch- words.

In the Upanishads we find scientific pursuit of the truth of life and the reality of the Absolute One manifested as cosmos, in the depth of experience of the Rishi. As Sri Aurobindo has said: "...the highest authority they could give for their own sublime utterances was a supporting citation from their predecessors with the formula- tad esa rca- bhykta'- "this is that word which was spoken by the Rig- Veda." About the Upanishads Sri Aurobindo has further said+ "they are a record of the deepest spiritual experiences – documents of revelatory and intuitive philosophy of an inexhaustible light, power and largeness<sup>5</sup>".

All subsequent development of Indian culture was conditioned by this Upanishadic legacy. Says Sri Aurobindo against: "Buddhism with all its developments was only a restatement, although from a new standpoint and with fresh terms of intellectual definition and reasoning... and Sufism (in Islam) <sup>6</sup> only repeats them (i.e. the Upanishadic revelation and philosophical) in another language."

Coming in the wake of Upanishads, the Bhagwad Gita is the first successful attempt in man's cultural history to work out a complete philosophy of life. It contains in its fold a unique synthesis also, of the triune Yoga of knowledge. Action and Devotion- Jnan, Karma and Bhakti. A contemporary work of Vedanta in the Upanishadic strain is the Ashtavakra Samhita (also called Ashtavakra Gita') which is a veritable guide for realization of the Self.

Simultaneously the supreme technique of meditation and other Yoga systems, fortified by moral purity and intense aspiration for transformation of consciousness, provided a spiritual base of the future of Indian culture. Even the practice of arts of spiritually oriented. Music had its origin in the lyrical hymns of Sam- Veda and a glaring example of the arts was of spiritual dance is 'Shiva –tandava,' the dance of creation by the Lord of 'tapas', who has been depicted as 'Nataraj' (the deity of the art of dancing) in Indian mythology. As aptly narrated by Swami Ranganathananda (in 'Eternal Values of a Changing Society'): "The image of God as Nataraj, the king of dancers, teaches us that the world is the product of the joyous dance of the supreme Deity".

The revelatory gnosis of the Veda culminates in 'Vedanta', which term literally means 'end of the Veda' or the essence of all-knowledge. Sri Aurobindo has stated in 'The foundation of Indian culture' that the Upanishads are Vedanta. The Vedanta philosophy depicts Brahman, the ultimate Reality as 'Sat- Chit-

Ananda', i.e. Existence consciousness- Bliss. As described in the Taittiriya Upanishad (II-7), "He is very delighted. By achieving this delight man verily becomes blissful. Who indeed would breathe, who would live, if in the space (of the heart) this bliss were not there? Indeed it is He alone that is the source of bliss."

The Mundaka Upanishad (II (ii)-8) describes the world as blissful and immortal. The Isha Upanishad describes God as 'kavi' (i.e. Divine Poet seer) and indicates that the universe is his poem, emanating in waves and rhythms. In this context Sri Aurobindo has further said: "The Vedas and the Upanishads are not only the sufficient fountain head of Indian philosophy and religion, but of all Indian art, poetry and literature. - The Veda is thus the spiritual and psychological seed of Indian culture and the Upanishads and expression of the truth of highest spiritual knowledge and experience that has always been the supreme idea of that culture."

In the post- Vedic era, Indian culture developed zest in life which expressed itself remarkably in the fine arts, literature, music and dance. Philosophy became experimental, instead of being speculative. Spirituality got diluted with ritualistic priestcraft, but still it retained its superb luster as the Indian way of higher life, for the priesthood laid emphasis on 'Tapasya, i.e. austerities and askesis. The great epics – Ramayana of Valmiki and Mahabharata of Vyas- the poetic 'itihasas' (i.e. ancient historical or legendary epics) were created in that era.

The para-yogic system of tantra was in vogue during this post- Vedic era. The method of the Tantra discipline is in words of Sri Aurobindo, "to raise Nature in man into manifest power of spirit." Also, the cult of Shakti worship prevailed throughout the land. 'Shakti for the commonality of the energies of Nature- physical, biological, mental and spiritual. The whole creation conscious and unconscious entities has emanated from the Energy of Consciousness- 'Chit Shakti ', Shakti has been and still is, worshipped with various names of Divine Mother, viz. Kali, Chandi, Durga, Devil it al.

In the Puranic era (about five centuries B.C. and the posterior period) when various were created, the spiritual content of Indian culture received the first major jolt, for the spiritual values got distorted among the masses into pries ridden ritualism and superstition. At this chaotic stage two prophets appeared in the arena of Indian spiritual culture- Mahavira (in the middle of the sixth century B.C.) And Gautama Buddha (563-483 B.C.). Mahavira revived the ancient Jainism and organized a celibate clergy and an order of nuns. Buddha founded a new religion known as Buddhism about which Sri Aurobindo says that "in its dynamic parts, by its ethical system and spiritual method, it gave a new set of values, a server vigor yet a gentler idealism of human living and was therefore powerfully creative both in arts which interpret life and in society and politics." The doctrines of Jainism are similar to those of Buddhism. Still sages of the Vedic tradition and there

<sup>5</sup> The foundation of Indian Culture(Centenary Vol. 14) PP- 261-267, 269-270

hermitage abounded galore, where the torch of Vedic wisdom and gnosis continued to kindle un-flickered. Also, stalwarts like Shankara, Ramanuja and Mahavira appeared to the Indian soil who held the banner of the Vedanta philosophy aloft. They highlighted the spiritual content of Indian culture. Sankaracharya has described the universe as "Waves of beauty"- in the strain of Upanishads. In his poetic work 'Vivekchudamani' there is an intellectual echo of the voice of the Upanishads and the manner of the Gita", each in his own way of Monism and Dualism (Advaita, Vishisht Advaita and Dvaita) respectively as averred by Sri Aurobindo.

In the medieval ages, Sanskrit became\* "the language of pundits and expect for certain philosophical, religious and learned purposes no longer a first-hand expression of the life and mind of people." The diversified version of the Ramayana- by Krittibas in Bengali and Kampan in Tamil,- Bhavartha Ram ayana in Marathi, Ranganatha Ramayana in Telegu, Adhyatma Rama-yanam in Malyalam, Rama charita Puranam in Kannada emphasized the need of disciplined life in a cultured society. The cult of devotion- Bhakti Marga- prevailed in India widely among the high and low. The Maharastrian saints Ramdas and Tukaram, the Tamil saint Tiruvalluvar and poetess Avvai gave a fillip to the moral and ethical upliftment of the masses in their respective regions. In Bengal the divine genius of Chaitanya and inspired verses of the two poets, Bidyapati and Chandidas, brought about a new awakening. In northern India the poet-saints Tulsi Das, Sur Das, Mira Bai, Nanak and Kabir gave a new dimension to the religious aspects of Indian culture. Also, there was a horde of Muslim Sufi- saints, the chief among them being Khwaja Muinud deen Chishti of Ajmer, who gave impetus, in their own way, to the spiritual fervor among the masses.

In modern times, the surge of spirituality has undulated to its lowest ebb throughout the world owing to the rising tide of physical sciences, and in India due to the influx of the materialistic Western civilization also. Thus says Sri Aurobindo<sup>6</sup>. "Indian society is in a still more chaotic stage; for the old forms are crumbling away under the pressure of the environment, their spirit and reality are more and more passing out of them, but façade persists by the force of inertia of thought and will and the remaining attachment of a long association, while the new powerless to be born". However, the fluctuating torch of Vedic enlightenment has been re-illuminated with multi- faceted brilliance by great men of divine dispensation, viz. Sri Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi, Swami Dayananda and Sri Aurobindo. Among this godlike personage Sri Aurobindo stands supreme, like the Everest peak of the Himalayas. The uniqueness of his supernal mission is that it relates to a new dimension of spirituality, not only of Indian culture but of entire mankind, viz. the advent of new species of

Supermen and Sacramental Beings, next higher to human race.

As regards to various reformist movements in modern times Sri Aurobindo says.<sup>6</sup> "All Great movements of life in India have been with a new spiritual thought and usually a new religious activity. What more striking and significant fact can there be than this that even the new European influence, which was an influence intellectual, rationalistic, so often anti- religious and which drew so much of its idealism from the increasingly cosmopolitan, mundane and secularist thought of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, precipitated in India from the very first an attempt at religious reformation and led actually to the creation of new religions?... The Brahma Samaj (in Bengal) had in its inception a large cosmopolitan idea- The Arya Samaj in the Punjab, (and other regions) founded itself on a fresh interpretation of the truth of the Veda and an attempt to apply old Vedic principles of life to modern conditions. The movement associated with the great names of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda has been a very wide synthesis of past religions motives and spiritual experience topped by a reaffirmation of the old asceticism and monasticism but with new living strands in it and combined with a strong humanitarianism and zeal of missionary expansion.... Islam has recently shared in the general stirring and attempts to return vitally to the original Islamic deals or to strike out fresh developments have preceded or accompanied the awakening of life of the long torpid Musalman mass in India... Especially we see everywhere the tendency towards the return of the spirit upon life; the reassertion of a spiritual living as a foundation of a new life of the nation has been recognizable impulse. Even asceticism and monasticism are rapidly becoming, no longer merely competitive, self- centered or aloof, but missionary, educative, humanitarian."

The real import of a culture is revealed by the orientation it gives to the way of life and the types of men it moulds by its manifold creative facets. The essence of the spiritual dimensions of Indian culture is Wisdom, Vijnana. To gain Wisdom through the science of self- 'Amta- Bodha' or 'para -Vidya'- is its first tenet. Realization of one's immortal divine self or infinite existence, infinite knowledge and infinite bliss- SAT-CHIT-ANANDA- is the second tenet. The third is that religion is a matter of experience and not a dogma or creed. Eternal and universal Truth ('Rtam' in the terminology of the Veda) is another dimension of Indian culture. Sri Aurobindo has described in beautiful words how is the days of your India, through the vision of Vedic Rishis, saw that "the invisible always surrounds the visible, the supra-sensible the sensible, even as infinity always surrounds the finite. She saw too that man has

<sup>6</sup> The foundation of Indian Culture(Centenary Vol. 14) PP-418-420

the power off exceeding himself.... She saw the myriad gods beyond man, God beyond the Gods, and beyond God his own ineffable eternity; she saw that there were ranges of life beyond our life, ranges of mind beyond our present mind and above these she saw the splendors of the spirit... her religions conquer China and Japan and spread westward as far as Palestine and Alexandria, and the figures of the Upanishads and sayings of the Buddhists are reechoed on the lips of Christ."

The concept of spiritual unity of all existence broadened the religious outlook of the Indian people and fostered inter religious harmony. The foundation of such universal concord was laid by the Vedic seers in one of their greatest pronouncements- "Truth is one; sages call it variously. Swami Vivekananda has said that this pronouncement of the Vedic Rishi is the Magna Charta of religion. In the Gita (IV-II) Sri Krishna proclaims similarly:

*"Though whatever paths men come to Me, I Receive them through those very paths. All paths, O Arjun, eventually come to me only".*

Swami Vivekananda memorable words in his opening address at the parliament of Religious at Chicago on 11 September, 1893, highlight this glorious aspect of the Indian culture:

"I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal tolerance, but accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites who came to southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which this holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to a religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation."

The Iranians, the Greeks, the Scythians, the Arabs, the Mongols and finally the Europeans- all have contributed to the enrichment of Indian culture, one after another. All the major religions of the world have also poured their ideas and visions into the stream of the cultural heritage of India. The perfect synthesis of these powerful cultural currents constitutes the central channel of this culture. The uniqueness of Indian culture lies in the fact that it has created a spiritual milieu on the earth in all stages of its continuity, from the pre-historic age down to the present times. That milieu has been producing, or providing sustenance to, ideal men who have been governing new directions from time to time for the advancement of mankind. In this context it will be apt to recall the following words of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, from his monumental work *Eastern Religions and Western Thoughts*:

"The Ideal man of India is not the magnanimous man of Greece or the valiant knight of medieval Europe, but the free man of spirit, who has attained inside into the universal source by rigid discipline and practice of disinterested virtues, who has freed himself from the prejudices of his time and place. It is India's pride that she has clung fast to his ideal and produced in very generation and in every part of the country, from the time of the Rishis of the Upanishads and Buddha to Ramakrishna and Gandhi, men who strove successfully to realize this ideal."

As Swami Vivekananda said: "India's gift to the world is the light spiritual. The philosophy and spirituality of India is ever ready to flow along the new made channels into the veins of nations of the world." The spiritual dimension of Indian culture stretch to the summit to which human consciousness has reached so far so realizing "the world within", where the glory and splendor of the Supreme One shines. Thus says Sri Aurobindo: "The heavens beyond are great and wonderful, but greater still and more wonderful are heavens within you." Universality and humanism are two of the essential characteristics of Indian culture. It seeks achievement by man of the highest glory and fulfillment of life, the culmination of which is transcendence of him into the next higher species, which Sri Aurobindo has named 'Superman' and 'Sacramental Being'.

The pivotal truth of life, around which the entire gamut of the spiritual dimensions of Indian culture revolves, is that man has been endowed with four primal powers: viz. Thought- power or 'Vichra- shakti', power of action or 'Karma- shakti' Power of feeling (including sentiments and emotions) or 'Bhava- shakti' and power of consciousness or 'Chit-shakti', If Vichra- shakti remains centered in Maya' (i.e. illusionary conceptions of "I" and "mine") man remains engrossed in Ignorance, of which the offspring are craving, fear and ego. If on the other hand, thought-power is focused on the Divine, man pursues the spiritual path of 'Jnan- Yoga' (the Yoga of Knowledge) which leads him to achievement of the virtues: contentment, fearlessness and reliance on Divine Grace. Man can thus attain Peace- everlasting. Similarly if 'Karma- shakti' is prompted by Maya, man indulges in enjoyment of luxuries, sensual pleasure and opulence, which result in misery. On the other hand if Power of action is prompted by Divine Will, man strives for welfare of all beings, selfless services of the society and other benevolent activities, which lead him to happiness in life.

As regards the Power of feeling, if it is utilized for pursuing activities of the lower nature, the result is attachment, desire and memory of desire (vasana), which produces suffering in life. On the other hand if the same 'Bhava -shakti' is turned towards the Divine, man becomes engaged in the spiritual cult of 'Bhakti- Yoga' (the Yoga of devotion), which involves the faculties of surrender, divine love and one-ness with all beings, and

ultimately lead to the attainment of blissful joy, 'Ananda'. Further, if the Power (or Force) of consciousness is yoked with 'Maya', man becomes victim of the Brute-force of which the main characteristics are ambitious, false hook, fraud, conspiracy and tyranny. By dint of these vices man becomes a devil incarnate. If on the other hand, this chit- Shakti is employed in the service of the Divine and for fulfillment of the Divine Will, the Soul-force gets awakened in man, bestowing on him the virtues of equanimity, equality, universality and divinity. Man can thus be blessed with the supernal Power of Truth consciousness, which has been termed 'Mind of Light' by Sri Aurobindo, and which is a precursor of Super mind, the insignia of Super mental Beings.

Indian culture and religiosity discern three stages in which man's spiritual life progress. In the first stage, man's religious impulse seeks to find expression in the external form of devotion and worship. He takes recourse to hymns and songs, images and symbols, rituals and pilgrimage, and formal worship in temples, mosques and churches. This stage may be deemed as the kinder garden of spirituality. The second stage is of seeking divinity, not in external objects and acts, but within oneself by the introversive discipline of contemplation, concentration and meditation. True spirituality beings at this stage. Through continued practice of such discipline one can become the lucky recipient of Divine grace and can experience a sort of communion with God. In the third stage, the aspiration achieves the fullness of realization. By dint of identification of his consciousness with the Divine consciousness he lives in the Divine, so to say. He sees God within himself and without, in the field of action. Consciousness that is the basis of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, is yet another dimension. Normally man is conscious only of a small part of himself. Yoga enables him to attain super-consciousness, even Divine Consciousness.

The spiritual dimension of Indian life, thought and literature in ancient, medieval and modern times have remained imbedded in the Vedic lore (especially the Upanishads), Mahabharata. "It is due to this original peculiarity, to this indelible spiritual stamp, to this underlying oneness amidst all diversities that if India is not yet single organized political nation, she still survives and is still India."

India has been the meeting place of various religions. Religion has been a central preoccupation of the Indian mind. Spirituality is the essence of religion. True spirituality does not reject new light, even materialistic means for human self-development. India can best develop herself and play her destined role in the present arena of universal forces by following the law of her own nature, viz. spirituality. A science-oriented spiritualized culture of India will make room for new fields of research on old psychical sciences, as also spiritual technology and modern material

technology. A glaring example of the ancient spiritual technology is the melodious tunes of Shri Krishna's flute, which enchanted and enamored the milk-maids ('Gopis') of Gokul and Vrindavana. Another example is supernal technologies procedure, by dint of which a suitable person, suitable due to one's past 'Karma' and present spiritual Sadhana- can become completely identified with the Supreme Being, one's entire consciousness being transformed into Divine Consciousness. An instance of the Vedic age, of such divine transformation, is of Vak, daughter of Maharshi Ambhram, whose eight rks, declaring herself as the Divine Mother, are included in the Rig-Veda. Another instance is modern times is of the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. She has herself stated that Sri Aurobindo had been doing her sadhana and she had been receiving the fruits therefore and that (on culmination of his Sadhana for her) he had pronounced to her one day: "You are She". This spiritual technology, coupled with modern sciences and material technology, is a new dimension of the spirituality of Indian culture, which aims at attainment of 'Para-Vidya' while keeping in view te 'Apara- Vidya'.

In such a spiritual- cum scientific culture, even art and poetry will create images of man and Nature which, while satisfying the sum of beauty and ethics, will be conducive to the new light for bringing about a renaissance in India. Therein his acumen of the spiritual dimension of Indian culture.

The context in which Hindu pluralism has become part of spiritualism is that of the religious plurality of India. At the empirical level, this plurality across religious traditions and within each major religious tradition is a well documented fact. In respect of Hinduism, it has been argued that what needs explanation is the emergence of an allegedly homogeneous 'all-India' Hinduism in the 19th century out of the welter of regional religious traditions, such as Vaishnavism in the west, Shaivism in the south, and Shaktism in the east.

If the coalescence of a large variety of religious traditions in the 19th century into (in Romila Thapar's phrase) 'syndicated Hinduism' reflected the pressure of an emerging nationalism, the danger that such a homogenized all-India tradition would turn out to be hegemonistic and even intolerant was also recognized, at least implicitly. Vivekananda saw both the former possibility (of an all-India Hinduism) and the latter danger (of intolerance), and strove to promote the one and prevent the other. The method he adopted is of interest in the context of the idea of pluralism.

The impact of Ramakrishna's teachings on Vivekananda was comprehensive. To understand the latter's spiritualistic position, it is imperative that we begin with Ramakrishna, who had by teaching and personal example stressed the importance of realizing the oneness of the true religious quest. He not only

affirmed the truth of all available paths of spiritual realization within the Hindu fold, but went further by suspending his Hindu identity for a while and trying to live in the meanwhile as an orthodox Muslim. Ramakrishna's emphasis was on personal experience. In his younger years as a temple priest and religious devotee, he had shown a remarkable openness of mind in respect of the diversity of religious belief and practice, embracing the Vedic-Puranic textual and ritual traditions, Vaishnava and Shakta theology and worship, and the Tantric tradition.

With the passage of time, he became more selective and favoured the higher Brahmanical tradition combined with bhakti over other forms of religious faith. Further, he stressed that once a path is chosen; one should be steadfast in pursuing it. Ramakrishna's religious quest drew upon the medieval, pluralist, Brahmanical doctrine of differential striving (adhikara bheda) and, indeed, had deeper roots in classical notions of social status-consistent (svadharmik) and personal nature-consistent (svabhavik) conduct. His familiarity with non-Hindu religious traditions was limited. In short, Ramakrishna was eclectically pluralist, but primarily within the Hindu fold.

It was Vivekananda who tried to firmly cross religious boundaries to construct a doctrine of pluralism. His message of religious pluralism and tolerance was addressed to the followers of all faiths, but it was given from a Hindu platform, as it were. One of his most frequently quoted pronouncements (made in 1894 in the USA) reads as follows:

"We not only tolerate, but we Hindus accept every religion, praying in the mosque of the Mohammedans, worshipping the fire of the Zoroastrians, and kneeling before the Cross of Christians, knowing that all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association, and each of them marking a stage of progress".

A close reading of the text, which at first seems to be an excellent statement of the pluralist position, reveals two serious shortcomings. First, it is not exactly an accurate account of the prevailing Hindu practices of the times: some Hindus were like what Vivekananda claimed on their behalf, some were not. The internal diversity within the so-called Hindu fold was and is too great for any such neat and uniformly applicable generalization.

Secondly, and more importantly, it is a frankly evolutionist statement in which some religions are higher than others (at different stages of progress). Indeed, Vivekananda's references to the 'lower forms' of Hinduism (which he liked to denigrate as the religion of the kitchen) and non-Hindu religions were not flattering, they were even critical. Aspects of Buddhism and

Jainism, notably the agnosticism of the former and the atheism of the latter, were criticized. The Buddha's stress on nirvana was considered a curse. He expressed respect for the Prophet of Islam, but, apart from the social egalitarianism of the Muslims, found little to follow in it. The attitude towards Christianity bordered on the aggressive: he deemed it an inferior religion: 'with all its boasted civilization, [it] is but a collection of little bits of Indian thought... a very patchy imitation [of] our religion. Vedanta, he proclaimed, again and over again, was the universal religion for 'the spiritually advanced' person.

Vivekananda's pluralism and his conception of tolerance, it is reasonable to conclude, were hierarchical: it was his considered view that Vedanta comprised all the highest truths of all religions, including those that had not yet been realized anywhere. It is obvious that his ideas of tolerance and harmony, combined with the 'mission' for the conquest of the world by Hindu spirituality, are more inclusive and synthetic than genuinely pluralist. Pluralism requires a transcendental referent in the absence of which either rank relativism will prevail, or hierarchy will rule. Vivekananda clearly believed Vedanta to be the transcendental religion: but surely a valid pluralist logic does not allow us to so elevate one among the many existing religions.

Gandhi understood the logic of religious pluralism better than anyone with whose thought I am familiar. (Maulana Azad's pluralism was akin to Vivekananda's, with Islam taking the place of Vedanta). Gandhi maintained that the religion that he considered the source of value was not Hinduism or any other known religion, but one that transcended them all. He did not name it, but one could describe it as a universal, spiritual (non-secular), humanism. He described Hinduism as the 'most tolerant of all religions' because it enables one 'to admire and assimilate whatever may be good in other faiths. Who is to judge such 'goodness'? Gandhi rejected the authority of tradition even when it is regarded as revealed (without human authorship). Ultimately, the only guide is moral reason or the inner voice or 'satisfaction' (atmatusthi): one chooses alone, as it were, hoping to be true to one's 'eternal self'. Needless to emphasize, one would have to construct a more generally realizable guideline than the foregoing.

## II. CONCLUSION

As we have seen above, the meanings of the terms communal and communalism are more or less clear, despite the bitter controversies between supporters and opponents. By contrast, the terms 'secular' and 'secularism' are very hard to define clearly, although they are also equally controversial. In fact, secularism is among the most complex terms in social and political theory. In the western context the main sense of these terms has to do with the separation of

church and state. The separation of religious and political authority marked a major turning point in the social history of the west. This separation was related to the process of “secularization” or the progressive retreat of religion from public life, as it was converted from a mandatory obligation to a voluntary personal practice. Secularization in turn was related to the arrival of modernity and the rise of science and rationality as alternatives to religious ways of understanding the world. In India secularism is largely practiced with tolerance and deep rooted spiritualism.

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