



Concept of History w.r.t. India : A Cultural Perspective

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The pristine existence of India in this universe has always merited the critical and creative responses of historians, philosophers and writers from times immemorial. At one point of time India was called 'The Sparrow of Gold' and 'Jagadguru', she was also branded as the country of snake-charmers and magicians at another. The German philosophers – Jone, Max Mueller and Goethe were profoundly influenced by the Indian philosophy, our mysticism, exp. The Vedanta philosophy. The German philosopher Max Mueller claims that if there is paradise on the earth, this is India, India, India. (Muller, 100)

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The very metaphor speaks of the multitudinous beauty and bounty of this 'Queen of Orient'. It signifies the fact that India has not lagged behind the world in any aspect of development rather as World Teacher, she has guided the entire mankind as friend and philosopher from the very outset. Prof. A.L. Basham, a great scholar of oriental cultural studies famously writes about the excellent cultural heritage of India :

India was a cheerful land, whose people, each finding a niche in a complex and slowly evolving social system, reached a higher level of kindness and gentleness in their mutual relationships than any other nation of antiquity. For this, as well as for her great achievements in religion, literature, art and mathematics, one European student at least would record his admiration of her ancient culture.

(Basham, 9))

Definitely, artists and philosophers have been wonder struck at the bewildering variety and complexity of Indian culture. In every realm of physics and metaphysics art and culture, religion and mythology, India has been a mother-figure. She has been revered by historians and philosophers around the world as the origin of division splendour in humanity. Walt Whitman, the representative poet of America expresses his unique vision of India's mature religion and culture in his well known poem, 'Passage to India' :

Passage indeed O soul to primal thought,
Not lands and seas alone, thy own clear freshness,
The young maturity of brood and bloom,
To realms of breeding bibles
O soul, repressless, I with thee and thou with me,
Thy circumnavigation of the world begin,
Of man, the voyage of his mind's return,
To reason's early paradise,
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,
Again with fair creation. (Whitman, 403)

Really, India has been a spiritual pioneer to the whole world. The entire mankind is indebted to Mother India for spiritual virtues. Needless to say, philosophers and historians have regarded India as 'Punyakhoomi' – 'The Land of Virtues'. If we talk of the German and American Transcendentalists or the Buddhists around the world the whole universe acknowledges the mystic legacy and heritage of India. Noticing the profound cultural influences of India on Asia in particulars, and the world, in general Prof. A.L. Basham writes:

Northwards Indian cultural influence spread through Central Asia to China ... Unlike South-East Asia, China did not assimilate Indian ideas in any aspects of her culture, but the whole of the Far East is in India's debt for Buddhism, which helped to mould the distinctive civilizations of China, Korea, Japan and Tibet. (Basham, 485)

The German writers (Goethe & Schopenhauer) seem to have been deeply influenced by dramatics and metaphysics of India. Prof. A.L. Basham says that Goethe borrowed a device of Indian dramaturgy for the prologue to "Faust" (P.433). He further infers that the German pessimist philosopher, Schopenhauer himself admitted that he was profoundly inspired by Buddhist philosophy of 'Shunyawad'. (Basham, 487)



While reading the poems and essays of the American Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman etc), one discovers India's engrossing mystical union between soul and divinity. Emerson's poem "Brahma" seems to be conceived in the Vedanta philosophy in letter and spirit. For example, the first stanza of the poem reads thus :

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain thinks he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again (Emerson, 34)

The very stanza seems to be an adaptation of the following lines from the 'Katha Upanishad'.

If the slayer thinks I slay,
If the slain thinks I am slain.
Then both of them do not know well.
It (the soul) does not slay, nor is it slain. (Page 35)

Like Emerson, Thoreau was deeply influenced by the Oriental philosophy esp. Hindu scriptures which deal with simple living and high thinking, communion with Nature and God. Admitting his keen fascination towards the Hindu scriptures, Thoreau wrote in his journal :

"I cannot read a sentence in the book of the Hindus without being elevated upon the table-land of the Ghauts The simple life herein described confers on us a degree of freedom even in perusal.....wants so easily and gracefully satisfied that they seem like a more refined pleasure and repleteness". (Thoreau, 266)

Whitman, the representative poet of American democracy, pretty well expresses and alludes to the original influences of the Oriental esp. Indian religion, culture and mythology on the western philosophy and act in one of his well-known poems, 'Passage to India':

Passage O soul to India!
Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables.
Not you alone proud truths of the world,
Nor you alone ye facts of modern science,
But myths and fables of eld, Asia's, Africa's fables,
The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,
the deep diving bibles and legends,
The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions. (Whitman, 398)

Critical of the limitations of the so-called linearity and temporality of written records and arbitrarily design contours, Amitav Ghosh also voices his opinion for the timeless appeal of the untold and the unseen underlying the empirical data. In his masterpiece, The Shadow Lines he talks about "the riots of 1964 which are indelibly engraved in his memory had by 1979 'vanished without leaving a trace in the histories and book selves". (Ghosh, 264). He asserts that the essential portion of the history is mystery as it is too intriguingly complex to be verbally communicated :

It happened everywhere, wherever you wish it. It was an old story..... told when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries..... a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman – across – the seas." (Ghosh, 264)

Sri Aurobindo, popularly called 'prophet of Indian nationalism' appreciates India's remarkable spiritual contributions to the world. Like Vivekananda, Aurobindo feels that India has to enlighten the humanity. The moral and spiritual reforms of the world will be ensured through Aurobindo's great vision about India as source of light and wisdom to the world. Highlighting India's unique excellence as a world teacher, he asserts :

India does not rise as other
Countries do, for self or when she is
Strong, to trample on the weak. She is rising
To shed the eternal light entrusted to her.
Over the world. She has always existed
For humanity and not for herself and it is
For humanity and not for herself.
That she must be great. (Aurobindo, 25)

The concept of India in Aurobindo's philosophy is nothing short of chauvinistic or materialistic or merely imperial domination. Like S. Radhakrishnan, his vision of India is marked by religious and cultural consciousness. He



believes in spiritual foundation of our civilization and history. He does not look upon society from western perspective i.e. pragmatic or politics economic stance. Rather Aurobindo visualises a deep inner vibrations within political and economic development of society. Like individual, he thinks that society is a living whole, an organic unity marked by harmonious growth always moving towards self-fulfilment. Society or country to him is :

a living power of the eternal truth, a self-manifestation of the
cosmic spirit, and it is there to express and fulfil in its own way
and to the degree of its capacities the special truth and power (Aurobindo, 25)

The wonderful description of India as the land of light and wisdom for the whole mankind may be vindicated through the great epics, literature, religion and philosophy conceived herein. Highlighting the unbelievable and matchless contribution of India towards world in the realm of art, literature, culture, agriculture etc. Vivekananda recounts the glorious heritage of India:

The philosophy we are even now head and shoulders above any other nation, as Schopenhauer, the great German philosopher, has confessed. In music India gave to the world her system of notation, with the seven cardinal notes and the diatonic scale..... in philology, our Sanskrit language is now universally acknowledged to be the foundation of all European languages.... In literature, our epics and poems and dramas rank as high as those of any language, our 'Shaguntala' (Shakuntala) was summarised by Germany's greatest poet, as 'heaven and earth united'. India has given to the world the tables of Aesop, which were copied by Aesop from an old Sanskrit book, it has given the Arabian Nights, yes, even the story of Cindralla and the Bean stalk's. In manufacture, India was the first to make cotton and purple (dye), it was proficient in all works of jewellery, and the very word sugar as well as the article itself, is the product of India: Lastly, she has invented the game of chess and the cards and the dice. So great, in fact, was the superiority of India in every respect, that it drew to her borders the hungry cohorts of Europe and thereby indirectly brought about the discovery of America. (Vivekananda, 21)

The Indian philosopher, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan reverts India as the original land of mysticism where the unity of humanity, nature and divinity is maintained by the seers, the sages, the artists and even scientists. But then India always ennobled imagination by reason, material by spiritual, scientific by emotional creativity, innovation, expansion and above all, all-embracing love enlightened her sages and thinkers. He aptly observes :

The thinkers of India are the inheritors of the great tradition of faith in reason. The ancient seers desired not to copy but to create. They were even anxious to win fresh fields. For truth and answer the riddles of experience, which is every changing and therefore new. The richness of the inheritance never served to enslave their minds. We have to keep our eyes open, find out our problems and seek the inspiration of the past in solving them. (Radhakrishnan, 776)

It will be a leap in the dark if we begin to study India as a merely historical entity. It is because mere history is nothing but a confused record of facts fabricated by the Kings/ emperors in power. For this reason, history is always dubbed as devoid of eternal appeal for humanity as it is conditioned by situation and characters of particular community. Sri Aurobindo rightly says about history:

History teaches us nothing; it is a confused torrent of events and personalities or a Kaleidoscope of changing institutions. We do not seize the real sense of all this change. (Aurobindo, 247)

The great historians of the world (Toynbee, Walsh, Rickert, Oswald, Basham etc.) share with and appreciate the vision of the enlightened historians like Hegel, St. Augustine, Sri Aurobindo, Basham. Lowitt rightly observes that it would be a poor, inadequate or even false description, if history is conceived of as a mere "record of facts which one age finds remarkable in another." (Lowitt, 20). It seems that noted historians of the world approach history of a country philosophically. These historians or thinkers appreciate the spiritual and cultural traditions of a nation. The German philosopher Hegel holds the metaphysical concept of 'World Spirit' and he believes that the aim of history and the final cause of world at Large is the complete realisation of the "potential freedom of spirit" (Hegel, 9) Hence these philosophers of history disagree with Arnold Tayabee who holds the empirical survey of the world of history. Critical of the linear or empirical view of the history, even William H. Dray appreciates Toynbee who



regards history as ‘the six and fall of civilizations’. Even Toyanbee, Dray says finally comes to view history as “representing cumulatively to the spiritual insight of the human race”. (Dray, 62-65)

There is another side of the picture, too. Although artists, philosophers and historians around the world have dwelt on the unrivalled scientific and mystical heritage of India, we come across so called writers and thinkers who treat India as if it were accultured by the west as ‘Whiteman’s burden’ to quote Rudyard Kipling’s term. These writers have been intellectually snobbish enough to have even attacked and ridiculed the innate simplicity, innocence, fellow-feelings and unsophisticated togetherness of Indian folks. The Indian writer in English – Nirad C. Choudhary feels disgusted and irritated by the unreserved, sociable and reciprocal mindset of the common folks in India. (Chaudhury, 43)

Moreover, there are writers like Arvind Adiga who pinpoint the hollowness and hypocrisy of system in India. These writers seems to feel, perhaps, the helpless exploitation and suffering of the people before the collapsed system as Shakespeare would say through Brutus,

“The fault, dear Brutus lies not in ourselves, but in our system,
because we are underlings.” (Shakespeare, I, II, 971)

Adiga elaborates upon the failure and downfall of system in his masterpiece, *The White Tiger*. Influenced by the Marxist ideology, he discovers two India within INDIA – One India inhabited by the few haves/the elitist bright India and another India of the majortarian have not/ the marginalised.

Adiga goes to the extent of asserting the fact that the denies of the dark India have nothing substantial to harp upon but the names of Gandhi or Gods/Goddesses. Their life is an endless tale of misery, victimization, collusions, chaos and confusion. It is something like the writers – Mulk Raj Anand, Prem Chand , to name the few, who depict the age old exploitation of the poor by the rich in India as there has been no system of social harmony, equality and fraternity herein. Disillusioned jby the completely collapsed system in India, he looks towards the Republic of China for rescue and restoration. He ruthlessly criticizes the lack of system in Indian when he says :

Never before in human history have
so few owed so much to so many...
O a handful of men in this country have
Trained the remaining 99.9 percent – as strong,
as talented, as intelligent in every way –
to exist in perpetual servitude, a servitude
so strong that you can put the
key of his emancipation in a man’s
hands and they will through it
back at you with a curse. (Adiga, 176)

Hence India as a nation must be approached with philosophical insight which alone may enable to visualize the mysterious traditions and background of India. As a cultural entity, India has been more than a history and a geography. She has been a land of mystery and mysticism as Sri Aurobindo talks of India s a nation:

“The nation is immortal because it is based on a real psychological unity and meets a genuine demand of the race. It now seem to have become the only visible form of the state, until a new unit, the world-state, replaces it.” (Aurobindo, 247)

Hence the historicity of a nation rather it is something trans-historical or meta-historical. The spirit of the age as Europeans call it Zeitgeist finds autoentic expression in the unbroken continuum of timelessness i.e.. the spirit of society or ethos of community. The post modern writer, Amitav Ghosh reads between lines and calls history as meta-historical i.e. ‘Shadow Lines’ to represent so –called border lines politically arbitrated among countries. Even Tagore reads spiritual meaning behind history and polity. He opines that “man’s endeavours and ability to transcend the even and reach Godhead and experience the universality of mind” are the basics of human life. (Tagore, XV)

He goes to the extent of asserting that ultimate purpose of history and politics is the spiritual unity of the whole universe. He rightly says that the beauty, love an dlif eof common humanity is always more lasting than that of national pride and prejudices characterized by chauvinism, bloodshed and false arrogance:

We shall thank God that we were made to wait in silence through the night of despair, had to bear the insult of the proud and the strong man’s burden....never could we blindly believe in the salvation which machinery offered to man, but we held fast to our trust in God and the



truth of human soul..... When the morning comes for cleansing the bloodstained steps of the nation along the highroad of humanity, we shall be called upon to bring our own vessel of sacred water – the water of worship – to sweeten the history of man into purity, and with its sprinkling make the trampled dust of the centuries blessed with fruitfulness. (Tagore, 346)

It is notable that India under the dynamic and visionary leadership of Shri Narendra Modi is leading the whole world in polity and spiritual activities. Thanks to the visionary initiative of Mr. Modi and Swami Ramdev's widespread inspiration towards making Yoga as a 'way of life', the U.N.O. has declared 21st June as the 'International Yoga Day'. The positive result of all this is that almost 175 countries have the world have adopted Yoga as a regular part of life which has been helping them to get better of health and hygiene crisis. This is, indeed, India's remarkable gift to the world in the realm of moral and spiritual rejuvenation. As in the past, so in the present India is once again emerging as the pioneer, the leader and the guide of the world in the domain of polity, spiritualism, environmental consciousness, culture, agriculture etc. Let the whole world follow India's foot-steps to re-establish peace, beauty, harmony and unity in the world today.

Vivekananda ecstatically remarked about the divine background of India and regarded India as "Land of Virtues". He emphatically said :

If there is any land on this earth that can lay claim to be blessed *Punya Bhumi*, to be the land to which souls on this earth must come to account for Karma, the land to which every soul that is wondering its way Godward must come to attain its last home, the land where humanity has attained its highest towards gentleness, towards generosity, towards purity, towards calmness, about all, the land of introspection and of spirituality – it is India. (Vivekananda, 30)

The great philosopher – scientist of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam has had the equally great vision of India in mind, perhaps, when he wrote his well-known book, *INDIA 2020 : A VISION FOR THE NEW MILLENIUM*. In the preface of the book he aptly and vividly declares his mission behind writing this book :

"Ignited young minds, we feel, are a powerful resource. This resource is mightier than any resource on the earth, is the sky and under the sea. We must all work together to transform 'developing India' into a 'developed India', and the revolution required for this effort must start in our minds. (Kalam, XVI)

In the concluding part of the book, Dr. Kalam hints at the ways and means towards realizing our vision of great India. He beautifully says :

We believe that the five mega-missions when integrated and implemented with a national focus, will result in actions which will shape the second vision of the nation. The necessary financial, managerial and human resources would flow from those whose minds are ignited, including those in the government and industrial sectors. We therefore have a dream. Our dream is that both our houses of Parliament would adopt a resolution for the second vision of a great nation : "India will transform into a developed nation before the year 2020. A billion people are our resource for this national transformation. This even will inspire the nation. (Kalam, 304)

Sri Aurobindo perhaps, like Vivekanand, believes in the all-embracing characteristics of India as a nation which has always loved and accepted those who/which have approach her from any part of the world . In his best-known address at the World Parliament of Religious, Chicago on 11th September, 1893, Vivekananda says :

I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the presented and the refugees of all religious 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 their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny..... I will quote to you, brethren. A few lines from the hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is everyday repeated by millions of human beings: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee". (Vivekananda Kendra Kanyakumari)



Sri Aurobindo, like Bankim Chandra and Vivekanand envisions India as the living manifestation of Supreme power incarnate, personified as Mother Durga. He writes : “Rider on the lion given of all strength, Mother, beloved of In final analysis, it may be said that India has been a wonderful land on this planet. Her history has been created and recreated by her outstanding artists, philosophers, scientists, politicians, enlightened human resources etc. from time immemorial. The bewildering variety, complexity and depth of her classics and brain-power have rendered the whole world speechless and those who have approached her have found her too unfathomable to be dived fully. In other words, she has been more than history, a round of mystery better to say. Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam closes his autobiographical masterpiece, ‘The Wings of Fire’ with his vivid and heartfelt observation about the immortality and eternity of India – “May the Sovereign Alimight shower infinite blessings on this Punyabhoomi (India), as God alone is eternal” (Kalam, 191). Really the beauty and bounty of India beggars description.

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