

Glimpses of Indian Heritage and Culture

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1. The Uniqueness of India

Indian Heritage (IH) is what we, of the present generation, have inherited from our past - ancient thought and wisdom, philosophy and religions, customs and traditions, culture and values, etc. IH is unique in various ways, a broad understanding of which will be relevant and useful in our daily life of transactions and relationships.

India is one of the 49 civilizations, which existed prior to the Christian Era, perhaps the oldest, with an unbroken continuity of 5000 years. Kaliyuga is believed to have begun in 3102 BC, the day Sri Krishna left his mortal body. The seers at that time had given an indication of the shape of things to come, some of which have been proved right. We see around us so much of crime and violence, corruption and conflicts, cruelty and insensitiveness, selfishness and exploitation, inequality and injustice, and a hundred other ills afflicting the modern society. How to wade through these samsaras, with a reasonable amount of happiness, is a complex problem confronting all of us. An appreciation of IH may help.

The other 48 civilizations in Greece, Rome, Egypt etc. are dead and gone, leaving behind only ruins of archeological curiosity and tourist interest. Rome has only the Coliseum; Greece the Acropolis and Parthenon and Egypt the Pyramids. But in India, what was in vogue 4000 years ago still prevails in religiosity, festivals, music, dance, respect for elders, sanctity of marriage, rituals, vegetarianism, etc. Therefore, there is something

unique about India, which made it possible for her to withstand 69 invasions, 1000 years of foreign rule and onslaught of crude culture.

The need for a glimpse of IH has arisen because Indians are losing their moorings due to the ill-effects of modernization and industrialization, wrong interpretation of secularism, crime and violence in the celluloid and electronic media corrupting the mind in the name of entertainment, rising consumerism and conflicts, and so on. We cannot individually do anything to change the present trends in the environment. But we should insulate ourselves from negative forces and strengthen ourselves with good thoughts. The universal prayers in India are:

- "Let noble thoughts come from every side,
Lead me from
- Ignorance to enlightenment
- Darkness to light
- Death to immortality"

The potential nature of mankind is divine. We should try to experience it in this life. The article may help in this spiritual and cultural journey.

2. The Secular and the Sacred

We have just entered the new millennium. The last century was momentous in the history of mankind. Industrialization made rapid strides. Spectacular developments in Science and Technology, hitherto unimagined by man, showed their tremendous power,

and may change the course of life on the planet. Albert Einstein showed the energy in the atoms, which lead to the development of the atom bomb, which was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The five major Powers have stockpiled thousands of atom and hydrogen bombs, which can kill the world population of man and animal many times over. Man has gone to the moon and is now exploring the other planets in the universe, using satellites. Computers and Information Technology have revolutionized global communication. The agriculture age prevailed for thousands of years, the industrial age for two centuries and the new era, termed as the information age, has begun.

In spite of rapid developments in technology, there is apprehension regarding the future of mankind. Social scientists have not still found solution to the major ills affecting mankind. One billion people, mostly in the industrialised advanced countries, are enjoying abundant wealth and luxury, while one billion people in poor countries are living in poverty and privation. Inequalities and injustice, crime and violence, deceit and corruption, exploitation of women and children, depletion of forests and bio-diversity, pollution of environment, cruelty to animal species, communal and racial conflicts, etc. are increasing every where. There is no sign of abatement, though conventional measures have been launched by national governments and the UN system.

Our ancient sages had foreseen such trends in degeneration of public life and decay in morals. They have suggested many ways by which man can find solace even in this environment.

IH is an integration of the thought and wisdom, theories and postulations, beliefs and faith, philosophy and spirituality, culture and values, principles and practices, customs and traditions of the four major religions, born in India, Hinduism from (3000 BC), Buddhism and Jainism (from 500 BC) and Sikhism (from 1500 AD). IH has also been influenced by Christianity, which came to India in 50 AD before it went to Europe, with its ideals of love, service and sacrifice. Islam came with conquerors, who ruled India for 800 years. Sufism, which is the mystical side of Islam, has found acceptance amongst liberated scholars Jews and Parsis, driven out of their land home,

were given refuge in India. Thus eight out of 12 world religions are coexisting, forming India's plural culture. The British rule for 200 years opened the doors to the western world, which enabled mutual understanding of the philosophy of the East and West, and ushered in the concept of secularism in Government, education and business.

Every country has a unique genius, and India's is religiosity and spirituality, where the secular and sacred are integrated in the personal lives of individuals. India has adopted secularism, where the State does not make any discrimination among religions. But IH believes that India's spiritual concepts, if integrated into personal and professional lives, would bring happiness to individuals and peace in society. However, only such of those ideas and ideals, which are relevant to modern life and which do not create conflicts, would be proposed for adoption whereby even inter - religious harmony can be fostered.

3. A Way of Life

One unique feature of Indian Heritage is its diversity. India's present population of one billion people is composed of 820 million Hindus, 126 m Muslims, 23 m Christians, 20 m Sikhs, 8 m Buddhists, 4 m Jains and 1 m others. One major difference is that Hinduism is not based on a single prophet or book. But it is the revelations of hundreds of Sages, Seers, Saints and evolved souls, who took birth in every century from 3000 BC till now. Other religions are based on Prophets and their teachings, such as Moses, Buddha, Mahavira, Zarathustra, Jesus, Mohammed and Guru Nanak. In fact, Hinduism is not strictly a religion, but a view and a way of life. The word Hindu itself was given by Persians, who used to call the people on the eastern side of the Sindhu (Indus) River as Sindhus, which got changed to Hindus. The real name is *Sanathana Dharma*, that is, Eternal Values Without condemning any sect. Hinduism assimilated prevailing concepts and cultures, becoming more a federation of philosophies, religions, customs, beliefs and practices. Thus one finds the most abstract and profound concepts of God and creation at one end, and primitive beliefs and obnoxious practices at the other.

Christianity has the largest following in the world with 2400 m spread over 100 countries, while Islam has 1200

m in 60, Buddhism 500 m in 10 countries. These religions through conversions have spread to many countries. But Hinduism, which does not convert, is prevalent mainly in India and the tiny kingdom Nepal of 10 m people. But Hindu culture has spread to Thailand, Indo-Chinese countries and Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim country, with a small Hindu population in the Bali Island. About 6 m Hindus have settled in various parts of the world Burma, Singapore, Srilanka and West Africa and the Caribbean islands.

An outstanding characteristic of IH is its openness, universality and all inclusiveness, Rig-Veda, the oldest scripture of IH, declared, "Let noble thoughts come from every side. For large hearted persons, the whole world is one family. God is one, though called by different names and sages and prophets. Like water from the sky falling on earth takes different routes through rivers and streams, they all ultimately reach and merge with the ocean, all prostrations to God, whatever be the name or form, reach the same God".

Another characteristic of IH is that the four religions born in India believe in reincarnation and transmigration of souls, which means that the soul is immortal with no birth or death and that it takes on new bodies when one body is dead. This soul is known by various names as *jiva*, *atman*, spirit, divinity etc. The Advaita philosophy postulates that the individual soul (*Atman*) is identical with the universal cosmic soul (*Paramatman*), The Dualistic philosophy believes that the universal soul, or God, is different from individual souls, which is a feature common to the three Semitic religions. Buddha never postulated a God or soul, though Buddhists believe in reincarnation. Buddhism and Jainism are in a sense atheistic, though followers treat their founders as Gods. Hindus also accept Buddha and Mahaveera as part of their God system, as divine incarnations.

Hinduism states that man is potentially divine and that man can realize his divinity in this life itself, if he leads a spiritual life. For this, various paths are devotion, knowledge, yoga and meditation, or desireless action in the name of God, or a combination of these four paths.

4. The Four Yogas

An unique feature of the teachings of IH is that spirituality is integrated into the secular life of work, transactions and relationships. Every thought, word and deed are considered as a spiritual endeavour. In this concept, the ultimate aim of man is conceptualised as realising his basic nature as divinity. This pursuit of realising God in this life itself can be accomplished by following the prescribed four paths, namely, knowledge, yoga, devotion and work, or by adopting a combination of these paths in varying proportions. One cannot only progress in the spiritual journey, but also prosper in this materialistic world with happiness and peace.

The path of knowledge, that is *Jnana Yoga*, is the most difficult, rarely feasible even for one in a million. Since most mankind is involved in work for earning a livelihood, IH prescribes *Karma Yoga*, where one is to engage in work or profession or business, without being obsessed with the fruits of one's action, that is 'desire less action or *Nishkamakarma*'.

One can be highly committed and dedicated in performing action, but results may not be as per our expectations, that is, it could be positive or negative. Anxiety and tension about results may even affect the quality of our actions. Religious people can dedicate the work to God and act as instruments of God. Others can do work in the name, and as a Trustee, of the society. Acting with such an attitude, in a spirit of surrender to God and leaving the result to Him, enables one to be released from tension and bondage. Whatever be the result, favourable or unfavourable, can then be accepted as *prasada*, i.e. as God's grace nevertheless.

The fourth path is known as *Rajayoga*, which consists of Yoga practices and meditation. In order to adopt these three paths, it is highly useful to adopt the *Bhakthi Marga*, that is devotion to God. This path is the most popular and relatively easy. Man loves himself. If one can transform this love to God, he gets empowered and inspired by God-consciousness. This approach of love and surrender to God is also adopted in Christianity and Islam. In India, most people follow the *Bhakthi Marga*, which is evident in the Indian scene - hundreds of temples and pilgrim

centres as well as large number of religious festivals, which are celebrated with devotional fervour. Most classical music and dance evolve in devotional themes. Prayer takes innumerable forms as *Bhajan*, *Keerthan*, *Pooja*, *Abisheka*, *Padasevanam*, singing the glory of God, parades and processions, dance to propitiate deities, religious baths in holy rivers and lakes, rituals, fasting, silence, etc.

Principles of these four paths, with different emphasis depending on one's aptitude and inclination, are described beautifully in the Bhagavad Gita, which is the essence of Hindu scriptures.

5. Outer Cover, Inner Core

IH advocates a spiritual approach to life, work, transactions and relationships not only amongst fellowmen, but also in man's outlook towards animals and nature. The concept is that the secular and sacred, materialism and idealism, philosophy and spirituality, ethics and morals should be integrated, forming a rope of different strands.

Religion is the outer cover and spirituality is the inner core. Typically, religion is based on prophets, such as Jesus and Mohammed, and their teachings contained in holy books, such as the Bible and Koran. Religions have organisations, hierarchy, wealth, doctrines, and faith in the divinity of the founders, rules for admittance and ex-communication, claims of superiority over other religions, exclusiveness, etc.

All religions have a set of ethics and morals, rules of conduct, do's and don'ts, etc., such as Ten Commandments, Codes of Conduct of Buddha, Sermons of the Mount, etc. Generally, a great deal is common amongst religions, though emphasis may be different. Unlike all these religions, Hinduism is distinct and unique. It has no founder, organisation or a single book. Hinduism derives its authority from the four Vedas - Rig, Yajur, Sama and Adharva Vedas. Each Veda has four parts. The first three parts consist of hymns in praise of nature and gods and rituals. The last part is called the Vedanta, meaning knowledge, which consists of Upanishads. About 108 Upanishads are extant now, out of which 12 are popular, namely Aitareya, Brhadaranyaka, Chandogya, Isavasya,

Kaivalya, Katha, Kena, Mandukya, Mundaka, Prasna, Svetasvatara and Taittiriya.

The gist of the Upanishads has been summarised in Brahmasutras, a set of aphorism, where profound thoughts are expressed in a few words. The quintessence of all the Vedas is in the Bhagavad Gita, which is the scripture of Hindus, comparable to the Bible of Christians and Koran of Muslims.

The gist of Upanishads and Brahmasutras are in Bhagavad Gita; the three together can be termed as Sanathana Dharma or Eternal values. Since these are abstract theories and postulations, beyond the comprehension of ordinary people, the principles contained in them are given in a story form in the two Itihasas - Ramayana and Mahabharata - as well as 18 Puranas, each containing 50,000 to 100,000 slokas.

In addition, Hindu scriptures include the Manusmriti (Law of Manu), Kautilya Sastra (Law of State Craft), Natya Sastra (Dance), Gandharva Sastra (Music), Ayurveda (Health), Dhanur Sastra (Warfare), Jyothi Sastra (Astronomy and Astrology).

Thus IH contains one million slokas of profound wisdom of hundreds of saints and sages, dealing with all aspects of life.

6. Seeing and Experiencing

The four India born religions (IRs) are Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, in which many aspects are common. The other two prominent religions of foreign origin are Christianity and Islam, which belong to the Semitic group (SRs), which includes Judaism as well. Followers of Zoroastrianism (Parsees) are largely in India, which has elements drawn from IR and SR. Islamic conquerors drove away Parsees from Persia (Iran), who took refuge in India, as Jews did earlier.

Though there is a great deal of similarity in ethics and morals in these eight religions, the IRs and SRs differ substantially in philosophy, relationship between Man and God and attitude towards animals and nature as well as concepts on creation, cosmology, good versus evil, goals of life, etc. SRs can be considered as exclusive, while Hinduism is inclusive, open to other thoughts and

accepts all religions as true, as different paths towards the same Godhood.

SRs have all along been in conflict with science, whose discoveries have shown that some of their concepts are factually wrong. Many Scientists were persecuted for their views and findings, which contradicted Biblical concepts. But Hinduism always welcomed science. With every scientific discovery, concepts given in Hindu scriptures are being proved right. Albert Einstein, the greatest scientist of the 20th century, has declared that religion without science is blind, and science without religion is lame. Hindu sages had speculated on the origin of the universe, concepts of relativity, age of the universe, speed of light, movement of planets, etc., - all of which are based on their intuition as they were made without the help of microscopes and telescopes.

Another point of difference is that SRs depend a great deal on the historicity and the divinity of their prophets. Hinduism does not depend on any prophet. Hundreds of sages and saints from prehistoric times till the present day have given their views based on their revelation. In every century, such evolved souls were born in all parts of India. Their theories, philosophical concepts, speculations and postulations have been verified by actual experience, and do not rely on mere faith or doctrine. In fact, Hindu philosophy is based on *Darshana* and *Anubhava*, seeing and experiencing. Sri Ramakrishna told Swami Vivekananda that he has seen God and that Vivekananda also could see Him, if he had adequate yearning.

In the case of SRs, if incidents in the life of their prophets are proved to be historically wrong, faith in their teachings will be shaken. However, in the case of Hinduism, even if it is proved that there was no Rama or Krishna, Vyasa or Valmiki, Vasishtha or Viswamitra, and so on, their ideas contained in India's scriptures will stand valid, based on logic and reasoning as well as being and becoming. Hinduism boldly says that man's potential nature is divine, and that he can realise his divinity in this birth itself by leading a pure and noble life, following one or more of the four Yogas - *Karma*, *Jnana*, *Bhakthi* and *Raja*. Bhagavad Gita describes these four paths succinctly. Whatever be one's religion, whether belonging to SRs

or the other religions in the IR group, reading Bhagavad Gita will be useful in the secular world of work and materialism as well as in the spiritual journey to realise one's divinity.

7. Many Forms of God

Ethics and morals are more or less the same in all the eight popular religions existing in India - three Semitic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam; Zoroastrianism; and four religions born in India, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Devotion or *Bhakthi* is the common feature of all the religions. There is no God other than their prophets in the case of Jainism (Mahavira) and Buddhism (Buddha). Followers of all religions seek God's help when they are in distress and plead for material wealth, blessings and various kinds of services. Hindus also approach God as *Jijnasu* - those who are inquisitive and eager to know about God, and *Jnani* - those who already know God's nature and adore Him.

Most religions consider God and man as separate, same as the *Dvaita* concept of Madhwacharya. Hinduism postulates two other concepts of God, namely *Visishtadvaita* of Ramanujacharya where man is part of God, as well as *Advaita* of Shankaracharya where man and God are the same. Though most Hindus accept Shankaracharya's concept in principle, in practice, they also consider God as separate and praise Him and seek favours. In a way, Advaita is implicit in Jesus's teachings also. "Kingdom of God is within you. God in heaven, you and me are the same".

Another unique Hindu concept is that God is *Nirguna*, that is, with no name, form or attribute. In another concept of *Saguna*, God is conceptualised in several manifested forms with names, forms and attributes. It is difficult for the large majority of people to visualise God as formless, and hence the rationale for a *Saguna* form which is easily comprehensible.

Further, Hinduism projects God in hundreds of forms, and gives freedom to devotees to approach Him in any form he likes as *Ishtadevata*. Thus we have Siva, Vishnu, Sakthi as well as Ganapathi, Subramanyan, Hanuman, Durga, Mahalakshmi, Saraswathi, Parvathi

and hundreds of deities with different names and forms, which may appear crude to non-Hindus. But Hindus sincerely approach their favourite Gods on whom they place their faith with heart and soul. They love God with different attitudes as - servant, student, friend and lover, depending on their temperament.

India has hundreds of temples for different presiding deities. Other deities are also given a place in the same temple. But generally, temples of Vaishnava cult have only *Vaishnavite* Gods and Goddesses. Further, some Gods are known by more than one thousand names.

Thus *Vishnu Sahasranama* and *Lalitha Sahasranama* contain one thousand names for Vishnu and Lalitha. Ardent devotees recite these names with great devotional fervour. The objective is to help devotees to imbibe attributes and values denoted by these names. All these concepts and practices are to help man to progress in the spiritual path.

Hindu temples, festivals, *Acharas* and *Samskara* provide great variety, colour and pageantry, which are attractive to enable devotees to approach God along lines they are inclined. Most devotees pray to all Gods and Goddesses without any discrimination. To rationalists, such approaches may look absurd. But devotees consider these as effective aids for increasing the intensity of devotion and dedication.

8. Spiritual Framework

Hinduism postulates that man is potentially divine, a revolutionary concept, which is not easily comprehensible. Hinduism further declares that the primary goal of a human birth is to realize this divinity in this life itself, and not in heaven or elsewhere after death.

In order to achieve this profound goal, perhaps after hundreds of birth cycles, Hinduism proposes that the approach to the secular world of work, entertainment, transactions and relationship ought to be spiritual and religious.

Hindu scriptures have structured all aspects of human activities in a spiritual framework, including birth and

death, marriage and family life, bathing and eating, professional work and business, building a house or buying a vehicle, undertaking journeys or meeting persons, music and dance, art and literature, sculpture and architecture, and so on. In medieval Europe, Church and State fought for power and supremacy, which resulted in unimaginable tragedies and persecution. Therefore, the State was separated from the Church and became secular.

The secular approach was extended to human transactions, keeping religion as an affair between man and God. India has adopted this as State policy. Thus, a tradition of hundreds of years was given up.

But, in private life, some people still try to integrate secular work and spiritual effort. Even business is carried out in temple premises on the ground that business should be done in the name of God. The God of wealth is Mahalakshmi herself, who is worshipped at the beginning of the business year.

Education is dedicated to Goddess Saraswathi. Names of persons, companies and restaurants are drawn from Hindu mythology. Pictures of Gods and Goddesses can be seen all over. Even machinery, vehicles and equipments are decorated and worshipped. Classical music and dance, art and literature, painting and sculpture all are on devotional themes. The idea is to remember God's names all the time.

Hindu saints and sages were not only philosophers but also poets too. They composed the two Itihasas and 18 Puranas in poetry form of one million stanzas.

9. Law and Karma

In the secular world of materialistic values, the twelve major religions of the world are trying to inculcate Ethics and Morals in transactions and relationships. In spite of the tremendous potential to bring about peace and harmony, what we see around is rising inequality and inequity, partisanship and parochialism, injustice and exploitation, crime and violence, poverty and disease, brutalisation of nature and animals, greed and selfishness, physical and mental pain. Buddha declared 2500 years ago that life is full of suffering. The varied

prescriptions given by the major world religions have not been able to reduce suffering or make man more humane and noble.

Meanwhile, enigmas and mysteries puzzle even wise men. Why are one billion people allowed to indulge in conspicuous consumption and waste, when another billion are wallowing in poverty and privation?

Why do virtuous people suffer, while the wicked enjoy luxury and power? Why is the system so cruel and insensitive to just causes and good people? Money and mafia power dominate the society, misusing the freedom given by democracy and exploiting innocent and helpless masses (as in India). Why such contradictions?

Why thousands of children are born blind or paralysed? What have they done in this life to deserve such life long punishment? Why are a few thousands born wealthy, while many millions are born poor destined for life long suffering? Corrupt politicians and criminals get away with murder, while the meek and law abiding are harassed by the establishment. Who is responsible for such widespread injustice and suffering? All religions affirm with great confidence that God is all merciful, loving and just. Therefore, he cannot possibly be responsible for such contradictions. Religious people pray to God for curing disease and helping in distress. While a few hundreds feel that their call has been answered, a much larger number feel frustrated that God is not listening to their wails and woes.

The four religions born in India declare that God is not responsible for the misery of man and animal and that man himself is responsible for his successes and failures, joy and sorrow, etc. One of the cardinal tenets of Hinduism is the principle of cause and effect, meaning that the present is the effect of the past, and that the present will determine the future. The present is the result of earlier actions in this birth or in previous births. An adjunct to this principle is the concept of reincarnation, where the soul, deemed to be immortal, migrates from body to body in successive cycles of births and deaths, carrying with it past desires and actions, effects of which will be experienced in this and subsequent births. Thus, the Law of Karma provides the rationale behind disparities

and discrepancies found in life. Also, it proposes that we should lead an ethical and moral life, observing Dharma and right values, so that we may enjoy a better future.

10. Order and Logic Rule the World

Man is only one among millions of living species. Therefore, to be born as a human being is a rare privilege. How did we become eligible for this unique opportunity? Was God favouring us? Surely, God would not be partisan, as he is considered just. Either he decided so based on our good deeds, which qualified us for this privilege, Or, there is a natural law, which determines automatically who should be born human and who as sub-human beings.

According to the Laws of Karma, Cause, Effect and Reincarnation, we are what we are because of our past acts in the previous birth or births, when we must have done enough virtuous or desirable deeds, qualifying for a human birth. With the same logic, we can presume that we would be born again as a human if we continue living noble virtuous lives - reasonable rationale for observing ethics and morals.

It is argued that such laws do not exist, and that there is no obvious and scientific proof for reincarnation. The scriptures of the religions born in India - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism - believe in these laws. Many scholars in the West, starting with Plato, believed in reincarnation. Many people recalled their previous lives, which have been verified and documented. Buddha recalled all his previous births; so too Sathya Sai Baba, who has also predicted his next birth in Mandya as Prema Sai. All Hindu saints and sages and the scriptures have declared unequivocally that the soul or Jiva migrates, along with the subtle body, containing desires, tendencies and vasanas. Body only perishes at death, while the soul is immortal, which is neither born nor dies.

These laws explain the enigma of the diversity, inequity, inequality and injustice found in life. Some are born wealthy and healthy, while others are poor and sick from birth. A child is born blind or paralysed. He has done nothing to suffer such a punishment. Good people suffer, while known criminals enjoy life. Competent people fail,

while the stupid are successful. As God is a good person, he would not possibly be responsible for such obvious anomalies.

Some rationalists believe that everything happens by chance, at random, without any reason or cause. But everything in the world obeys a natural law or order. The atom at one end and the vast galaxies observe order in movements. Stars and planets travel as per precise routes and speeds. The earth goes round its own axis, goes around the sun and further travels in space along with the solar system, all at great speeds, without even a minor change in speed or direction.

Plant life observes order. Mango trees produce mangos; A set of pattern for all plants. A minute seed blossoms into giant tree. Minerals and plants life observe absolute order, scientifically predictable. Fire is always hot, while ice is cold. Their nature and behaviour are predictable, observing certain laws. Light, gravity and magnetism obey laws.

Similarly, the animal kingdom also observes order. Dog loves mankind, while scorpions bite. Certain animals start swimming from birth. Repetition in successive births makes such characteristics a habit, which ultimately becomes basic nature or swabhava. Animals act as per instinct, which is consistent.

This analysis shows that there is absolute order and logic in the world of events, movements, nature and behaviour. If that is so, what happens in the human world of events, acts, transactions, responses, relationships, results, outcomes, happenings, nature and behaviour? The only logical explanation is that it is the result of some causes, which took place in this birth or previous births. A part of the effects of all previous births is allotted to this birth, called Prarabdha, which has to be enjoyed and suffered in this birth. This effect is called by various names as fate, luck or ill luck, destiny, Karma, Vidhi, etc. Effect of what we do now will be in the future - in this or the next birth. The present and future can be modified by virtuous deeds and God's grace.

11. The Four Paths to Divinity

The path of Devotion is most popular in Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, which together cover 4.5 billion

out of 6 billion people in the world. Man generally prays to God for help while in distress and for material gains, which is a low form of worship. Pure and disinterested love is considered more proper and most acceptable to the Divine. In the dualist school of philosophy, followed by Christianity and Islam, Man and God are different. Hindus have two other concepts – one suggesting that Man is part of God (qualified non-dualism), and Man and God are the same for those who have attained Knowledge at the highest level, popularly known as *advaita* i.e. non-dualism.

In the Hindu concept, one can approach God with different attitudes or *Bhavanas*. One can look at God as a child, as Yasoda did Krishna; or as friend, as in the case of Arjuna and Krishna; or as a servant, as Hanuman and Rama; or as lover, as in the case of Radha and Meera to Krishna.

Devotion can be in various forms, such as *Sravanam*, *Keerthanam*, *Vishnusmaranam*, *Paadasevnam*, *Archanam*, *Aathmanivedanam*, etc. Temples, Churches and Mosques are meant for group worship. Here also there are differences among the three religions. Christians go to Church on Sundays and Muslims on Fridays. Hindus go on all days. Most Hindu temples are open from 4 a.m. upto 10 p.m., where devotees worship individually. In the case of the other two religions, group worship is the standard practice, which fosters organised effort and unity.

Hindus are highly individualistic, where each has different notions about God, method of worship, etc.

Another feature of Hinduism is the large number of festivals, such as *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Krishnashtami*, *Ramanavami*, *Vijayadasami*, etc. Large number of pilgrim centres attract devotees from all over India, such as Sabarimala, Vaishnudevi, Tirupathi, Varanasi, Badrinath, Rishikesh and hundreds of others, which attract millions of pilgrims. Such pilgrim centres, scattered all over India, help national integration. Thus festivals and pilgrimages are special features of Hinduism, which strengthen religious fervour.

For example, Ganesh chaturthi is celebrated on a grand scale. Ganesh is the most popular deity in India.

Thousands of idols, some as big as 60 feet, are taken in procession and immersed in water bodies every year. Ganesha is a lovable God, who, in popular imagination, plays many roles. He is vigneshwara or remover of obstacles. He is most sought after before examinations. He was invoked to rescue the film star Rajkumar from the bandit, veerappan!

12. Homage to the Teacher

Teachers Day is observed on Sept 5th to coincide, with the birth anniversary of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, former President of India, who was a philosopher, teacher, statesman, scholar, orator and a true representative of India's glorious concept of philosopher teacher. Through his books, lectures and professorial assignments in prestigious Universities in UK, he made available India's profound wisdom in philosophy to the Western world. His book on "East and West" is a classic document, comparing Eastern and western philosophy. His stature was so high that he could converse freely with Stalin when he was Ambassador to the USSR.

One of the unique features of Indian philosophy and culture is the profound status, bordering on reverence, enjoyed by teachers in religious literature and philosophy, social standing and cultural values.

The ancient Gurukula system was based on the concept that teachers should not only impart knowledge but also character. Education is character building and man making, while training is concerned with imparting information and developing knowledge and skills for making citizens productive in society. But nations depend on the character and values of citizens, which are to be inculcated during the formative stages of studentship in the educational system. Though successive Educational Commissions have emphasised the importance of character building and value formation, India has not yet achieved even a semblance of this goal.

In mythology and religious literatures, we find that kings, and even Gods, abided by the wise counsel of their chosen Gurus. Vasishta, as Guru to Rama and his brothers, imparted wisdom in the classic philosophical

literature, called Yogavasishta.

Ancient sages and saints, who functioned as teachers to society and to individuals, were held in the highest of esteem for their self-effaciveness and selflessness, service and sacrifice. They were so committed to the cause of human welfare, with least interest in name and fame, that they did not even put their names as authors of their sublime thought and wisdom contained the 108 Upanishads, Brahmasootras, Bhagavad Gita and Dharma and Neethi Sastras. In every field of human endeavour - medicine, health, architecture, dance, music, astronomy, warfare, administration and even sex - they gave profound wisdom, which, though written 4000 years old, are still relevant to the problems encountered by modern societies.

In the Indian concept, one cannot progress spiritually without the blessing and guidance of teachers. Teachers not only instructed, interpreted and developed knowledge, but also inspired students to blossom in wisdom, character and spirituality. Even great Shankaracharya had a Guru. Ramakrishna was Guru and mentor of Vivekananda.

In spite of this glorious tradition from prehistoric times, India has not taken advantage of the ancient values of teachers in character building and value formation in the educational institutions. A civilization will be judged not so much by material progress and high-tech, but by values, such as love and affection, compassion and kindness, service and sacrifice, truthfulness and uprightness, honesty and integrity, humility and austerity, etc.

Therefore, on Teachers Day, we honour teachers and remember Dr. Radhakrishnan and thousands of his predecessors from prehistoric to current times, who shaped the concept and content of our education.

13. A True Exemplar

On October 2nd, Gandhiji's birthday, the whole country pays tributes to him. His statue was unveiled in Washington DC, showing that even the US respects him. Gandhiji demonstrated how the cultural and spiritual heritage of India can be effectively used in all walks of

life, including politics. Gandhiji is a true representative of India's glorious heritage.

The basic principle of IH is that spirituality should be integrated with the secular world of work, transactions and relationships. Gandhiji considered himself as an instrument of God. He applied the principle of Non-violence in dealing with the British as well as in Hindu-Muslim conflicts. He did not harbour any ill-will against the British. By adopting the concept of peaceful non-cooperation, he converted handicaps of being weak and disorganised into powerful weapons to immobilize Britain's organised rule and arms.

Service and sacrifice have high value for leadership in IH, with which he inspired India's intelligentsia, businessmen, professionals and masses. Gandhiji led a simple life, identifying himself with the masses. Bhajagovindam says that man should lead a contented life, accepting what he is eligible for in this birth as effect of merits and demerits done in previous lives. Power came to him without his asking for it, while our leaders are pursuing power and patronage.

Gandhiji was perhaps one of the very few persons who practiced what Jesus Christ taught, namely 'love your enemy and forgive them'. Vivekananda said "Awake, arise and stop not till the goal is reached". Gandhiji woke us up from long years of servility.

He displayed tremendous courage in everything he did. He started his meetings with prayer, invoking the blessing of Gods of all religions. He observed fast and silence for gathering inner strength. He walked in Naokhali, pleading for communal harmony at a time when violent Hindu-Muslim riot was taking place.

He had the courage to sit at the Round Table Conference in London clad in simple clothes to meet the King. His witty remark to reporters who asked why he had practically not worn anything. "His majesty had enough clothes on for both of us". Our ancient Rishis, who advised mighty kings of India, led a simple life and wore the minimum of clothing. Gandhiji stayed in slums and travelled in third class.

Gandhiji openly declared that he looked up to Bhagavad Gita for guidance and solace when in distress. He

sought God's blessings before undertaking any major programme. Our secularism makes us diffident to utter openly that we are servants of God. Gandhiji was more secular, in the true sense, than all the proclamations of secularism by our leaders and professionals.

It is a strange irony that those who are garlanding his statue in different parts of the country do not even feel a sense of shame or hypocrisy when they are conducting themselves without following any of Gandhiji's principles.

14. The Significance of Diwali

Indians celebrate Diwali with great fervour. Diwali has significance in many aspects of our life. It symbolises triumph of light over darkness, virtue over vice, knowledge over ignorance, justice over injustice, compassion over cruelty, and such dualities in life. According to IH, one cannot exist without the other. For instance, we cannot have pleasure without pain, success without failure, attachment without aversion, love without hatred, and so on. Diwali is an occasion to celebrate the positive aspects and to endure the negative and unpleasant.

We are born with two kinds of assets and liabilities. Firstly, Prarabdha is inherited from the good and bad actions done in previous births, which is to be enjoyed and endured. Secondly, physical and mental characteristics are inherited from parents. A combination of these is called fate, destiny etc. During the first 20 years of life, we are influenced by religion, environment, education, ideology etc.

Only when we become adults, we are capable of knowing what is right and wrong, good and bad, etc. By observing ethical, moral and spiritual values, we can reduce the ill effects of destiny. Diwali is an occasion to remind ourselves to curb undesirable tendencies, such as, anger, violence, hatred, jealousy, envy, pride, cruelty, lust, passion, greed, avarice etc, all of which will result in further degradation in this birth and in the next birth. Diwali illumines the inner divinity in us and encourages us to follow ethical and virtuous values, such as, honesty, integrity, truthfulness, humility, courtesy, compassion, forgiveness, sympathy, fairness, helpfulness, selflessness, etc. In addition, we should

also observe spiritual values, such as yoga, meditation, fasting, silence, prayerfulness, desireless action, service acting as instrument of society and God, submission to God's will and accepting results with equanimity, balance, etc. Thus, Diwali exhorts us to observe Dharma and abjure evil thoughts, words and action, which will help us to achieve happiness as well as progress materially and spiritually.

In the societal plane, Diwali helps us to unify our nation, which is our duty. We have been a single cultural entity for millennia. But we are now a highly divided people with a pluralistic culture. No other nation in the world has so many divisive forces, based on religion, caste, language, ethnicity etc. The concept of a nation state is yet to take root. Therefore, cultural events like Diwali help to unite us. Many such celebrations and festivals, observed all over the country every month, unite our peoples as a nation.

Diwali is the time for merry making, eating sweets, exchanging gifts, bursting crackers, and so on. In the midst of such revelry, the real significance of Diwali should be kept in mind so that we respect our heritage.

15. Outstanding Example of Spiritual Leadership

An extraordinary feature of our civilisation is its spirituality, which has been kept alive for five millennia by thousands of saints and sages. Mankind is grateful to them. While industrialised countries progressed materially, India's contribution was in spiritual growth. Ramana Maharshi, Aurobindo, Bhagwan Ramakrishna, Saradadevi, Shirdi Baba, Vivekananda, Yogananda, Shivananda, Ramathirtha, Chinmayananda and hundreds of known and unknown spiritually evolved souls kept aloft India's glorious spiritual heritage. One amongst them is Sri Satya Sai Baba (Shirdi Baba in the previous birth) whom millions consider as an incarnation of God and is revered by people all over world.

About 20 million followers, in 100 countries, acknowledge his presence for being with them to guide and bless mankind. At Prasanthi Nilayam in Puttaparthi, the birthplace of Satya Sai Baba, two millions congregated on his birthday to sing his glory, and receive Baba's message.

No other human personality has united the hearts of peoples, belonging to all nationalities, religions, races and castes, as Baba has done. Baba is a universal person who discourages sectarianism. He has millions of devotees in the Christian world. To all his non-Hindu followers, his advice is to remain in their own religions, enriching the same with ethical and moral principles, which are common to all religions. Holy festivals of all religions are celebrated with equal fervour in Prasanthi Nilayam. Thus Baba unites mankind spiritually, allowing each religion to retain its identity.

Hundreds of books have been written describing the miracles Baba has performed. Millions have been cured of their illness. His superhuman powers have been witnessed by scientists and scholars.

Baba preaches in simple words, the importance of love, truth, service and spirituality. Besides, he has transformed the poor, and Ananthapur District, making available water, greening the area, establishing schools, colleges and primary health centres, and so on. A super specialty hospital renders free medical service, including the most complicated heart and other operations. Another super specialty hospital is functioning in Whitefield. Doctors from all over the world fly in to the Puttaparthi airport and conduct operations free at the hospital. He has built houses for poor people and also gives gifts to those deserving. The Educational institutions, established and managed by the Sai Trust, give highest importance to values and attitude formation, which is a model for the rest of India. A School of Music was inaugurated on his birthday, as a part of Sai University.

India had many spiritual masters; but Baba stands above all of them, representing all that is sublime and spiritual. Baba is an outstanding example of spiritual leadership and management. Though one million congregated in Puttaparthi, there were no policemen. Everybody observed decorum and volunteered to work free. Those living now, particularly in India, should consider themselves fortunate that Baba is with them, walking about and acting like an ordinary human being.

16. Serve God by Serving Man

The essence of Bhagavatham, consisting of 96,000 Slokas, is "helping others is *Punya*; hurting is *Papa*".

Barthruhari, a great saint and scholar, has suggested that we should use every opportunity to “give more and take less”. Religious teachings say “you will serve God by serving man”. Service and sacrifice are cardinal principles in all the religions. Lao Tse has stated, “by giving, you become more”. Charity and rendering help to the needy is the essence of humanism.

Having attained a human birth, and that too in India, which is a Karma Bhoomi, we should render social service. By so doing we keep our mind active. Our saints and sages have proved the benefits of rendering service and observing ethics and morals. Modern scientific research has established that social service activities give tangible benefits – mental peace and sound sleep, improved health, prolonged life span, etc.

The whole family can work together in such activities, which will help to foster understanding within the family. Children would develop good character by involving themselves in service activities. When such

work is undertaken in groups in specific programmes, cooperation and team spirit can be fostered. When the mind is kept idle, or even engaged in worthless pastimes, the three trillion cells in our body will decay fast. At the other end, when serving noble causes, these cells will get revitalised, which will manifest as Tejas in the face. Experiments have also shown that the process of aging can be even reversed. Deepak Chopra’s book on “Timeless Mind and Ageless Body” shows the very many advantages of pursuing noble goals without egoism and expecting no reward and recognition.

Indian heritage gives innumerable reasons for such service, one of which is returning to nature and society what these have provided for us. We should be thankful to the sun, earth, air, water and plant life as well as to saints and sages, scientists and scholars, who have given us this great civilization. Work done, as an instrument of the divine for serving God’s creatures is the spiritual approach and basis of missionary work.