



# The Greatness of Indian Culture and Sanatana Dharma

(A Comprehensive Study)

In the Light of Sri Aurobindo

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## Preface

India is the only country in the world that has been, since the beginning of time, fully conscious of and faithful to its very lofty spiritual goal. Indian civilization has not only been a great cultural system which has had tremendous achievements in every field of human endeavor and thought, but has been an immense religious effort of the human spirit which has nurtured the Sanatana Dharma, a perfect way to move towards and realise this noble spiritual goal in the fastest and most integral way possible both for the individual and the collectivity.

At present, India seems to be going through a period where every aspect and value of its life seems to be more and more influenced by the Western utilitarian spirit and the following of an alien way. This has created problems, and the current attempts at solving these under the same spirit in an unthinking duplication of the Western ways seem to be a huge mistake. Not by following an alien law, but only by going within, can we find again our true life-giving sources and our forgotten Atma-Shakti. That is why, in the present time, the most important task before India – which being accomplished most of her current problems and difficulties will automatically dissolve – is to become conscious of the profound truth hidden at the root of her great culture, its glorious past and its supreme achievements. To build a greater future, we have to know our great past and making it the basis, move forward.

This book has brought together Sri Aurobindo's words on Indian culture and Dharma and the Essential Spirit behind it which have then been conscientiously interpreted. The purpose of this interpretation has been to elucidate those profound thoughts of Sri Aurobindo which alone can tell us the profound and true reasons behind the various outer expressions that our culture had used in the past and for the ups and downs it has undergone in this effort of self-expression. It is only by so knowing – and this cannot be done on the surface but only by sympathetically entering into its fundamental spirit – that we can understand the profounder truths hidden behind the outer forms of this culture and their necessity in their own time (when they were in vogue) – something, naturally, beyond the reach of the modern surface materialistic consciousness – and adopt a more balanced and more just attitude in this matter.

The various informal talks and discussions between me and various sadhaks of the Sri Aurobindo Divine Life Ashram while reading our own publication 'The Greatness of India and Its

Culture'(2015) form the basis of this book. Pankaj Bagaria has not only painstakingly transcribed and edited these talks, but has diligently completed the innumerable tasks that go towards publishing such a book. All quotations from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have been put in quotation marks. The commentary has been put in between (‡ ‡) marks to distinguish it from the original.

We hope that this book, dedicated to the work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on this Earth will be such a beacon of light in whose presence many moved by their self-nature and aligning their hearts and minds to it will resolve to dedicate themselves to working for the renaissance of India and its destined role in the world.

– Chandra Prakash

*Dedicated to the work of  
Sri Aurobindo and the Mother  
on this Earth*

## Excerpts from Sri Aurobindo's Famous Uttarpara Speech

“I say no longer that nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith; I say that it is the Sanatana Dharma which for us is nationalism. This Hindu nation was born with the Sanatana Dharma, with it it moves and with it it grows. When the Sanatana Dharma declines, then the nation declines, and if the Sanatana Dharma were capable of perishing, with the Sanatana Dharma it would perish. The Sanatana Dharma, that is nationalism.” (CWSA 8: 12)

“Then He placed the Gita in my hands. His strength entered into me and I was able to do the *sadhan* of the Gita. I was not only to understand intellectually but to realise what Srikrishna demanded of Arjuna and what He demands of those who aspire to do His work, to be free from repulsion and desire, to do work for Him without the demand for fruit, to renounce self-will and become a passive and faithful instrument in His hands, to have an equal heart for high and low, friend and opponent, success and failure, yet not to do His work negligently. I realised what the Hindu religion meant. We speak often of the Hindu religion, of the Sanatana Dharma, but few of us really know what that religion is. Other religions are preponderatingly religions of faith and profession, but the Sanatana Dharma is life itself; it is a thing that has not so much to be believed as lived. This is the *dharma* that for the salvation of humanity was cherished in the seclusion of this peninsula from of old. It is to give this religion that India is rising. She 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. India has always existed for humanity and not for herself and it is for humanity and not for herself that she must be great.” (CWSA 8: 5-6)

“...day after day, He showed me His wonders and made me realise the utter truth of the Hindu religion. I had had many doubts before. I was brought up in England amongst foreign ideas and an atmosphere entirely foreign. About many things

in Hinduism I had once been inclined to believe that it was all imagination; that there was much of dream in it, much that was delusion and *maya*. But now day after day I realised in the mind, I realised in the heart, I realised in the body the truths of the Hindu religion. They became living experiences to me, and things were opened to me which no material science could explain.” (CWSA 8: 9)

“When I approached God at that time, I hardly had a living faith in Him. The agnostic was in me, the atheist was in me, the sceptic was in me and I was not absolutely sure that there was a God at all. I did not feel His presence. Yet something drew me to the truth of the Vedas, the truth of the Gita, the truth of the Hindu religion. I felt there must be a mighty truth somewhere in this Yoga, a mighty truth in this religion based on the Vedanta. So when I turned to the Yoga and resolved to practise it and find out if my idea was right, I did it in this spirit and with this prayer to Him, “If Thou art, then Thou knowest my heart. Thou knowest that I do not ask for Mukti, I do not ask for anything which others ask for. I ask only for strength to uplift this nation, I ask only to be allowed to live and work for this people whom I love and to whom I pray that I may devote my life.” I strove long for the realisation of Yoga and at last to some extent I had it, but in what I most desired, I was not satisfied. Then in the seclusion of the jail, of the solitary cell I asked for it again. I said, “Give me Thy *adesh*. I do not know what work to do or how to do it. Give me a message.” In the communion of Yoga two messages came. The first message said, “I have given you a work and it is to help to uplift this nation. Before long the time will come when you will have to go out of jail; for it is not my will that this time either you should be convicted or that you should pass the time as others have to do, in suffering for their country. I have called you to work, and that is the *adesh* for which you have asked. I give you the *adesh* to go forth and do my work.” The second message came and it said, “Something has been shown to you in this year of seclusion, something about which you had your doubts and it is the truth of the Hindu religion. It is this religion that I am raising up before the world, it is



this that I have perfected and developed through the *rishis*, saints and *avatars*, and now it is going forth to do my work among the nations. I am raising up this nation to send forth my word. This is the Sanatana Dharma, this is the eternal religion which you did not really know before, but which I have now revealed to you. The agnostic and the sceptic in you have been answered, for I have given you proofs within and without you, physical and subjective, which have satisfied you. When you go forth, speak to your nation always this word that it is for the Sanatana Dharma that they arise, it is for the world and not for themselves that they arise. I am giving them freedom for the service of the world. When therefore it is said that India shall rise, it is the Sanatana Dharma that shall rise. When it is said that India shall be great, it is the Sanatana Dharma that shall be great. When it is said that India shall expand and extend herself, it is the Sanatana Dharma that shall expand and extend itself over the world. It is for the *dharma* and by the *dharma* that India exists. To magnify the religion means to magnify the country.” (CWSA 8: 9-10)

“The name of your society is “Society for the Protection of Religion”. Well, the protection of the religion, the protection and upraising before the world of the Hindu religion, that is the work before us. But what is the Hindu religion? What is this religion which we call Sanatana, eternal? It is the Hindu religion only because the Hindu nation has kept it, because in this peninsula it grew up in the seclusion of the sea and the Himalayas, because in this sacred and ancient land it was given as a charge to the Aryan race to preserve through the ages. But it is not circumscribed by the confines of a single country, it does not belong peculiarly and for ever to a bounded part of the world. That which we call the Hindu religion is really the eternal religion, because it is the universal religion which embraces all others. If a religion is not universal, it cannot be eternal. A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can live only for a limited time and a limited purpose. This is the one religion that can triumph over materialism by including and anticipating the discoveries of science and the speculations of philosophy. It is the one religion which impresses

on mankind the closeness of God to us and embraces in its compass all the possible means by which man can approach God. It is the one religion which insists every moment on the truth which all religions acknowledge, that He is in all men and all things and that in Him we move and have our being. It is the one religion which enables us not only to understand and believe this truth but to realise it with every part of our being. It is the one religion which shows the world what the world is, that it is the *lila* of Vasudeva. It is the one religion which shows us how we can best play our part in that *lila*, its subtlest laws and its noblest rules. It is the one religion which does not separate life in any smallest detail from religion, which knows what immortality is and has utterly removed from us the reality of death.” (CWSA 8: 11-12)

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# 1. What Is India?

“India is not the earth, rivers and mountains of this land, neither is it a collective name for the inhabitants of this country. **India is a living being, as much living as, say, Shiva. India is a goddess as Shiva is a god. If she likes, she can manifest in human form.**”<sup>1</sup>

‡ Sri Aurobindo had a living experience of the soul of India, so here he has opened before us a very novel and unique perspective. According to him, just as Lord Shiva, Sri Radha and other gods and goddesses have their own separate Being, similarly the Goddess of India has her own separate Being, which has its special mission. Considering the example of an individual soul, in its true being it is essentially one with the Paramatman and comes into this terrestrial manifestation, perhaps, with the aim of manifesting one attribute, one special aspect from among the infinite aspects of the Paramatman. So, in evolution it takes up a personality made up of a mind, vital and physical. This personality, a conglomerate of many personalities, has into it the entry of the different levels of consciousness, ranging from the inconscient and subconscient to the deepest and highest superconscient levels. That is why in life we see such infinite complexity, so many dualities – like pain and pleasure, loss and gain, success and failure, rise and fall. Making use of all these complexities, the Divine effectuates the manifestation of that special attribute which in the embodied soul is ingrained as the inner faith. Even in an individual’s life we can see such infinite variety and complexities – which tend to increase successively as he ascends to the higher and deeper levels of consciousness – and only after a long evolution of many many lives does an individual being begin to move towards its culmination, so how much more difficult it must be for us to even conceive of the dimensions and vicissitudes involved in the evolution of a cosmic being. Sri Aurobindo says that just as an individual has a separate being, similarly a nation too has a separate

being. The Earth has its own distinct being as has the solar system and the universe. Each of these beings have their own inherent truth which they have to express. Similarly India too has a separate being which has its own profound truth that it has to express. When even in an individual being, it takes a long time for the soul to come to the front and effectuate its true expression, then the time taken in the development of a collective being must be very great by any of our human standards of time. When a person comes into contact with that being and has the experience of its soul only then can the person know something about its true purpose, about its past, present and future development, about its destiny. Without that contact and experience he always sees and judges things, persons, happenings etc. only superficially and fails to understand their true reason and their true course of movement. Having this direct experience and identification, Sri Aurobindo discusses in his work '*The Human Cycle*' that the earth has a special destiny and has a place of distinction in the whole universe. And even in that, India has a very special place. From this wide perspective he reveals the past, present and the future course of the whole human race. At the same time, he reveals how during this entire course of development the function of India has always been to unlock the soul's riches for the world and in future too her role would be to lead the world in the movement towards an integral fulfilment of the Divine Law on this earth. Only when we look with this perspective do we somewhat understand the deep logic behind the whole course of the development of our culture from its Vedic age to the present time and on the basis of that can be assured of India's splendid future. But before India is ready to fulfil her great role, she must first rise out of the present degenerate condition and develop a strong nationalism and emerge as a powerful nation. The institutions, organizations, policies etc. which will prove to be helpful in the development of this nationalism will be the only ones that will be able to last, all the others will be discarded as alien elements. But unlike other nations



the rise of India will not be to become powerful only to fulfil her self-interests. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, “She 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. India has always existed for humanity and not for herself and it is for humanity and not for herself that she must be great.”(CWSA 8, 6)

*Qs: How can this being manifest in a human form?*

*Ans:* We have the example of Sri Aurobindo before us. It was as if the soul of India found a concrete expression in him. Though in himself Sri Aurobindo represents a decisive action of the Supreme and by announcing the transformation of the entire earthly manifestation gives to the destiny of the whole earth a new dimension, but at the same time it seems that the soul of India has found its fullest self-expression in him. The secrets of the Indian culture, its spirit, its Sanatana Dharma, the Gita, the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, etc. have all been revealed, revived and re-established by him. In the past also, the soul of India has been given a voice from time to time through Swami Vivekananda, Guru Govind Singh, Shivaji and numerous other great souls. ‡

\* \* \*

“Mother India is not a piece of earth; she is a Power, a Godhead, for all nations have such a Devi supporting their separate existence and keeping it in being. Such Beings are as real and more permanently real than the men they influence, but they belong to a higher plane, are part of the cosmic consciousness and being and act here on earth by shaping the human consciousness on which they exercise their influence.”<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

“The Soul of India is one and indivisible. India is conscious of her mission in the world. She is waiting for the exterior means of manifestation.”<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

## INVOCATION, 15 August 1947

“O our Mother, O Soul of India, Mother who hast never forsaken thy children even in the days of darkest depression, even when they turned away from thy voice, served other masters and denied thee, now when they have arisen and the light is on thy face in this dawn of thy liberation, in this great hour we salute thee. Guide us so that the horizon of freedom opening before us may be also a horizon of true greatness and of thy true life in the community of the nations. Guide us so that we may be always on the side of great ideals and show to men thy true visage, as a leader in the ways of the spirit and a friend and helper of all the peoples.”<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \*

**“In the whole creation the earth has a place of distinction, because unlike any other planet it is evolutionary with a psychic entity at its centre. In it, India, in particular, is a divinely chosen country.”<sup>5</sup>**

‡ The Mother has revealed here a profound and occult truth. In our Puranas and other ancient Indian literature also we get indications that even the gods wish to be born as humans, but Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have revealed the occult secret behind these things in a manner that we seldom find elsewhere. According to them, this entire universe is created as if the Divine wanted to manifest himself in circumstances completely opposite to his true self. And it is a great riddle in itself how the Divine who is Sachchidananda (i.e. ever existent, conscious and blissful) comes to manifest his true self again from the seemingly completely opposite circumstances – circumstances of Falsehood instead of Truth, complete Unconsciousness and Inconscience instead of Consciousness and pain and suffering instead of Bliss. For the ease of understanding, we may say that when we need to solve a huge problem or want to build something on a grand scale we first try it out on a small scale in the laboratory and only then apply the successful results on the large scale. In this

sense the earth is the laboratory of this whole universe. The results obtained here can be applied in the whole universe. This is because on this earth all the other worlds have an entry. When the consciousness descends from its superconscient levels to the complete Inconscience, this process creates a descending series of increasingly dense planes which Sri Aurobindo calls the true mind, the true vital, the true physical. But when after the involution, the evolution of consciousness begins, then the physical, vital and mind evolve, but because of their Inconscient origin all kinds of impurities can be seen in them. But since all the different levels of consciousness have an entry into this earthly manifestation, when there is a descent of the divine consciousness and there is a divine manifestation here then it has its effect on all the other worlds. That is why in the whole creation the earth has a very special place. Whatever is realised here effects spontaneously the whole universe.

In the Puranas and other scriptures we find the description of myriad worlds. In them when we read the descriptions of the worlds of goddesses, worlds of the gods, world of Truth, of Sāketadhāma, of Goloka and of various other higher and subtle worlds, of their grandeur, their splendour, their great power, their immense and unimaginable opulence, then the earth seems to be nothing compared to their magnificence. In Sri Aurobindo's epic '*Savitri*' we find a vast scheme of higher, lower and deeper levels of consciousness. Then what is the thing that makes the earth such a special place that even the gods are eager to take birth here? According to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the earth is the chosen laboratory where the difficulties of the universe are concentrated and it is here that the solution will be given and therefore this is the one place where the Supreme Himself has descended. Unlike any other world, the earth is evolutionary, while all other worlds, no matter how magnificent in themselves, remain stationary and cannot ascend or come down because they do not have the contact of the Supreme

through the psychic being, which is accessible only on the earth. It is only the earth that has the supreme privilege of the phenomenon of evolution. And since the Supreme Lord himself is always incarnate here, its splendour is far greater than any other world. It is this that the Gita terms ‘*parāprakritirjīvabhūtā*’<sup>[1]</sup> which means that the Consciousness-Force of the Supreme herself becomes the Jiva (the embodied Soul). This element of the Supreme is innate in the earth as the soul and the psychic being and that is why all possibilities are latent here. No matter how ignorant and obscure the earthly conditions may seem to us on the basis of outer appearances, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have assured us that after the supramental transformation, after the establishment of the Divine Law, this obscurity of falsehood ignorance, etc. will not persist any longer and the terrestrial evolution will then not be from darkness to light but will be from light to ever greater light and will rise to ever diviner levels. Even on such a special earth, India has been chosen to fulfil a very special role. From the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and from the ancient Indian literature we come to know that the physical or subtle presence of some perfected souls, in the form of Rishis, have always been presiding and leading this nation towards its true destiny. This is why while today we barely find even the traces of any other ancient cultures, the Indian culture has not only survived the long periods of slavery, suffering, darkness and inertia, but, along with its growing external influence on the whole world, it is greatly increasing its spiritual and cultural influence and is now moving rapidly towards regaining its glory. ‡

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“India is the *guru* of the nations, the physician of the human soul in its profounder maladies; she is destined once

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<sup>[1]</sup> Gita VII.5

more to new-mould the life of the world and restore the peace of the human spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

‡ Qs: *What is the meaning of the profound maladies of the soul and how has India been their physician?*

Ans: At present we can see all around us how the whole socio-economic-political system is centred exclusively around the satisfaction of the lower physical and vital propensities. Essentially, all maladies are born when man ignores his soul and takes his vital and physical impulses as his true self, and it is from this that all physical and psychological problems arise, as we are witnessing today in the whole world. Sri Aurobindo writes at one place, “To see your Self in all creatures and all creatures in your Self – that is the unshakeable foundation of all religion, love, patriotism, philanthropy, humanity, of everything which rises above selfishness and gross utility. For what is selfishness? It is mistaking the body & the vital impulses for your true self and seeking their gratification, a gross, narrow and transient pleasure, instead of the stainless bliss of your true self which is the whole Universe & more than the Universe. Selfishness arises from Avidya, from the great fundamental ignorance which creates Ahankara, the sense of your individual existence, the preoccupation with your own individual existence, which at once leads to Desire, to Hunger which is Death, death to yourself and death to others. The sense that this is I and that is you, and that I must take this or that, or else you will take it, that is the basis of all selfishness; the sense that this I must eat that you, in order to live & avoid being eaten, that is the principle of material existence from which arises strife and hatred. And so long as the difference between I and you exists, hatred cannot cease, covetousness cannot cease, war cannot cease, evil & sin cannot cease, and because sin cannot cease, sorrow & misery cannot cease.” (CWSA 17, 140)

And this is what we are currently seeing everywhere. But no matter how many outer schemes or policies we

make, how much change we make in the outer machinery, until we realise this fundamental truth, we will not be able to truly cure our ills. Sri Aurobindo says that, “This erring race of human beings dreams always of perfecting their environment by the machinery of government and society; but it is only by the perfection of the soul within that the outer environment can be perfected. What thou art within, that outside thee thou shalt enjoy; no machinery can rescue thee from the law of thy being.”(CWSA 12, 468)

This has been the true message of India and this is how it has been the physician of the profoundest maladies of mankind because it alone has always remained faithful to the Spirit. Once again it will rise and fulfil its destined role. But at present it seems to have been completely overwhelmed by the influence of Western materialism. This is the reason why Swami Vivekananda cautioned the Indians that, “...if you give up that spirituality, leaving it aside to go after the materialising civilisation of the West, the result will be that in three generations you will be an extinct race; because the backbone of the nation will be broken, the foundation upon which the national edifice has been built will be undermined, and the result will be annihilation all round.”(CWSV 3, 153)

That is why, looking at the current appearances any person of goodwill will feel concerned whether India will perish? If that were to happen then according to Swami Vivekananda, “...from the world all spirituality will be extinct, all moral perfection will be extinct, all sweet-souled sympathy for religion will be extinct, all ideality will be extinct; and in its place will reign the duality of lust and luxury as the male and female deities, with money as its priest, fraud, force, and competition its ceremonies, and the human soul its sacrifice. **Such a thing can never be.**”(CWSV 4, 347) ‡

\* \* \*

“There is only one country in the world that knows that

there is only one Truth to which everything should be turned, and that is India. Other countries have forgotten this, but in India it is ingrained in the people, and one day it will come out. ...I know the conditions of the country. Even if one person could put himself faithfully at the disposal of the Truth, he could change the country and the world.”<sup>7</sup>

‡ Therefore, to think that what after all can a single person do, is a mistake. And to justify this by saying that outer circumstances and times are not favourable, people are like this or that – is all a falsehood. When in truth there exists no separate being other than one’s own true self then, to use external circumstances, things and people as an excuse for one’s inaction is a deluded way of seeing things and negates the fundamental truth of one’s being, for so says the Vedanta, ‘ekamevadvitiam’, meaning that there exist no two separate beings. In a true sense, whatever we see around in the outside world, or whichever states of being or worlds we may have experienced or can ever experience even in our intensest trance, or any of the greater worlds and planes that we may find described somewhere, or even that whom we call the Supreme Self, essentially all of these are projected from our own consciousness only. Therefore, it is a fundamental truth that we can never come into contact with anything that has not been projected from within ourselves. So it is necessary that instead of remaining engrossed in his petty surface self, a person should discover his true self and live in it. Sri Aurobindo says in his epic ‘*Savitri*’ that, “One man’s perfection still can save the world.”(CWSA 34: 531) From a material stand-point a person is nothing whereas spiritually he is everything. So, depending upon whether we identify ourselves with the material part or with the inner spirit, in one case we are nothing and in the other we are everything. Out of ignorance a person blames outer circumstances, his surroundings, other people, the environs, social milieu or even the outer nature he has

been endowed with, as obstacles to his progress. Or the person blames fate saying that he has not been given the opportunity to progress. But all these suggestions are deceitful in a sense and just become excuses for the person to not make an effort. It would be better for a person to get out of this deceitful condition as soon as possible and move in the right direction. ‡

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“India is the country where the psychic law can and must rule and the time has come for that *here*. Besides, it is the only possible salvation for this country whose consciousness has unfortunately been distorted by the influence and domination of a foreign nation, but which, in spite of everything, possesses a unique spiritual heritage.

Blessings.”<sup>8</sup>

(2 August 1970)

\* \* \*

“From a spiritual stand-point, India is the foremost country in the world. Its mission is to give the example of spirituality. Sri Aurobindo came on earth to teach this to the world.

This fact is so obvious, that even a simple, ignorant farmer here is in his heart closer to the Divine than all the intellectuals of Europe.”<sup>9</sup>

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“India shall take her true place in the world only when she will become integrally the messenger of the Divine Life.”<sup>10</sup>

‡ This will be the culmination of the revelation of the Vedic Rishis. The principle conception of the Truth, the Right and the Vast revealed by them in the Veda would be truly realised only when the ‘Divine Life’ is established upon earth and matter itself is transformed. Sri Aurobindo came for the establishment of this Divine Law which he termed as the Supramental Manifestation. Although, in the whole scheme of the different levels of consciousness



as propounded by Sri Aurobindo, the Supermind itself is only the first of the spiritual levels in which the Spirit can freely express itself. In the planes higher than the Supermind, an increasingly grand and free expression of the Self is possible, but the human mind has no entry into these worlds, so we cannot truly conceive anything about them. But since the splendours of all those diviner worlds are inherent in the human soul, it is only proper that the soul should reveal those inherent possibilities and manifest them. It is for this that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother announced the Supramental Manifestation. They did not leave it as a philosophy or principle but, by a lifelong endeavour, actuated its descent in the subtle physical on the 29th of February, 1956. According to them, the true resolution of the inconscience, ignorance and other problems of the material world can be achieved only by the Supramental transformation. When India will give this message of a 'Divine Life' to the whole world – as it is already doing to some extent but must do it integrally now – only then will it be able to gain its true place in the world. ‡

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“...Of all the proud nations of the West there is an end determined. When their limited special work for mankind is done they must decay and disappear. But the function of India is to supply the world with a perennial source of light and renovation. Whenever the first play of energy is exhausted and earth grows old and weary, full of materialism, racked with problems she cannot solve, the function of India is to restore the youth of mankind and assure it of immortality. She sends forth a light from her bosom which floods the earth and the heavens, and mankind bathes in it like St. George in the well of life and recovers strength, hope and vitality for its long pilgrimage. Such a time is now at hand. The world needs India and needs her free. The work she has to do now is to organize life in the terms of Vedanta...”<sup>11</sup>

‡ Qs: *‘Of all the proud nations of the West there is*

*an end determined. When their limited special work for mankind is done they must decay and disappear.' What is the meaning of this?*

*Ans:* The permanence of any nation depends on its fundamental idea about existence. Whatever physical, vital and mental forms there are in this world, they all derive their truth from the Eternal. The closer they are to the Eternal, the more permanence they will have. But if one considers the Eternal as only distantly true and confuses Him with His physical or psychical manifestations in this world, then it is a relatively false and impermanent ideal, and for this very reason one will not be able to survive for long.

The Greeks confused the Eternal with His physical manifestations and realised Him in the aspect of beauty; beauty therefore was the only law of morality which governed their civilization. Even their ethics were based on the avoidance of excesses in all directions, that is, to avoid excessive virtue as much as excessive vice, because for them, the excessiveness of either was hurtful to the sense of beauty. The whole system of governance was based on keeping a fine balance between one's responsibilities to oneself and one's obligations to others, and the sense of proportion was the one law of restraint in their private ethics. This was the peculiarity of the Greek culture and also the very reason for its failure to endure as a separate culture. The Roman culture conceived and defined the Eternal not in the aspect of beauty but of force governed by law, and accordingly erected their whole social and political structure and systematised their ethics. By religion they meant a constraint that bounded by certain fixed laws and they restrained life by strictly moulding it according to them. Discipline stood as the keynote of their system; discipline of the actions created an inelastic faithfulness to domestic and public duties; and since discipline greatly exercises a check on animal impulses, it produced an orderly courage and a cold, hard purity.

Although all this strict discipline was very favourable to the creation of a powerful and well-ordered State and it is this that made the Roman civilization more long lived than the Greek, but it was not at all a favourable environment for the development of a many-sided civilization and it is due to this shortcoming that the Roman culture too could not last.

Similarly, the civilisations that we know of today or of which some traces are found, all of them sooner or later ceased to exist due to the insufficiency of their conception of the Eternal. It is in this sense that we may say that all of these have been experiments of nature in the cosmic evolution whose results clearly show us that every aspect of the Divine has its own truth but, when applied or insisted upon with exclusiveness, it turns into falsehood and, that is why, once its limited special work is done it must disappear. The peculiarity of the Indian culture has been that it raised the surface veil and saw the Eternal in its true form. But it saw the Eternal not only as the Universal Transcendent Self but also saw the same as the particular Self in each. It reached the singleness of the Eternal separate from this phenomenal universe, and at the same time saw the same Eternal pervading the numberless manifestations of the universe. It is this comprehensive and integral realisation that did not allow any kind of rigidity to enter into its philosophy and prepared infinite number of paths for reaching the Transcendent. It is because of its many-sidedness and plasticity that this culture exists even today. Also, whatever qualities or specialties other cultures had developed, they were present in this culture more completely and it is because of the wideness of these conceptions that the defects seen in exclusive or one-sided conceptions elsewhere are not seen here. In this context Sri Aurobindo writes about Indians that, "They had in full measure the Roman discipline, courage, purity, faithfulness to duty, careful conservatism; but these elements of character & culture which in the Roman were hard, cold, narrow and without any touch of the spirit in

man or the sense of his divine individuality, the Hindus warmed & softened with emotional & spiritual meaning and made broad and elastic by accepting the supreme importance of the soul's individual life as overriding and governing the firm organization of morals and society. They were not purely devoted to the worship and culture of beauty like the Greeks and their art was not perfect, yet they had the sense of beauty & art in a greater degree than any other ancient people; unlike the Greeks they had a perfect sense of spiritual beauty and were therefore able to realise the delight & glory of Nature hundreds of years before the sense of it developed in Europe. On the ethical side they had a finer justice than the Greeks, a more noble public decorum, a keener sense of ethical & social balance, but they would not limit the infinite capacities of the soul; they gave play therefore to personal individuality but restrained and ordered its merely lawless ebullitions by the law of the type (caste). In addition to these various elements which they shared with one civilization or another they possessed a higher spiritual ideal which governed & overrode the mere ethics (mores or customary morality) which the other nations had developed. Humanity, pity, chivalry, unselfishness, philanthropy, love of and self-sacrifice for all living things, the sense of the divinity in man, the Christian virtues, the modern virtues were fully developed in India at a time when in all the rest of the world they were either non-existent or existent only in the most feeble beginnings. And they were developed, because the Aryan Rishis had been able to discover the truth of the Eternal and give to the nation the vision of the Eternal in all things and the feeling of His presence in themselves and in all around them. "(CWSA 17, 221) ‡

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**“India has in herself a faith of superhuman virtue to accomplish miracles, to deliver herself out of irrefragable bondage, to bring God down upon earth. She has a secret of will power which no other nation possesses. All she needs to**

rouse in her that faith, that will, is an ideal which will induce her to make the effort.”<sup>12</sup>

\* \* \*

“India cannot perish, our race cannot become extinct, because among all the divisions of mankind it is to India that is reserved the highest and the most splendid destiny, the most essential to the future of the human race. **It is *she* who must send forth from herself the future religion of the entire world, the Eternal religion which is to harmonise all religion, science and philosophies and make mankind one soul.** In the sphere of morality, likewise, it is her mission to purge barbarism (mlecchahood) out of humanity and to aryanise the world. In order to do this, she must first re-aryanise herself.”<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \*

“This nation is not a new race raw from the workshop of Nature or created by modern circumstances. One of the oldest races and greatest civilisations on this earth, **the most indomitable in vitality, the most fecund in greatness, the deepest in life, the most wonderful in potentiality,** after taking into itself numerous sources of strength from foreign strains of blood and other types of human civilisation, is now seeking to lift itself for good into an organised national unity. Formerly a congeries of kindred nations with a single life and a single culture, always by the law of this essential oneness tending to unity, always by its excess of fecundity engendering fresh diversities and divisions, it has never yet been able to overcome permanently the almost insuperable obstacles to the organisation of a continent. The time has now come when those obstacles can be overcome. The attempt which our race has been making throughout its long history, it will now make under entirely new circumstances. A keen observer would predict its success ... because the freedom, unity and greatness of India have now become necessary to the world.”<sup>14</sup>

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## 2. Indian Civilisation and Culture

**“Indian civilisation must be judged mainly by the culture and greatness of its millenniums, not by the ignorance and weakness of a few centuries. A culture must be judged, first by its essential spirit, then by its best accomplishment and, lastly, by its power of survival, renovation and adaptation to new phases of the permanent needs of the race.”<sup>1</sup>**

‡ Often we come across criticisms of India and its culture charging that this nation has always been subjugated and downtrodden by foreign invaders and there has always been poverty here. Whatever modern development we now see here is all a gift of the Europeans. Mostly the criticisms we come across of this culture are based exclusively on the period of her decline, inertia and inactivity. But actually, this cannot be the right basis of judging any culture, and certainly is no way of judging a culture as ancient as the Indian. It would be easy for any discerning person to understand that even when describing some great personality we depict his greatness by that period of his life during which he had expressed himself best, and not only by the period of his outworn condition or his old age. A culture that had for millenniums irresistibly and incessantly manifested on a colossal scale in all the spheres of spirit, thought and life, explored new dimensions, opened up untrodden paths in every field for the whole human race, cannot be judged rightly or justly by anyone who concentrates exclusively on its weakness of a few centuries.

But a fundamental question arises that, what after all should be the proper standards for judging a culture? For, if the standards themselves are unsound, then no reasonable outcome can be expected from an evaluation based on these. For instance, if the Indian culture is to be reckoned by its military aggressiveness, its success in warfare against other nations and the triumph of its organised acquisitive and predatory instincts, its

irresistible push towards annexation and exploitation, then India would hardly measure up to the standards of greatness, because any such tendency was completely alien to the spirit of her culture. While sharply criticising the use of such confused standards of greatness for judging India, Swami Vivekananda says, "It is said – the fittest alone survive. How is it, then, that this most unfitted of all races, according to commonly accepted ideas, could bear the most awful misfortunes that ever befall a race, and yet not show the least signs of decay? How is it that, while the multiplying powers of the so-called vigorous and active races are dwindling every day, the immoral (?) Hindu shows a power of increase beyond them all? Great laurels are due, no doubt, to those who can deluge the world with blood at a moment's notice; great indeed is the glory of those who, to keep up a population of a few millions in plenty, have to starve half the population of the earth, but is no credit due to those who can keep hundreds of millions in peace and plenty, without snatching the bread from the mouth of anyone else? Is there no power displayed in bringing up and guiding the destinies of countless millions of human beings, through hundreds of centuries, without the least violence to others?" (CWSV 4, 323)

If wealth, opulence and external prosperity are the only benchmarks for the evaluation of a culture, then the fact remains that the splendour of Asia, and particularly the opulence of India, were once stigmatised by the indigent Europe as signs of barbarism. But after a long period of reckless plundering of that wealth when the circumstances were reversed, then that very Europe, taking pride in its plundered wealth, began to declare itself on that very basis to be civilised and developed, and it started deriding as uncivilised, poor and naked the very people whose wealth it had plundered and whose culture it had tried to annihilate in a systematic and motivated manner. The difference in life-values leads to a difference in outlook, and people start judging things according to their own prejudiced outlook. Swami Vivekananda, giving



an example of what a great difference there lies between the Indian and the European mentality about their own past, says, "Did you ever hear of a country where the greatest kings tried to trace their descent not to kings, not to robber-barons living in old castles who plundered poor travellers, but to semi-naked sages who lived in the forest? Did you ever hear of such a land? This is the land. In other countries great priests try to trace their descent to some king, but here the greatest kings would trace their descent to some ancient priest."(CWSV 3, 153)

It is clear from all this description that if a culture, especially the Indian culture, is judged on the basis of such prejudices and if the critic happens to be unsympathetic as well as prejudiced, or even more, if he is hostile, then from such a one we can never get that true appraisal of this culture for which Sri Aurobindo provides us the standards here. In order to evaluate a culture we have to first consider its essential spirit or motive. When we go to meet a great personality, before judging him, we need to have a sense of what his fundamental motive is. If a person visits Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, but does not have some sense of what the motive of that place is, what the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo is, what the fundamental aim of the Ashram is, for the realisation of which all the arrangements have been made, then he would only be able to have at best a view of the outer details of the organisation and will describe the place accordingly. Even the description of a unit like Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry can be truly meaningful only when a person intimately understands the fundamental motive and the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. A right appreciation, to any extent, even of the outer details of a person, institution, system etc. can be made only in the light of its fundamental motive, purpose, central idea, and not otherwise. And once we know the fundamental motive of a nation, then we will have to consider the amount of effort it has put in the direction of realising that motive, and what are its achievements.

If the motive in itself is great, but lacks outer expression or manifestation, or only very meagerly, then this will be a sign of insufficiency or imperfection and such a motive will have to be considered ineffective in practice. Instead, in the earthly manifestation, importance will be given to the nation which, even though having a comparatively less sublime motive, has successfully fulfilled it and with whatever capacity and resources at hand, has made achievements towards that motive. In practice, a motive will be considered to be realistic only to the extent it succeeds in molding itself in practical application. Now, even if a culture possesses both these characteristics, still its perfection will depend on how long it is able to survive. If the essential spirit of some culture is high and it has even made great achievements, but they are short lived, or if the culture lacks the capacity to bear any shock, or has not the necessary power to revive itself from some accident and move forward with renewed vigour, then this will be a sign of its incapacity, weakness and imperfection, and not of any greatness. Such a culture cannot be called an ideal culture. Therefore, a great culture should also have the power of survival and the capacity to bear all shocks triumphantly. Any long lived culture faces difficult times or periods in the course of its development. These periods have their own physical, psychological and spiritual demands, to which the culture has to respond by revealing new forms in the light of its fundamental spirit. If a person, society or culture lacks the power to adapt to the changed times or circumstances, then it will be a sign not only of its inflexibility and rigidity but also an indicator of its demise. In the course of its development, Indian culture has not only had the experience of the profound intuitive golden period of Satya yuga, but has over time also tasted the bitterness of subjection, servitude, inactivity and inertia. But during all these periods, preserving its original motive deep within itself, it has always expressed itself in new forms suitable to the period in question. The occult reason for this has been the constant presence, whether manifest

physically or subtly, of the Rishis (seers) which has always upheld and led this nation towards its predestined goal. Moreover, the spirit of this culture has been so strong, all-pervasive and all-inclusive that, assimilating all the changing forms of different times and climes and purifying them in the divine fire that burns in its spiritual heart, it has always been able to shape them anew into forms suited to its spirit.

At present, too, in the course of its evolution mankind is undergoing a stage of crisis in which the human mind has achieved an enormous development in certain directions while in others it stands arrested and bewildered, and is trying to find its way. Physical science has put at its disposal many potencies of the universal Force and has made the life of humanity materially one. Humanity has erected such a huge and complex structure of external life for the service of his mental, vital, physical claims and urges that it is becoming unmanageable for his narrow intelligence. This structure is a complex political, social, administrative, economic, cultural machinery which is an organised collective means for his intellectual, sensational, aesthetic and material satisfaction. It is a system of civilisation which is getting ever more difficult to manage for his limited mental capacity and understanding and his still more limited spiritual and moral capacity. Due to man's individual and communal ego and its ever increasing demands, a sense of apprehension or concern has started to arise in discerning persons that if things continue to follow the same course, then destruction is certain. At such a time, the soul of this culture has proclaimed, through the agency of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the descent of the supramental consciousness upon earth and the goal of the realisation of a divine life in a divine body. It is a sign of the remarkable adaptability of this culture that even amidst the most grim of circumstances, it sends forth a new light from its soul which creates new forms suited to the time.

After having set these standards for judging a culture, Sri Aurobindo will now move on to evaluate and reveal

how this culture has fully lived up to these standards. ‡

## I. The Fundamental Idea and the Essential Spirit

“It is essential, if we are to get a right view of Indian civilisation or of any civilisation, to keep to the central, living, governing things and not to be led away by the confusion of accidents and details. This is a precaution which the critics of our culture steadily refuse to take. A civilisation, a culture must be looked at first in its initiating, supporting, durable central motives, in its heart of abiding principle; otherwise we shall be likely to find ourselves, like these critics, in a maze without a clue and we shall stumble about among false and partial conclusions and miss entirely the true truth of the matter. The importance of avoiding this error is evident when we are seeking for the essential significance of Indian religious culture. But the same method must be held to when we proceed to observe its dynamic formulation and the effect of its spiritual ideal on life.

‡ If we wish to analyse the actions of a person, we need to first find out the purpose he is striving to fulfil. For, only when we know the destination of a person, can we rightly say whether the path he has taken to reach it is the right one or not. Similarly, when we have an understanding of the fundamental motive of the Indian culture, then only will we be able to view in a real perspective how suitable have those dynamic forms been in which it has embodied its essential spirit and how effective they have been for its expression. It is only then that we will be able to overview the course of the development of this culture in a proper perspective.

But even in getting a clear perception of the essential spirit of this culture, a formidable difficulty presents itself before us, and, that is of our own narrow externalised vision that is accustomed to seeing only the surface of things, and being engrossed in our ego we do not even have any perception of its narrowness, shallowness and smallness. For example, just as it is not possible for an

ape's consciousness to perceive the infinite possibilities latent in human consciousness as compared to an animal's consciousness. In the same way, when an individual or a community who has not had any deeper realisation, and confusing the surface self for its true self, keeps engrossed in and strives day and night after the satisfaction of its petty material and vital hungers and cravings, it is not possible for such an individual or community living in such a consciousness to even get a glimpse of the riches of a culture that is based on the unfolding of the deeper parts of our being. It is for this reason that in their evaluation of the Indian culture, the critics find themselves caught in a maze of appearances. On the one hand, there is the teeming life of fast, festivals, customs, rituals, injunctions, various cults, etc., of which they cannot understand the first thing, on the other, the austere life of a Sannyasin. For a person living in ordinary surface consciousness, it is not possible to get even a glimpse of what joys there may be in an austere life, a life dedicated to overcoming desire rather than satisfying it. And it is due to this difference of consciousness that he will tend to describe an austere life as a life of impoverishment, the drying up of life-energy. One who has never had a sight of the lofty peaks of the Himalayas, the experience of the deep joy of climbing them and of the passion to stake even one's life for such a venture, may call all this endeavour as nothing but an unproductive and futile frenzy which really should have no utility or attraction for a sane and rational person or society. As compared to any such adventurous external aims, the Indian culture placed before itself an aim unthinkable greater. It had glimpsed and had the experience of the absolute transcendent Being and developed a vast and complex system in the form of Sanatana Dharma which could lead, as swiftly as possible, each individual and collectivity, from whatever its immediate physical, emotional, psychological and inner state to the state of self-experience, self-attainment and self-fulfilment. Seldom do we come across a person who,

even with an aspiration for self-realisation – which itself is not common – can actually fulfil it in his life to any extent and mould his life according to that ideal. The reason for this lies in the kind of outer nature with which we start in the evolution. This nature is such that it is occupied, almost exclusively, with the satisfaction of one's egoistic and baser animal appetites. And since this journey of self-transcendence is much more of an inner and psychological nature than of the external, the path is compared to a razor's edge and is full of deceptions and dangerous traps and ambushes because even a slight deviation in the inner course leads to a great deviation from the path externally. Still, Indian culture did not aim to take only a few gifted souls to this strenuous and formidable ideal of self-realisation but to prepare each and every soul for this ultimate journey and even achieved great success in this very difficult endeavour. During this great effort, this culture built – or rather, developed spontaneously through the inspiration of the Rishis – numerous external, but deep rooted forms, codes of conduct, systems, institutions, etc. We cannot get to the true purport of these forms on the basis of their outer appearance alone. It is only in the light of the fundamental motive of this culture that one can begin to rightly approach and understand these. When a critic tries to review the outer details without even understanding the basic motive of the culture and the need of such disciplines for its practical implementation, misconceptions naturally arise. It must be kept in mind that for anyone to have a deeper perception of even the fundamental motive itself, a certain inner cultivation and refinement is a prerequisite. When even to acquire the qualification for analysing a particular art demands long and methodical training under proper guidance, it is obvious that the capacity to really appreciate the deep motive of a spiritual culture can be acquired only by a great previous preparation, hard labour and discipline in the close company of persons who are solely moved by such a motive in their lives. ‡

Indian culture recognises the spirit as the truth of our being and our life as a growth and evolution of the spirit. It sees the Eternal, the Infinite, the Supreme, the All; it sees this as the secret highest Self of all, this is what it calls God, the Permanent, the Real, and it sees man as a soul and power of this being of God in Nature. The progressive growth of the finite consciousness of man towards this Self, towards God, towards the universal, the eternal, the infinite, in a word his growth into spiritual consciousness, by the development of his ordinary ignorant natural being into an illumined divine nature, is for Indian thinking the significance of life and the aim of human existence. To this deeper and more spiritual idea of Nature and of existence a great deal of what is strongest and most potential of fruitful consequences in recent European thinking already turns with a growing impetus. This turn may be a relapse to "barbarism" or it may be the high natural outcome of her own increasing and ripened culture; that is a question for Europe to decide. But always to India this ideal inspiration or rather this spiritual vision of Self, God, Spirit, this nearness to a cosmic consciousness, a cosmic sense and feeling, a cosmic idea, will, love, delight into which we can release the limited, ignorant, suffering ego, this drive towards the transcendental, eternal and infinite, and the moulding of man into a conscious soul and power of that greater Existence have been the engrossing motive of her philosophy, the sustaining force of her religion, the fundamental idea of her civilisation and culture."<sup>2</sup>

‡ The fundamental conception of Indian culture is that, in the form of his soul, there is a truth inherent in man which is eternal, infinite and supremely blissful. His perception of the whole phenomenal world, the entire outer manifestation is, as though, an imperfect, crude or distorted form of that truth. The soul, in this manifestation, puts on as its instrument a personality made up of mind, life and body, and using it, marches towards regaining its own real self, its original truth. Since the composition of physical, emotional, psychological and inner parts in a person is entirely different from that of any other, and even in the same person their balance keeps shifting during his