

# The Governing ideas of Indian Culture.

By Anilbaran Roy.

India has lived and lived richly, splendidly, greatly, but with a different will in life from that of Europe. Her idea and her plan have been peculiar to her temperament, original and unique, and therefore difficult to seize and easily open to hostile misrepresentation. Three powers we must seize in order to judge the life-value of a culture—the power of the conception of life; the power of the forms, types, rhythms given to life; the inspiration, vigour, vital execution of the power in the actual lives of men and the life of the community. The European conception of life is one with which we in India are now very familiar, because our present thought and effort are filled and obscured with its presence or its shadow; we have been trying to assimilate it, even to shape ourselves,—our political,

our economical, outward self has been specially dominated—into some imitation of its form and rhythm. The European idea is the conception of a Force manifesting itself in the material universe and a Life in it of which man is almost the whole meaning—in spite of the recent stress of Science on a mechanical Nature,—and in man an effort to arrive at some light and harmony of understanding and ordering reason, efficient power, adorning beauty, strong utility, economical well-being. The free power of individual ego and the organised will of the corporate ego are the great forces which this life needs for its flowering; therefore the development of individual personality and organised, efficient, national individuality are of the first importance to the European ideal. At present the sense of the corpo-

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rate being dominates, the idea of a great intellectual and material progress, an ameliorated state of political and social human being governed by science, intelligent utility, liberty, equality, organisation, efficiency, general well-being. The endeavour has become too outward and mechanical, but some renewed power of a more humanistic idea is trying to beat its way in and man may perhaps before long refuse to be conquered by his apparatus and tied on the wheel of his own triumphant machinery: we must not lay too much emphasis on what may be a passing phase. The broad permanent conception of life remains and it is in its own limits a great and invigorating conception.

But the Indian conception of life starts from a deeper centre and moves on less external lines to a very different objective. The peculiarity of the Indian eye of thought is that it sees or searches everywhere for the Spirit, and the peculiarity of the Indian will in life is that it feels itself to be still unfulfilled, not in touch with perfection, not justified in any intermediate satisfaction so long as it has not found and does not live in the truth of the Spirit. Its idea of the world, of Nature, of existence is not physical, but psychological and spiritual. Spirit, soul, consciousness are not only greater than inconscient matter and force, but they precede and originate them; and force and matter cannot exist without them. The force that creates the world is a conscious will or an executive power of the Spirit; the material universe is only a form and movement of the spirit. Man himself is not a life and mind born of and eternally subject to physical Nature, but a spirit using life and body. It is an understanding

faith in this conception of existence and the attempt to live it out and get from the materialised and enter into a spiritual consciousness which constitutes the much-talked of Indian spirituality. It is evidently very different from the European idea, different even from the form given by Europe to the Christian conception of life. But it does not mean that Indian culture concedes no reality to life, and follows no material or vital aims and satisfactions. Nor can it be contended that such a conception of existence can give no powerful and inspiring motive to the human effort of man. If matter, mind, life, reason, form are only powers of the spirit and valuable, not for their own sake, but because of the spirit within them,—*atamartham*, for the sake of the self, says the *Upanishad*, and this is certainly the Indian attitude to these things,—that does not depreciate them or deprive them of their value. On the contrary, it enhances and increases their significance a hundredfold. Form and body become of an immense importance when they are felt to be instinct with the life of the spirit and a support for the rhythm of its workings. And human life was held by ancient Indian thought to be no vile and unworthy existence, but the greatest thing known to us, desired even, the *Purana* boldly says, by the gods in heaven. The deepening and raising of its richest or its most potent energies is the means by which the spirit proceeds to its own self-discovery. Mind and reason heightening to their greatest lights and powers make embodied life capable of opening to all the greatest light and power of the individual, universal and transcendent being. These are no sterilising and depressing ideas; they exalt and divinise the life of man.

The dignity of human existence, given to it by the thought of the Vedantic and the classical ages of Indian culture, exceeded anything conceived by the noblest western idea of humanity. Man is a spirit veiled in the works of energy and moving to self-discovery. He is a soul growing in Nature to self, a divinity and eternal existence, a wave of the God-ocean, an inextinguishable spark of the supreme Fire, identical even in reality with the ineffable Transcendence from which he came, greater even than the godheads he worships. The natural half-animal being which he chooses for a while to seem, is not his whole or his real being. To find his real and divine Self, to exceed his outward, apparent, natural Self, is the greatness of which he alone of beings is capable. He has the spiritual capacity to pass to a supreme and extraordinary pitch of manhood, and that is the first aim which Indian culture proposes to him, to live no more in the first crude type of an undeveloped humanity, ( न यथा प्राकृतो जनः ), but to become a perfected semi-divine man. But he can do more, become one with God, one self with the Spirit of the universe, one with a Self that transcends the universe. To be shut up in his ego is not his perfection; he can become one with others, with all beings, an universal soul, one with the supreme Unity. To aspire to that perfection and transcendence through his mind, reason, thought and their illuminations, his heart and its unlimited power of love and sympathy, his will, his ethical and dynamic being, his æsthetic sense of delight and beauty, or through an absolute spiritual calm, largeness and peace, is the high ultimate sense of his humanity. This is that spiritual liberation and perfection of which Indian thought is so full and

which appears to it, however high and arduous, yet in a way quite near, possible and normal to spiritual realization, but of which the positivist western mind finds it difficult to form a living and intelligent idea,—the status of the *Siddha*, *Bhagavata*, *Mukta*. In ancient Europe there was some approach made to it by the Stoics, Platonists, Pythagorians; it has often been envisaged or pursued by a few rare souls; it is now percolating into the western imagination, but more as yet by poetry and certain aspects of general thought than by philosophy and religion. But the distinction of Indian culture is to have seized on it, kept it a living and practicable thing, sounded all the ways to this spiritual way of perfect existence and made it the common highest aim and universal spiritual destiny of every human being.

Indian thought recognised that the normal life of man has to be passed through conscientiously, developed with knowledge, its forms perused, interpreted, fathomed, its values worked out, possessed and lived, its enjoyments taken on their own level, before we can go on to self-existence or a supra-existence. The spiritual perfection which opens before man is the crown of a long, patient, millennial out-flowing of the spirit in life and nature. This belief in a gradual spiritual progress and evolution is the secret of the almost universal Indian acceptance of the truth of reincarnation. By millions of lives in inferior forms the secret soul in the universe, conscious even in the inconscient, ( चैतनो ज्ञचेतनेषु ) has arrived at humanity, and by hundreds, thousands, perhaps millions of lives man grows into his divine self-existence. Every life is a step which he can take backward or forward; by his action, his will in life,

by the thought and knowledge that governs it, he determines what he is yet to be, *यथाकर्म यथाभुजम्*. This conception of a spiritual evolution with a final spiritual perfection or transcendence of which human life is the means and an often repeated opportunity, is the pivot of the Indian conception of existence. Two main truths are always kept in sight by the Indian mind whether in the government of life or in the discipline of spirituality. First, our being in its growth has stages through which it must pass. Then, again, life is complex, the nature of man is complex, and in each life man has to figure a certain sum of its complexity. The initial movement of life is that form of it which develops the powers of the ego in man; *Kama*, *artha*, self-interest and desire are the original human motives. Indian culture gave a large recognition to this primary turn of our nature. These powers have to be accepted; the ego-life must be lived and the forces it evolves in the human being brought to fullness. But to get its full results and inspire it eventually to go beyond itself, it must be kept from making any too unbridled claim or heading furiously towards its satisfaction. There must be no internal or external anarchy. A life governed in any absolute or excessive degree by self-will, by passion, sense-attraction, self-interest, desire cannot be the whole natural rule of a human or a humane existence. The tempting imagination that it can, with which the western mind has played in leanings or outbursts of what has been called Paganism,—not at all justly, for the Greek or Pagan intelligence had a noble thought for self-rule, law and harmony,—is alien to the Indian mentality. It perceived very well the possibility of a materialistic life, and its attraction

worked on certain minds and gave birth to the *Charvaka* philosophy; but this could not take hold or stay. Even it allowed to it, when lived on a grand scale, a certain perverse greatness; but a colossal egoism was regarded as the nature of the *Asura* and *Rakshasa*, the Titanic, gigantic, demoniac type of spirit, not the proper life for man. Another power claims man, overtopping desire and self-interest and self-will, the power of the *Dharma*.

The *Dharma*, religious law of action is not, as in the western idea, only a religious creed and cult inspiring an ethical and social rule, but the complete rule of our life, the harmony of the whole tendency of man to find a right and just law of his living. Everything has its *Dharma*, its law of life imposed on it by its nature; but the *Dharma* for man is a conscious imposition of a rule of ideal living on all members of his society. This *Dharma* develops, evolves, has stages, gradations of spiritual and ethical ascension. The main necessity is that, that there must be in all things some wise and understanding canon and ideal; a lawless impulse of desire and interest and propensity cannot be allowed; even in the frankest following of desire and interest and propensity there must be a rule, a guidance, an ethic and science arising from and answering to some truth of the thing sought, a restraint, an order, a standard of perfection. The rule and training and result differ with the type of the man and the type of the function. The idea of the Indian social system was a harmony of this complexity of *Artha*, *Kama* and *Dharma*.

At the same time there is a universal embracing *Dharma*, but this is a law of perfection of the human soul; it is a



growth of the developing mind and spirit of man into the power and force of certain universally ideal qualities which make up in their harmony the highest type of manhood. The ideal of the Aryan man is clearly portrayed in the written records of ancient India transmitted during two millennia. An ideal and rational, a spirit-wise and wordly-wise, a deeply religious, nobly ethical, a firmly yet flexibly intellectual, a scientific and æsthetic, a patient and tolerant, but an arduously self-disciplining culture with a strong eugenistic element was the base of Indian civilization. But all this was only foundation and preparation for that highest thing by whose presence human life is exalted beyond itself into something spiritual and divine. The Law and its observance is neither the beginning nor the end of man; for beyond the law he climbs to a great spiritual freedom. Not a noble but ever death-bound manhood, but immortality, freedom, divinity are the highest height of man's perfection. Indian culture held always this highest aim constantly before the eye and insistently inspired with its prospect and light the whole conception of existence, ennobled with its aim the whole life of the individual and cast into a scale of ascension to it the whole ordering of society. The well-governed system of the individual and communal existence, which is always in the first instance a natural functioning, a pursuit of interest, a satisfaction of desire and human need, a combination of knowledge and labour with these ends, but must be controlled and uplifted by the ideals of the *Dharma*, was founded on an

education which, while it fitted man for his role in life, while it stamped on his mind a generous ideal of an accomplished humanity, gave him at the same time the theory of the highest liberating knowledge and familiarised him with the conditions of a spiritual existence. The symbols of his religion were filled with suggestions which led towards it; at every step he was reminded of lives behind and in front and worlds beyond the material existence, of the Spirit who is greater than the life he informs, of the final goal, of the high immortal freedom. He was not allowed to forget that he had a highest self and that always he was living, moving and had his being in God, in the Spirit; he knew that there were systems and disciplines provided by which the great liberating truth could be realised and to which he could turn and follow them according to his *Adhikara*, the claim of his nature and his capacity; he saw around him and revered the practicers and the mighty masters of these disciplines. They were the teachers of youth, the summits of his society, the great lights of his culture, the inspirers and fountain-heads of his civilization. Spiritual freedom and perfection were not figured as a high and far-off ideal, but presented as the common human necessity, a thing for all to grow into, made possible to all on the basis of life and the *Dharma*; and the Spiritual idea governed, enlightened and gathered towards itself all the other life-motives of a great civilized community. \*

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\* Compiled from Sri Aurobindo's "A Defence of Indian Culture."