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### **The Essence of Indian Culture**

**Lakhan Mehrotra** <sup>2</sup>

US Asia Technology Management Center  
521, Memorial Way, Knight Building  
Stanford University

Institute for Competitiveness  
155, National Media Center  
Gurgaon, Haryana, India

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<sup>2</sup> Ambassador Lakhan Mehrotra, Formerly Secretary in MEA & Prime Minister's Special Envoy

# The Essence of Indian Culture

## The Spirit of Synthesis

In his perennial quest for a better and brighter life, man has consistently evolved new ideas, made new inventions and established new institutions. Thus have cultures grown and civilizations flourished from man's primitive beginnings several millennia ago. The Sanskrit word for culture is 'Sanskriti' or 'refinement'. Man's fertile brain and his skillful fingers have been producing new objects all the time and constantly refining them to suit his environment. Through this cycle of creation and refinement, the "homo sapiens" have built newer forms of culture and edifices of civilization. Man is a creature of the past but his mission is to build the future. Both these faculties, looking backward and forward, are essential to his existence and the continuity of the human race. The Buddha described life as a constantly running stream that retains its identity and yet is never the same. If the flow ceases, the river stagnates and dies. Thus through the ages, man has evolved a marvelous technique of perpetuating the past and combining it with his needs of the future. The technique permits him to retain what he should, and yet evolve a new fabric of life consistent with his ever-changing environment through a process of challenge and response. In certain cultures, this spirit of synthesis and harmony is more pronounced than in others. In the case of the Indian culture it has been of its very essence. Writing about the spirit of India, Rabindranath Tagore, India's sage poet, said: "I love India, not because I cultivate the idolatry of geography, not because I have had the chance to be born on her soil, but because she has saved through tumultuous ages the living words that have issued from the illuminated consciousness of her great sons: Satyam, Jnānam, Anantam Brahma. Brahma is Truth, Brahma is Wisdom, Brahma is Infinite. Śāntam, Śīvam Advaitam: Peace is in Brahma, goodness is in Brahma and the unity of all things."

The Nobel Laureate also quoted the following as the "true prayer of Mother India":

Ya eko varno bahudhā Śaktiyogāt,  
Varnān anekān nihitārtho dadhāti;  
Vichaiti chānte viśwamādaḥ sa devah  
Sa no budhyā śubhayā samyunaktu.  
"He who is one, who is above all distinctions;  
Who through his prowess becomes many by design;  
Who comprehends everything from beginning to the end;  
Let Him unite us all with the wisdom of goodness."

This concept of the unity of all things, animate and inanimate, has been at the heart of Indian ethos from times immemorial. It has allowed India to accept, tolerate, and transform what comes to it from outside rather than reject it whole or allow distinctions to distort her vision of the basic unity of all existence. As Krishna tells us, "All manifest forms of existence emanate from the Unmanifest at the break of Brahman's day and ultimately lose themselves into it as Brahman's night descends". (Bhagavadgita VIII.18)

The panorama of Indian culture is very vast indeed. It harbors a sixth of mankind, and its mosaic is polychrome. Century after century it guaranteed its continuity by taking recourse to a syncretistic process which allowed him to face the new challenges of his life successfully and move into a new

dawn marked by better health, happiness and prosperity. Let us walk through that process, epoch by epoch, to prove the point.

Man had been on the Indian scene for several million years before the Indian civilization became something very distinctive with its nucleus in the valley of the river Sindhu—referred to as ‘Indus’ by the Greeks and ‘Hindu’ by the Persians. The Siwalik Hills in India have yielded evidence of the earliest hominids on earth, called Rāmapithecus, about 12 million years ago.

Like his kins in Kenya, Hungary and Indonesia, Rāmapithecus of the Siwalik Hills was a dwarf, about one and one-third meter high, probably a seed-eater not having elongated canine teeth, a biped who could stand erect and throw stones. The Daśāvatāra Purānūa, an ancient Indian treatise that traces the sequence of incarnations of the Supreme Being in an evolutionary sequence mentions Vamana or dwarf as one of them:

Matsya kūrma varāhashcha, Narasimhotha Vāmanah;  
Rāmo Rāmashcha Rāmashcha, Buddho Kalaki cha te daśa.

Matsya or fish, symbolising life-forms in water; Kūrma or tortoise, which could live on both water and earth; Varāha or boar, entirely a denizen of the earth; Narasimha—man-lion i.e. half human and half animal; and Vāmana or dwarf (Rāmapithecus?) were followed by Rāma, Parashurāma, Balarāma and Gautama Buddha.

That meshes well with Darwin’s Theory of Evolution propounded centuries later. The ten incarnations of Daśāvatāra represented evolutionary stages of the human being through which his physical and mental faculties demonstrated a constant growth in tune with their prevailing environment until one reached the full incarnation of the Supreme in Krishna. The Buddha, the ninth in the list of incarnations, and born six centuries before the Christian era represents a very high state of spiritual evolution, a high watermark in the march of human civilization. Kalaki, the tenth incarnation, is yet to come. Their roots lay in the past, starting with the fish but through the millennia ahead they synthesized and harmonized their past at each stage of their evolution with the needs of the present and a foresight that would help them to evolve into what homo sapiens are today.

It was only by about 4000 BC that small village communities came into existence south of the Hindukush. It took about a thousand years more for them to blossom into what has come to be known as the fountain of the Hindu civilization, the Sindhu Valley culture.

Man was no longer content then with his rural dwellings of reed or straw. He was building well-designed edifices and whole townships with systematic roads, drainage systems, and fortresses. He was no longer producing simple stone tools to guarantee livelihood but was cultivating a variety of grains such as wheat, barley, and peas. He was even mining gold, silver, lead, copper, and tin. He had moved from the world of utility to the world of art also quite sufficiently and was producing beautiful ornaments and toys.

The Indus Valley Civilization was marked by the domestication of important animals such as the bull, buffalo, sheep, elephant and camel. Its inhabitants had time enough not only for dances and music but also to delve into the mysteries of life and give expression to his thoughts of the beyond. He was not only articulate in his speech but also had a script to his credit which unfortunately has

not yet been deciphered, and he was familiar with both cotton and wool which enabled him to leave behind part of his animal existence. The foundations of culture laid by our Indus predecessors were so strong and powerful that despite a gap of nearly 5,000 years, many facets of their culture have come down to us to this day as part of the Hindu way of life. That includes the practice of Yoga, the tradition of dances, the system of counting based on units of sixteen and the worship of Śiva and Shakti. While the major urban centres of the Sindhu culture were along the river Indus (Greek adaptation of ‘Sindhu’), its domain extended to areas much farther to the east and south as testified by Lothal in the present-day Gujarat. It was in very regular contact with two other contemporary cultures, those of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

The Sindhu Valley culture flourished for over a millennium before it blended and harmonized itself with what has come to be known as the Vedic tradition. It had more than enough time to assimilate and grow and to lend to its ideas and institutions an abiding strength and character.

While the major sources for the study of the Indus Valley civilization are archaeological, in the case of the Aryans they are literary. The life and times of the Aryans of that epoch are reflected in the Vedic Samhitas, history’s first literary compendium. The four Samhitas, viz, the Rig, Yajur, Sāma, and Atharva, are not the work of a single individual written over a lifetime. They contain thousands of hymns composed by India’s earliest seers or Rishis over generations and were transmitted orally for more than a millennium before they were reduced to writing. During the course of centuries, they were classified as the Brahmanas and Upanishads. The former are primarily ritualistic while the latter are essentially philosophic. And then, century after century and age after age, commentaries were written on them called Dharma Śāstras and Dharma and Grihya Sutras.

There abides in all these works, the Vedas, Vedanta (Upanishads) and Vedangas (Other Vedic Forms), a huge diversity of themes from cosmogony and cosmology to problems of life and death such as victory and defeat, joy and sorrow, desire and freedom from desire, bondage and release, rituals and sacrifices, monism, monotheism, pantheism, agnosticism, secularism, and even atheism. Only a profound spirit of harmony and synthesis could contend with such a mass of thematic and structural variety with a sense of unity and purpose. In its basic core, Hinduism is neither church-bound nor tied to the strings of a single scripture. It has been a running stream that has allowed a thousand currents to merge and mingle with it during the course of its long history. It recognizes that each individual is a universe in himself who must commence his voyage for self-realization in accordance with his own preferences:

Ruchinām Vaichitryāt Rijukutīlā nānā pathi jushām;  
Nṛnam eko gamyas Tvamasi Payasām arnava iva .

“Due to a variety of tastes, men seek different paths, straight or winding; however, thou art their only destination as is the ocean of rivers and streams.”

The Sindhu Śiva survives to this day as Mahayogi, the Yogi of Yogis and as Pashupati, Protector of the animal world in the Vedic pantheon. The principle of the unity of all things so pronounced in the Upanishads militates against any thought of individual or community distinctions dividing the human or for that matter even the animate world. The spirit in its evolutionary march strives towards perfection and those born animals in one life can be born human in the next. But there can be degeneration also from one species to the other if one is not careful. The centre-piece of Indian

Culture through the Vedic times up to the present has been the belief that everything stems from Brahman and eventually returns to it and all distinctions are an illusion.

Śiva's importance keeps growing till it reaches its pinnacle in the Puranas in the Hindu Trinity of Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Sustainer; and Śiva, the Destroyer. However, they are manifestations of the same reality, the Brahman. The mythological stories also represent them as dependent on each other's grace. In the Rāmāyana, Rāma, the hero, the incarnation of Vishnu, a Vedic divinity, cannot even fulfill his mission of destroying demonic Rāvana, without worshipping Śiva. The Mahayogi, Śiva, in turn meditates on Vishnu, the effulgent Lord of whom Rāma is an incarnation.

The Trinity of Brahmā, the Creator, Vishnu, the Sustainer, and Maheśa the Destroyer, emanates from Brahman, the Absolute as part of a constant cycle in which one becomes many and many one. Brahman thus is the symbol of the unity of all existence and also of the unity of existence and non-existence. In their seemingly diverse roles, they remain part of a syncretistic whole and interdependent rather than functioning as independent divinities. The Rāmāyana of Tulsidas, one of the greatest of Hindu saints who adorned the medieval times, has Rāma, the incarnation of Vishnu, pray to Śiva thus:

Namāmīshamīshāna Nirvāna rūpam  
Vibuhum Vyāpakam Brahmaveda Swarūpam;  
Ajam, nirgunam, nirvikalpam, nirīham,  
Chidākāshamākāśavāsam bhajeham.

“My salutation to Lord Śiva who in his full majesty is the world's only salvation; who is unborn, free of any attributes, any dualities or desires; whose consciousness is limitless like the sky; whose dwelling is in heaven; who is the illustrious Brahman and the Veda personified”.

The constant message of the Vedic, Upanishadic and the Puranic tradition thus has been that the Personal and the Impersonal, God and the Absolute, are one and the same and everything in the Universe is a variant of the Supreme Being. The pantheistic illusion is over and over again reduced to the monotheistic unity of the Puranas and the monic unity of the Upanishads. As a matter of fact, the spirit of synthesis is so strong in our culture that the supreme Truth is described as both Being and Non-Being, both Sat and Asat.

Nowhere is this synthesis more marked than in the Bhagavad Gita. The Song Divine contains seven hundred verses and is a part of the Mahabharata, an epic of more than 100,000 verses. It contains a sermon given on the field of battle by Krishna, the charioteer, to Arjuna, a hero of the epic. Krishna symbolizes the Absolute, upholder of the moral law who assumes the human form to rid the earth of evil. Arjuna is the symbol of the soul that is torn asunder by attachment. Krishna teaches him the path of selfless duty that summons him to march against wily Kauravas, notwithstanding his ties of blood with them. The life of every one of us is a constant battlefield between the forces of good and evil. Gita tells us that upholders of Dharma must at any cost side with the good. In his journey towards self-realization, the human being can either seek the path of knowledge or of devotion or of selfless action.

Those three roads to salvation, however, do not stand apart but in harmony with each other complementing each other to achieve that goal. The soul must undertake that voyage with a sense of

surrender to the will of the Supreme and with selfless dedication to its righteous duty. Since tuning to the Absolute is not easy, one can devote oneself and offer all one's thoughts and actions at the altar of a personal divinity. Instead of a mechanical offering of rituals, one should strive to achieve psychological equanimity through Yoga, so that the spirit is not torn asunder by the crosswinds of success and failure, joy and sorrow, victory and defeat but will sustain its sense of unity with the divine like a steady flame unaffected by wind.

Yathā dīpo nivāstho nengate sopamā smrtā  
Yogino yatachittasya Yunjato yogamātmanah. B.G. VI.19

The Bhagavad Gita has inspired Indians and foreigners alike through the centuries. Its path of knowledge inspired Sankara's Advaitism, its path of devotion produced Rāmanuja's Visishtadvaitavada; its path of selfless action became the central theme of Lokmanya Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi, who led India's millions to freedom.

Prominent among the foreigners inspired by the Upanishadic axiom, "Aham Brahmasmi"—"I am Brahman"; "Soham"—"I am He" was poet Emerson who came to believe that there was one mind common to all individual men and remarked that Whosoever had access to this universal mind was a party to all that is or can be done, for that was the only and sovereign agent."

From the age of the Vedas and the Epics, let us now move on to the Age of the Buddha, the Enlightened One. A deep and subtle knowledge of Truth had represented the quintessence of Upanishadic wisdom. With the passage of time, however, the Vedantic heritage was getting eroded by a heavy accent on ritualism on the one hand and asceticism on the other. The Buddha stressed that Nirvāna could not be achieved either by elaborate rituals or by the mortification of the flesh through severe ascetic practices. Gautam Buddha accepted the Vedic doctrine of Karma, of cause and effect being eternally entwined. He accepted, too, the Vedic concept of Punarjanma, rebirth of the spirit carrying the karma of the previous birth with it and set Moksha or Nirvāna, i. e. release from the cycle of births and deaths as the highest goal of life. However, he was convinced that Nirvāna could be gained only by following the Majjhimapatipada, the Middle Path in which he synthesized some central concepts of the Vedic Age with his own concept of the road to Nirvāna. That comprised an understanding of the Four Noble Truths of life, Chatvāri Ārya Satyāni, viz. the noble truth of suffering or pain, the noble truth of craving as the cause of pain, the noble truth of the cessation of pain through the cessation of craving, as well as of the Eight-fold Path consisting of the right view, right intent, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right endeavour, right mindfulness and right concentration as the recipe for Nirvāna.

In Buddha's view, like Krishna's earlier in Bhagvadgīta, ethical conduct constituted the foundation of spiritual existence and not Vedic rituals. The seeker of Enlightenment has to concentrate on eliminating Avidyā (ignorance); acquiring six perfections (pāramitas), namely, generosity, morality, patience, vigor, concentration and meditation; achieving Pure Consciousness; and reaching the acme of spiritual existence, Shunyata, emptiness.

A person's spirituality expressed itself in multiple ways such as Maitri (Universal Brotherhood), Karuna (Universal Compassion), Upekshā (Detachment) and Prajñā (Intuitive Wisdom). In a departure from the Vedic Chāturvarnya or caste-based social divisions, the Buddha denounced caste distinctions as an assault on human dignity, believed in the equality of all human beings and compassion for all living things. In order to perpetuate his thinking, the Buddha also established

what might have been the first monastic order of the world. He also established the first nunneries. For running the monasteries, he prescribed a democratic system based on resolutions adopted through a vote and their validity based on a minimum quorum.

The Buddha, however, was working within the Upanishadic tradition of reflecting on the nature of the self. His was a reformist movement, not a new creed. King Aśoka carried Buddha's doctrine to the four corners of India through his edicts and stupas, some three hundred years after him. Aśoka also sent missionaries to far-off lands including Egypt, Greece, Burma (now Myanmar), and Sri Lanka. True to the Indian tradition of tolerance, Aśoka stated in his edicts that those who harmed the sects and religions of others caused hurt to their own. The gaunt specter of violence involving much loss of life in his expeditions had moved his heart to the core. He, therefore decided to convert "the drums of war into the drums of righteousness." His message thereafter was the same as the Buddha's—of universal love, peace, and non-violence. Aśoka adopted these shibboleths as an instrument of state policy or Rajadharma rooted as it was in the coexistence and harmony of various sects that marked India's landscape.

The Buddha lived in the sixth century before Christ during what is known as the Age of Republics in India. Though born a Prince, he shared the democratic spirit of his times. He also belonged to the age of great intellectual fervor in the annals of history, which gave birth to Confucius and Lao Tse in China and to Socrates, Plato and later Aristotle in Greece. Buddha's legacy, however, has lasted much longer than theirs due to its timeless message and universal appeal.

Later, when the Buddha was deified and Buddhism started acquiring the trappings of a separate religion, the all-embracing Hinduism accepted him as an incarnation of Vishnu and Buddhism as a sect within its own fold. Both religions assimilated each other's forms. As for their philosophic tenets, Sankaracharya's Advaita came so close to Mahayana Buddhism that even in his own lifetime Sankara was charged of being a clandestine Buddhist (Prachchhanna Buddha). Thus for the Hindus, the Buddha and his word have been part of their own cultural setting.

Another great figure during the Age of the Republics in India was Mahāvira Digambara Jain. Mahavira believed that everything in the universe consisted of atoms and that they were not inanimate objects but life-full. He was one of the strongest proponents of non-violence and his devotees were to keep their nose covered with cloth to inhale filtered air so as not to kill germs. The practice has continued, but again the doctrine of Mahavira and the corpus of gods and goddesses that grew around him in the style of the Hindu pantheon led to an inevitable synthesis, often making it difficult to distinguish between the sculptural motifs of Hinduism and Jainism. Hinduism accepted the latter, too, as a distinct sect within its own fold. While Buddhist monasteries do look somewhat different from Hindu temples, there is not much distinction in the architectural and sculptural forms in Hindu and Jain institutions. In the Hindu tradition, Jainism and Buddhism are treated as sects with their own identity but within its fold and a Hindu accepts their tradition or parampara as part of his rich cultural heritage.

Two centuries later Alexander's conquest of Persia had brought him to the doorstep of India and, though after a few bloody skirmishes with the northwestern states of India, his forces obliged him to retreat, his satraps continued to rule over the area west of the Indus. Chandra Gupta Maurya, the grandfather of Aśoka, defeated Seleucus, who ruled from Bactria, married his daughter Helena. He also accepted a Greek Ambassador, Megasthenes, to his court who turned Buddhist. The reign of

Chandragupta's grandson Aśoka was marked by a great deal of interaction between India and Greece.

The commingling of the two great cultures of the world, Indian and Greek, led to a flowering of new art forms. The first images of the Buddha in Gandhara are draped in the transparent Greek style. However, later one finds the Buddha at Sarnath and Ajanta as uniquely indigenous in character. With the Greeks also came their coins which were imitated in India and mixed with India's own numismatic tradition resulting in the minting of very beautiful coins.

The Mauryan Empire also saw a good deal of interaction with Persia. There is a remarkable similarity between the Aśokan pillars and those of Persepolis; but again, in the rock-cut temples of India and later in the beautiful temples constructed throughout India in the early medieval times, India's own genius overtakes every suggestion of a foreign influence. The spirit of synthesis warranted that while there was no resistance to things alien as such, the good in them was to be integrated with the indigenous tradition and richer patterns evolved for adoption. Instead of treating other contemporary cultures as antithetical to India's own, there was to be a subtle evolution towards a synthesis in the spirit of the unity of things. Said the Upanishads:

Aa no bhadraḥ kratavo yāntu vishvataḥ  
Let good thoughts come to us from all over.

India's philosophy and religion held out a fascination for aliens coming to India whether for conquest or settlement. Not only Heliodorus, an Ambassador from the Indo-Greek court of Taxila became a devotee of Vishnu as far back as the second century as testified by a pillar after his name not far from Sanchi. Actually, whole dynasties such as those of the Scythians, Kushans, and Parthians became Indian by faith. Similarly, whole tribes such as those of the Huns were accepted within the fold of Hinduism. In the Hindu view of life, the emphasis on the knowledge of the self was no barrier to great advances in humanities, sciences, and fine arts. During the Gupta period, one witnesses the construction of exquisite sculptures adorning religious sites, and great philosophical works written on the six systems of Indian philosophy.

Simultaneously, however, India reached new heights in mathematics and astronomy, too. The discovery of zero and of the decimal system revolutionized mathematics. Aryabhata, who was responsible for the decimal system, also discovered that the earth rotated around its axis and calculated, by a very slight margin of error, the length of the day and the year. He also figured the eclipses correctly and his discoveries travelled to far off places on the globe.

Varahamihira contributed greatly to every branch of the natural sciences. India's medicinal systems went to distant parts of Asia as far as Japan, right across Tibet, Mongolia, Korea and China, and its numerals, mathematics and astronomy to West Asia and the Middle East. India's universities at Takshila, Nalanda, and Vikramaśila became centres of learning for students from distant lands and diverse cultures. Scholars such as Atīśa, and saints like Padmasambhava went from India to Tibet, and to China went Kumarjiva, who translated the Buddhist works into Tibetan and Chinese. From there they were translated again into other Asian languages.

Buddhism received a new fillip during the reign of Harsha who ruled northern India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Huen-tsang, a Buddhist monk who visited India during his rule all the way from Loyang in central China collected more than 700 Mahāyāna manuscripts and returned with them to his native



monastery as Moksha Deva. Buddhism was treated as a part and parcel of the mighty stream of Hinduism, which had room for all such variations and reforms.

A thousand years later came Guru Nanak, who gave birth to Sikhism. His creed with its emphasis on martial virtues was meant to defend Hinduism from foreign assaults. Guru Granth Saheb, the holy scripture of the Sikhs beautifully puts the sayings of many saints together who had all propounded religion as an instrument of universal brotherhood. He combined the simplicity of Islam with the catholicity of Hinduism and was received with acclaim in several Islamic countries in the Middle East.

Islam came to India first in the form of Arab merchants and then with the sword of Muslim conquerors. India initially suffered much at their hands; but once Delhi became their capital, the immigrants were “nationalized”, as it were, as time passed. They took “national” pride in being rulers of Hindustan and several of them worked to promote harmony between native and alien cultures. As early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. ‘Indian’ Islam particularly in the states of Bengal, Jaunpur, Gujarat, and Malwa began to reflect a synthesis characteristic of Indian culture. Sultan Ahmed Shah, who founded the city of Ahmedabad in 1411 in Gujarat, raised beautiful structures with a marked influence of Hindu architecture. His successor was also a patron of Hindu art. Under rulers such as Sultan Mohammed, according to the account of his chroniclers, Mohammedans and Hindus maintained friendly interaction with each other. In the state of Malwa, the Muslim Sultan had a Hindu Prime Minister. In Jaunpur, mosques and palaces of Muslim rulers displayed a happy blend of the two architectural styles. Sir John Marshall, a Western historian, noted emphatically that the Muslim architects, with their background of Sassanian and Byzantine art patterns, developed a new vision when they looked at the great buildings of India and took full advantage of them in creating new designs and patterns of beauty.

Even under the most bigoted of kings, Alauddin Khilji and Firozshah Thughlaq, the Hindu religious leaders received honors and recognition. The intermingling of the two cultures was facilitated by the fact that even under India’s Muslim rulers, the best part of officialdom remained Hindu and forced conversions were avoided because of the need to procure the services of as many eminent people as possible from among the Hindus to govern large territories.

The Hindu movements such as Vaishnavism and Saivism of great fame continued to thrive under Muslim rule. Devotional figures like Jayadeva, the author of Gita Govinda, Mirabai, Rāmananda and Kabir, all arose during those times. Islam’s message of one God and of the equality of all human beings reminded the Hindus of the age-old ethos of India of the unity of all things.

The great Bhakti movements that arose in India during that period reaffirmed the belief that one could call the Supreme Being by any name—Rāma, Śiva, Vishnu, Krishna, Kali, or Sakti—since they were all manifestations of one and the same reality. The Bhakti movements of India merged and mingled very beautifully with the Sufi movement of Islam. Both of them rested on the bedrock of mysticism and were essentially tolerant towards each other.

The harmonization of the Hindu and Islamic traditions touched its acme under the Mughals in India. Akbar, the greatest of the Mughal Kings, propounded a new faith which he called Din-Elahi. It sought to assimilate the best from other religions of his time into his native tradition. His new faith was based on the Indian belief that attaching exclusivity to a dogma or faith was to impose limitations on the frontiers of knowledge and experience.

Akbar appointed a Hindu Raja like Man Singh to the governorship of Kabul and gave full freedom to his Hindu consorts to practice their own faith. Within the four walls of the Red Fort of Delhi, the temple and the mosque stand side by side. India's best musicians like Tan Sen adorned Akbar's court and some classical forms of Indian dancing reached their high watermark in his time. Kathak dancing with its origin in the Oudh court at Lucknow imbibed an impressive mix of the Hindu and Islamic traditions.

Like Akbar, his son Jehangir and grandson Shahjahan looked at all their subjects with an equal eye. Shahjahan immortalized himself by constructing one of the world's wonders, the Taj Mahal, as a mausoleum for his wife, Mumtaz. Containing a unique blend of the Hindu and Muslim forms of architecture, the Taj Mahal is a marvel both in its conception and translation on the ground. It is a tribute to India's spirit of synthesis that it could weave two completely distinct and proud strands of culture into a homogeneous whole so magnificently.

The Mughal art was not simply a transplant from another country or region into India. In Jaunpur, the mosques and palaces of Muslim rulers displayed a happy blend of the Hindu and Muslim architectural styles. The mausoleum of Akbar at Sikandara, too, is also unique in many ways. It was conceived on the lines of a Buddhist vihara, which speaks volumes of the architectural synthesis achieved on Indian soil in medieval times.

Nowhere is India's capacity to synthesize more manifest than in music. Amir Khusro is an illustrious symbol of that synthesis. Aiman, Tarana, Qol, Suhla and several other tunes sung by millions in the subcontinent are a living testament to the assimilative genius of India. Prominent Muslim musicians were deeply inspired by it and put its stamp as much on the new music forms they evolved but also on musical instruments like Sitār, a simpler variant of Vīna.

Sultan Hussain Sharqu, King of Jaunpur, was a great lover of music, and it was he who introduced the khayal style in Indian music. "The cooperation of Hindus and Muslims, for almost a thousand years has brought about a consummation that has perhaps no equal in the world," said Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad. The growth of Indian classical patterns of music under the Muslim rulers and Gharanas has been a major source of the cultural unity of this entire region. For hundreds of years, most themes of Indian classical music have derived themselves from Hindu mythology but some of the greatest masters of that music have been Muslim.

It would be interesting to note that the Kitab-i-Nauras, a collection of songs in praise of Hindu deities and Muslim saints, was written by a 17th century ruler, Ibrahim Adil Shah II. Through the common idiom of music and dance, the people of this subcontinent have expressed their joys and sorrows, their struggles and aspirations, and other emotions for centuries together and their homes have reverberated with music after the assimilation of diverse streams from different climes.

Thus, through the vistas of the past, through many centuries, the voice of the sages of the Himalayas and the recluses of the forest has run into a running stream—the voice that spoke to us through the Vedic Rishis and Upanishadic saints, through the Buddha and Mahavira, through the prophets, and holy men and women of numerous faiths along the corridors of time right up to Mahatma Gandhi. They all believed in "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"—the entire world is but one family. Said Vivekananda: "There are differences in non-essentials in religion, but in essentials they are all one."

Unity in diversity is the plan of the universe. True religion is meant to unite rather than divide. Ultimately the goal of every religion is human well-being, spiritual, mental and physical. The Vedas proclaimed that long ago: “Yatobhyudaya-nishreyas siddhih sa Dharmah”-- That which ensures well-being in this world as well as beyond is Dharma. The Bhagavad Gita expresses the same sentiment when it says:

“The one who by self-analogy feels for all  
In gladness or in grief alike  
The yogi par excellence is he.  
Arjuna that is the abiding truth (VI: 32) 32

Two centuries after Krishna, the Buddha, too, propounded this golden rule: “Do not do unto others what you do not wish done to yourself and wish for others what you desire and long for yourself . This is the whole of Dharma, heed it well.” Jesus Christ who followed the Buddha after a gap of six centuries enjoined upon his followers to do the same: “Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them.” Later Prophet Mohammad instructed his followers thus: “Thou should like for others what thou would like for thyself.” (Hadis)

Bhagavad Gita’s three-fold path of Jñana, Bhakti, and Karma Yoga is matched by similar triads in other creeds: Śīla, Prajñā and Samādhi in Buddhism; Samyak charitra, Samyak darśana and Samyak-jñāna in Jainism; work, knowledge and spiritual elevation in Christianity and Shariat, Tariqat and Haqiqat in Islam.

The inherent desire of man to be at peace with himself and with his surroundings is central to all religions. Mahatma Gandhi also believed in the soul of religion to be one but encased in many forms. Placing ethics above everything else, he echoed his understanding of religion thus: “Co-operation with forces of good and non-cooperation with forces of evil are the two things we need for a good and pure life whether it is called Hindu, Muslim or Christian.”

One of the most interesting features of medieval India is the interaction between Sufism and the Bhakti movement. The latter had its basis in the Bhagavad Gīta and Bhāgavatam. In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna speaks to Arjuna on diverse routes to attain him thus:

‘By whichever way men approach me, so do I reach them;  
O Partha, from all over, the paths men follow are mine.’ B.G.IV.11

Both the Sufi Pirs and the Bhakti saints were immersed in the contemplation of a loving and compassionate God. The bond between them comes into limelight in medieval miniatures portraying the dialogue between saintly men drawn from both Hinduism and Islam. Self-realization through the contemplation of the “Other” was their primary goal. Ibn-eI-Arabi, the greatest Arabic mystic of Islam, states: “God is the object of worship not in the sense that he is exclusively the God of the Muslims, the Christians or the adherents of any other religion, but in the sense that He is the Essence of everything that is worshipped.” He breathes the same spirit into his compositions. He treats love as a pearl worthy of imparting a deep religious experience and says:

“My heart has become a receptacle of every form,  
It is a pasture of gazelles and a convent for Christian monks.

For Tables of the Torah and the Book of the Quran,  
I follow the religion of love whichever way do the camels take,  
This is my religion and my faith”.

Kabir who made no distinction between Rāma and Rahīm said:

“Hari is in the East; Allah is in the West. Look within your heart, for there you will find both Rahīm and Rāma. All the men of the world are His living embodiment!”

Kabir also treated himself as the offspring both of Allah and of Rāma out of his conviction that they were one and the same. He spoke of Rāma in highly eulogistic terms. He is my Guru, He is my Pir, he said. Later Swami Vivekananda told world audiences : “I accept all religions that were in the past and worship with them all. I worship God with every one of them.”

More recently Arnold Toynbee paid a tribute to ‘the catholic minded Indian spirit’ and prescribed it as “a way of salvation for human beings of all religions in an age in which we have to learn to live as a single family, if we are not to destroy ourselves.”

Kaji Nazrul Islam, the great revolutionary poet of Bangladesh, always prayed for Hindu-Muslim unity. In one of his poems, he says:

“Mora eki brinte duti kerse, Hindu Musalman,  
Muslim tahar Hindu tuhar pran.”

“Hindus and Muslims are but flowers from the self-same branch.  
The Muslim is the jewel of the flower’s eye, Hindu its heart.”

Catholicity of spirit has served to create a strong bond among the people of India to whatever faith they might belong. Faiz Ahmad Faiz has been an all-time favourite in India and Firaq Gorakhpuri was equally adored in Pakistan. Like the poets, the Pakistani ghazal maestros have also had a large fan following in India. Mehndi Hasan and Gulam Ali have captivated the heart of several mehfilis in India through the magic of their works. Similarly, Lata Mangeshkar, Amitabh Bacchan and Madhuri Dixit had been household names in Pakistan.

Through the centuries past, people of diverse faiths and cultures have coexisted and tolerated each other in India. The Dravidian, Aryan, Greek, Central Asian, Mongol, Persian, Arabic, European, and many more ethnic and cultural streams have all joined to fill up the mighty ocean of our civilization. Nowhere else in the world have so many cultures met and coalesced with each other through the corridors of time. Here we do not find uniformity of religious conduct and belief, but a harmonization of various faiths into a symphony of spiritual quest.

By now, we have traversed some 12 million years through the corridors of Indian history from the days of Rāmapithecus on. Let us now walk along its final phase of some two hundred years when India’s interaction with Christianity became intense under the colonial era. India was trading with Rome before the birth of Christ and knew Greece from well before that. Christianity came to India in AD 58 with the arrival of Saint Thomas. However, legends speak of Christ himself having stayed in Kashmir for a long time for study and penance. The Syrian Church has flourished in India since the first century of the Christian era while in recent times other Christian denominations have come and established their institutions in India.

The onset of Christianity in India led to the emergence of religious movements such as the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj that undertook to rid the Hindu society of some of its anachronistic ways and practices. The Hindu Renaissance that followed produced saints such as Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Vivekananda, Yogananda, Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi, who all studied the message of Christ very closely and believed that it was not much different from that of their own religion with its emphasis on Truth and Love. Inspired by that message, Mother Teresa, a Yugoslav settled in Calcutta, stole the hearts of millions in India and abroad through her massive campaigns to help the downtrodden and the victims of natural disasters and wars round the globe till the end.

One might say that if the Indian civilization has remained a living organism even after five millennia since its birth and has not suffered the fate of several other ancient civilizations, it has been so because of its remarkable spirit of synthesis and harmony fostered by its millennial heritage. In the midst of turmoil and travail, our culture has retained a core of spirituality that makes us work on several levels of consciousness and realize how important it is for the human being to discover his own self, as it is to discover the world outside.

The cultural mosaic of India is marked by a unique synthesis of diverse schools of thought, of a variety of faiths and of races and tongues both alien and indigenous. We have never looked at spiritualism and science as two polar entities but at both as instruments for the search of truth. Fortunately, the realization is growing in the world of science today that a gene is not only matter but also carries with it a psycho-spiritual content from its very inception, and that when a life disintegrates, just as its material components merge with the elements around, its psychological and spiritual content must also find its way into a cosmic force. This has led several scientists to point towards the existence of cosmic consciousness behind the paraphernalia of nature, the intransient in the midst of transience. That is not too far from the concepts of Purusha and Prakriti, of Jivatma and Paramātma, Janma and Punarjanma propounded by our sages of old. The Bhagavad Gita tells us repeatedly that the spirit is eternal and unborn, that fire cannot burn it nor water drench, nor air dry, nor weapons cleave it.

The human race is one. Let the East and the West meet in the glory of the universal spirit and experience a new joy of living based on the foundations of truth, love, and non-violence. A new synthesis is already rising from the ashes of the past. Let us grasp it and move towards a new dawn in our history. That is as necessary for our survival as for evolution and growth. We must either synthesize or perish.

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