

W (h)ither Indian Mind

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The Indian mind has always maintained a singularly enigmatic identity that has defied all definitions and baffled sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers by its highly complex character. A meeting point of diverse races and cultures and of long years of chequered history, the Indian mind manifests a veritable saga of an unbroken human civilization. The multiplicity of languages, sects, customs, religions, beliefs, and practices that this mind nurtures has conferred upon it a certain distinctness and novelty which, over the years, has proved to be inimitable and ineffaceable. Naturally therefore, the Indian mind has often been the subject of study for scholars and researchers both in India and abroad.

With waters lapping the Indian peninsula, it might have been quite easy to drift away, to be drowned, but then, to be vulnerable or to succumb has seldom been the Indian way. With Himalayan grandeur, this ancient civilization has withstood several severe onslaughts, there have been repeated inroads of foreign races that came to conquer but ultimately lost themselves in the vastness of Indianness. Treading along the paths of history, India has experienced and accumulated varied influences- indigenous and foreign- in its cultural casket. Assimilation, not rejection, has been her stance. Indeed, today when our world envisions a global culture and talks in terms of a world forum, it is pleasing to point out that prototypical trends of cross-cultural, inter-racial, and inter-religious, interactions have thriven on the Indian peninsula since age-old times.

While writing the life of J.R.D. Tata, R. M. Lala recounts how the Zoroastrians (called "Parsees") made their debut in India on her western coast with an intelligent gesture that was both cordial and thoughtful. After two centuries of rule, the Achaemenian Dynasty founded by Cyrus the Great was overthrown by King Alexander, and other dynasties followed. In the seventh century, "the Crescent and the Sword swept over the land of Cyrus and Darius the Great. "The Persians found themselves confronted with the choice of either being converted to Islam or being slaughtered. A Few adventurous Persians "set sail in little boats, treasuring their sacred fire, and headed for the west coast of India." They landed in Gujarat and more boats followed later. When the voyagers on the first boat arrived in India, the local Hindu raja sent a vessel full of milk to the refugees. He meant to indicate to these newcomers that the place was full to the brim and that there was no room for them. A Zoroastrian priest, who headed the group on the boat, poured sugar into the receptacle of milk, which did not overflow.

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He then requested the raja's representative to take that vessel of milk back to his master. Through this, the priest wished to convey to the raja, the message that these refugees would mix with the raja's people and enrich his state. Of course, the newcomers were granted permission to stay. And, for over a millennium thereafter, the Zoroastrians, known as Parsees - after the province of Pars in Persia - have flourished in India.

Almost in the same way, the eastern coast of India witnessed another meeting of cultures when more than two hundred years ago, on 11 November 1793, William Carey - the Christian missionary, landed at Calcutta. He established the Serampore Mission near Calcutta for spreading the message of Christ; he also served the cause of education and humanity. It is in this context that Serampore College acquires a special significance for this deliberation. The Serampore College, founded by the famous RTIO of Serampore Mission- William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, is indeed one of the unique cases of convergence of diverse religions and cultures. It is an institution that imparts theological education along with secular education. In fact, William Carey - the founding father, settled down here and died at this college- the college of his own creation.

While spreading the message of God, William Carey must have realized that he had come to a unique land. For, India has been multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious country where diverse faiths like Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, and other religious sects, coexist. Here, people not only coexist, but also learn and enrich themselves from each other. Tolerance, togetherness, and interdependence pave the way of life, and these healthy attitudes are passed down through generations, facilitating and onward march of the country towards a multi-cultural global community.

In 1793, Carey's was a case of the West coming to the East, to spread the message of Christ. Exactly hundred years after, an Indian and a Hindu travelled to the West, to spread the message of Hinduism. He was Swami Vivekananda who addressed the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago on 11 September 1893. Speaking at the August assembly, the Swami proclaimed, "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true." This is indeed the essence of our Indian faith and the quintessence of our quiet existence.

While addressing the Parliament of Religions, Vivekananda also quoted a few lines from a hymn which he remembered to have repeated from his earliest boyhood, and which he believed was repeated everyday by millions of human beings: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee." The Swami observed that the gathering was in itself a indication and a declaration to the world, of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita: "Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me."

Elsewhere, Swami Vivekananda has explained this Indian religious point of view: "I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan;

I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his law; I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the light which enlightens the heart of everyone." According to Vivekananda, religion is not in doctrines, not in dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming; it is realization. And in this seeking, can be heard echoes from the Bible- from Christ's own words:

"Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

The Indian mind knows of a faith that is expansive and all – encompassing in nature; its philosophy is inclusive and not exclusive in outlook. To return to Vivekananda again, " If there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development." Obviously, it is in such a land where cultures, races, religions, sects are all embraced into one fold called 'humanity', and it is in such environs where flourished the visions of a world community.

Two exemplary cases of a convergence of the spirit of Hinduism and the ethos of Christianity, of the East and the West, are Sister Nivedita who was a westerner and came to India as a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, and in our more recent times, Mother Teresa who was an Albanian and came to settle at Kolkata for the cause of the poorest of the poor. For these noble souls, serving man was serving God; they spoke the universal language of love. They saw the world as an undivided humanity that knows no barrier or religion, race, class, and nationality. Silently and sincerely, they endeavoured to usher in a world that Alfred Lord Tennyson envisioned in his poem, *In Memoriam*:

"Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be."

Interestingly, our Indian culture, its philosophy, and literature have always championed such a wider and liberated view. Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate in Literature from Bengal, emphasized this essential oneness of mankind and visualized a universal man. The lines from his famous Nobel – winning English *Gitanjali* expresses the religion of this universal man:

"When one knows thee, then alien there in none,
Then no door is shut. Oh, grant me my prayer that
I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the one
In the play of the many."

This "touch of the one in the play of the many" sums up our Indian faith that is, amidst all religions and with all religions, we are one. Tagore here meant that for one who has truly realized God, no man is a stranger and no land is foreign - all are of one family. It must have been this same conviction, this undeterred hope and faith in the sovereign grace of God that enable William Carey to work amongst alien men in an alien land for the cause of the neglected

and the oppressed. His noble and dedicated life was a unique unison of the Hindu concept of 'karma' and the Christian aspiration for 'divine grace.' Indeed, such is man's journey from 'karma' to 'grace', to sublimity through activity. The meeting point of all races, religions, cultures, and nationalities - arching over all barriers and differences - is a 'liberated mind'.

That is why; Tagore's 'Indian Pilgrimage' hails one and all with great fervour:

“Come ye Aryans, come non – Aryans,
 Hindu, Muslim, come all.
 Come ye English, come ye Christian,
 Come Brahmin, cleanse your mind
 And hold others by the hand,
 Come ye outcaste come ye lowly ones,
 Fling away your load of shame!
 Come, one and all, to the Mother's crowning come,
 Fill the sacred bowl and let all unite
 And consecrate the waters
 On the shore of vast humanity
 That is India.”

In his famous book, *The Discovery of India*, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru too observes that ancient India, like ancient China, was a world in itself, a culture and a civilization, which gave shape to all things. He explains that foreign influences poured in and were absorbed into the Indian culture. He believes that some kind of a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization. But, Nehru asserts:

“That unity was not conceived as something imposed from outside, a standardization of externals or even of beliefs. It was something deeper and, within its fold, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practiced and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged.” Mahatma Gandhi in his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, articulates the same philosophy that helps to realize such a co-existence: “To see the universal and all – pervading spirit of truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself.”

A western stalwart, F. Max Miller, reflected on the Indian mind and paid one of the finest tributes to this age – old civilization. Miller commented, “If I were to look over the whole world to find out the country most richly endowed with all the wealth, power and beauty that nature can bestow — in some parts a very paradise on earth — I should point to India.” Coming down to the present day, our revered President, APJ Abdul Kalam, - a nuclear scientist and a renowned scholar - has been attempting to keep aflame this same spirit of love and abundance. He writes, “We are a great civilization and each one of us born here must trust in the wisdom of this civilization. Our scriptures tell us that there is no barrier between the world, that we are the world just as the world is in us. It is for you to put yourself in tune with the music of the universe.” Very clearly are audible here the heralds of a borderless global community.

Having said this far, it is also true that there are materialistic aberrations, which are, at times, rampant. A comparative viewing of the noble idealism of the Indian mind and the stark reality of life in the Indian society today can engage any critical onlooker in debates that may last another millennium. For, instances of political, social, and communal violence, casteism, religious fundamentalism, and parochialism continue to brutally sear the Indian scene; stubbornly disgraceful blots these are on the traditional Indian ethos of tolerance and goodwill. The violation of human rights, political feuds, and unabashed opportunism has often stained the country's records. Corruption and greed, commercialization and consumerism, frictions amongst factions have, of late, been cankering the moral fibre of the society and attempting to creep into the sacred corridors of educational portals. Such deplorable developments have given cynics a scope to question the integrity of India's diversity. This explains the anomaly encapsulated in the caption of this paper - '*W(h)ither Indian Mind.*'

The Indian mind has been, over centuries, grooming itself on a philosophically holistic and humanitarian ideal. Towards this envisaged destination, it ought to proceed and is striving to proceed: this is *whither* the Indian mind must ideally lead. But are there also some disquieting signs of the heritage – rich Indian mind withering away? No, for, diversity has indeed been integral to Indian heritage. But then, we too have our roles to play and responsibilities to protect and promote our heritage. One cannot afford to rest contented expecting the country to preserve its sanctity and wind its way to perfection without sustained efforts. The secret of success of any mission is effort not chance. To be indolently complacent is to be hopelessly resigned. Indeed, we have to be vigilant and vibrant in preserving the very essence of our existence.

The world over, this is a tumultuous age: it is an age ridden by violence, vengeance, hatred, and petty – mindedness. Unprecedented scientific and technological developments are juxtaposed by acts of unredeemed selfishness and self – centredness. The fast – changing, professedly progressive modern society seems to suffer from an inward loneliness. It is increasingly in dire need of a reorientation to human values. Imparting value education must therefore remain an indispensable objective of the halls of learning. As S.K. Chakraborty remarks, "Values serve the process of 'becoming', in the sense of transformation of the level of consciousness to purer higher levels. They help us to distinguish between the 'desired' and the 'desirable', between the 'delectable' and the 'electable', between the 'short-term' and the 'long term', between the *preya* (the pleasant) and the *shreya* (the good)."

As our world faces the challenges of the twenty-first century and harbours ambitions of a global community, the Indian mind with its multifaceted character, is expected to play a vital role in promoting unity in diversity on an international plane. To do so, we Indians must renew our spirit of commitment and self – sacrifice. To give freely, to withhold nothing, should be our twin touchstones. The self-centredness in 'me' and 'mine' must make way for all – encompassing 'you' and 'thine'. A genuine concern for one and all must triumph over the myopic 'me – first' concept and beneath this selfless dedication to the service of humanity and beneath the will to sacrifice, must lie the capacity to love. For, selfless giving can never be truer than when propelled by love. All along, the Indian mind has striven to echo this message to lands, peoples, and cultures across distances in time and space. The essence of the spirit of this vibrant Indian mind lies in its serene conviction:

'Give to the world the best you have and
The best will come back to you.'

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