

34. Highlights of Indian Culture

Culture has been defined in many ways but all the definitions leave us with a feeling that it is something more. The expression of culture varies in different countries and although the abstract basis is the same, the outward expressions vary widely. Russian culture is essentially different from Indian culture or American culture. Culture is the best expression of a nation's soul and every nation has its own distinctive expression. It is essential to have such differences; without such variety life would be drab and monotonous. There is, however, no question of superiority or inferiority in such variations.

Tolerance, especially in the intellectual field, has always been an outstanding feature of Indian culture. A person was free to think along any line and hold any view of life; there were six systems of philosophy, including even atheism. A man can deny God and be still a Hindu; he was equally free to worship a piece of stone on the wayside. It was an accepted idea that whatever path a person followed, all paths ultimately lead to the same goal. Hence it was that in ancient times there was no thought of conversion

from one religion to another; God welcomed a person whatever be the path trod by him.

Another factor which made Indian Culture a living force in life was that it assimilated and built into itself whatever was good in other cultures and thus enriched itself all along. But everything was co-ordinated and based on the great Truth of Unity of Life. This has been the rock-bottom basis of all the various facets of our culture.

Let us now consider how this culture shaped human relation in India. Culture in India has always been associated with hospitality which is one of the outstanding traits of our country. The Vedas say that a guest should be treated as God. The welcome that is given to a guest in our country is spontaneous, warm and sincere. The other aspects of our culture can be covered by what Valmiki has said of Sri Rama. In fact Sri Rama has been depicted by the poet as the embodiment of the characteristics of a cultured gentleman; and Sri Rama himself speaks of Hanuman as a perfect example of human behaviour. A special trait of Sri Rama which is of great significance is that of being *Purvabhashi*—starting conversation first and putting the other person at ease. This characteristic is distinctive to India in contrast to what obtains in the West where two persons are generally not supposed to speak to each other unless they have been properly introduced. Civilisation in our country has been based on the community as distinct from the individual as in the West. We are courteous without effort. Courtesy with us is never a pose. Being instinctively helpful and having consideration for others, are other prominent traits. A sense of perspective, making friends easily, disagreeing politely without offending people, high thinking and simple living, these are other essential Indian ideals which express our culture.