

The Notion of Indianness: An Elucidation

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Kūrma Purāna 47,21 describes the diversity of persona found in India when it says:

Bhāratesu striyah pumso nānāvar'āé prakirtitāé,

Nānā devārcane yuktah nānā karmā'i kūrivate.

That is, Men and women in India belong to different communities, worship different Gods and practise different rites. According to Murty the question naturally arises; 'how so many different communities, who practised different rites, worshipped different gods and who were spread over the continent became woven into a single cultural pattern with a common history and spirit.'¹ In the modern times it is Iqbal who draws our attention to the mysteriousness of the element of Indianness which accounts for the perseverance and continuity of our civilization when in his poem "Taran – e – Hindi" he says:

*Yunan, Mishr, Rome, sab mit gaye jehan se;
baki magar hai ab tak namo nishan hamara;
kuch baat hai ki hasti mitati nahin hamari;
sadiyon raha hai dushman dore jaman hamara
Iqbal koi mehram apna nahin jahan men;
maloom kya kisi ko dore nihan hamara.*

That is:

(The ancient civilisations of) Greece, Egypt and Rome/Byzantium all have been wiped out from the face of the earth without trace;

But our identity continues to live on

There's something in our identity that our civilisation has not been erased;

[though] time over centuries has remained our adversary.

Iqbal! There's no confidant of ours in the whole world;

What can one know of the grief that shrouds our hearts!

The question that naturally arises is: What is that which is responsible for our uninterrupted existence over the millenniums? Apparently, in answer to this, as well as the question raised by Murty above we can say that the element responsible for our unity and the distinguishing feature of our continuity over the millennia is – our 'Indianness'. At the outset it should be clear that the question 'What does 'Indianness' consist in?' is in essence not a question about either territory, geography or history of the people called Indians. Rather, it is a question about the traditional, cultural values, the total form of lived life and philosophy that an Indian adheres to whether living within the territory of India or outside it. As Iqbal says: "*Gurbaat mein ho agar hum rahtaa hai dil*

watan mein samjho hemein wahien bhi dil ho jahhan hamara” when we're away, our heart remains with our motherland; we are at the place where our heart is. Our heart is where our values, culture and traditions are.

Historically, the geographical identity of the inhabitants of the region was chosen by ‘others’, ‘the outsiders’ and was not of inhabitants’ own choice or making. But this does not imply that the Indic people – the people residing on the other side of the river Indus – did not know the significance of the notion of geographical or historical factors in defining their identity as is thought by many indologists. The inhabitants of the region on the other side of the river Indus called their region Bharatavarsha, Matrubhumi, Punyabhumi, Dharmabhumi, Devabhumi, Karmabhumi, Jambudvipa, Bharatkhanda, or Bharat Mata. The Persians called it Hindustan. It is not merely incidental that even today in the *sankalpa sloka* recited by every Brahmin at the beginning of any ritual, or prayer like morning or evening sandhya, begins thus: “.... *kaliyuge vaivasvata manvantare bharatakhanda . . . dandakaranye (in South India) . . . samvatsare . . .*” and so on. The term ‘Bharatavarsha’ is most commonly used in the classical Indian literature to represent the geographical region in which the people now popularly known as ‘Hindus’ lived. The inhabitants called themselves ‘Bharatavaasis’ or ‘Bharatias’ – the inhabitants of Bharatavarsha. *Vishnu Purana* II.3.1 describes the geographical boundaries of Bharatavarsha thus:

*uttara yat samudrasaya himādreś caiva gacchatam/
varsa tad bhārta nāma bhāratī yatra santatih//*

The area which is to the north of the sea and extends up to the Himalayas is called Bharata and its inhabitants are known as Bharatis. Manu too in II, 23-26 of the Manusmriti says, “The tract which extends as far as the eastern and the western oceans (the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal) and the mountain range of Himalayas and the Vindhya-chala” is called Aryavrata. The Puranas give a very graphic and detailed description of Bharatavarsha. According to Puranic texts the regions and locations constituting Bharatavarsha are as under: “In the centre is Ilavrita, and to the east is Bhadravarsha. To the south-east is Hirnyaka and to the south is Bharata. To the south-west is Hari and to the west is Ketumala. Beautiful Kimpurusha varsha stood to the north west of Ilavrita”². The inhabitants of the Eastern boundaries of Bharatavarsha are called Kiratas, of the Western side are called Yavanas, Turuskas occupy the Northern boundaries and the Andhras live on the Southern boundaries. From this, it is evident that not only foreigners identified the inhabitants of this region by the geographical region inhabited by them but even the natives described themselves not in

terms of the religion practised by them but in terms of the geographical contours of the physical area occupied by them.

The Indians have been giving equal importance to history and their genealogy. Kalhan's *Rajtarangini*, Ceylonese Buddhist historical traditions *Mahavamsa* (which contains 20 centuries of Ceylonese history), and *Manjushri Mulakalpa* of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition besides *Bhaagvata*, *Harivmsa* and *Mahabharata* have been cited by K. Satchidananda Murty³ as the best examples of the Indians' concern for history. Murty asserts, "right from the time of *Satpathabrahmana* (XII 4.3) history was put on par with the sacred scripture. Kautilaya had great respect for it"⁴. Because of the oral tradition and its remoteness "history was sought to be made poetic, romantic and hardly less wide of the truth 'than the novel' "⁵. In the Biblical accounts of Adam, Seth, Enos lived for more than 800 years just as the Puranic kings did. The quest for historical Jesus is as fascinating and as difficult as the quest for historical Krishna. The histories of Greek and Rome as recounted by the classics teem with fairy tales and myths"⁶. So Indians care for their history and when they regard the lived world as *māyā* or *mithyā*, they do not mean that it is an illusion or hallucination but that it is ever-changing existence – evanescence'. The fact is that "there is no passage in any of the Hindu classics which dismisses human life and what we do and think in this world as unimportant. No Hindu scripture teaches that we are born in vain and that life has no meaning. Faith in the meaning of the world and life is a basic presupposition of Indian thought"⁷. History of individual societies, states and nations plays a minimal role in prescribing or proscribing actions which one ought to perform, or from which one should abstain. Indians realised much before others that by itself history does not help us in determining and finally realising the end that we have chosen for ourselves. It does not account for 'cultural regeneration' leading to 'all round development' of a human being or even of a society or state. Such a development is possible only when a people root themselves in their culture and tradition. Therefore, Indians do not give predominance to history or geography in defining 'Indianness', rather they prefer to explain it in terms of culture and tradition.

From the above it follows that the definition of 'Indianness' does not admit of one concise formulation. It does not arouse any unique clear and distinct picture in our mind. It is what Wittgenstein calls a family resemblance concept. Amratya Sen agrees with this contention when he says, "we have to resist two unfounded but often implicitly invoked assumptions: (1) the presumption that we must have a single – or at least principal and dominant identity; and (2) the supposition that we 'discover' our identity with no room for any choice"⁸. Therefore, to find an

answer to the question ‘what is Indianness?’ we ought to see how the term ‘Indianness’ is used. Even to the question ‘what are Indian values?’ or in other words ‘what is Indian culture and tradition?’ there is no single complete and final answer. It is because Indian culture continues to be in the making; it is something which is perennially evolving. It is what can be called a living tradition. In living it we creatively add to it, we create and recreate it. We retain certain aspects of it and discard others. The ones that are discarded are replaced by something contemporary, something novel. It is not something which is fossilised and therefore, has become either an artefact or a curio in a museum. Pure Aryan culture, tradition and values are a myth. A myth can be defined as “a story that a group of people believe for a long time despite massive evidence that it is not actually true; the spirit of myth is the spirit of Oz: Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.”⁹

Mahatma Gandhi recognizing this categorically asserted in 1931 that, “Indian culture is . . . neither Hindu, Islamic nor any other wholly. It is a fusion of all and essentially Eastern. And everyone who calls himself or herself an Indian is bound to treasure that culture, be its trustee and resist any attack upon it.”¹⁰ Murty makes it more explicit when he says that Indianness does not merely include Hindu culture but a culture that has been “formulated by the peoples of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, the Vedic Aryans and successive generations of their off-springs”. It includes besides Hindus, Cārvakas, Buddhists, Jainas, Sikhs and various tribal traditions, the Christians, Parsees, Muslims and Baha’i’s. In short it includes the traditions of all those who have made India their home. The argument that they were born on soil alien to Bharatvarsha and came from other regions does not hold good as by the same logic Vedic religion would also have to be foreign as it was brought in from “Central Asian steppes”.

From the above discussion, however, it does not follow that there are no identifiable distinct features of ‘Indianness’. On a close search we find that Indianness is an amalgamate of a group of values. The proportion in which these values are mixed varies with the context, age and circumstances. The cardinal values of Indian culture, which are not found in any other culture and are therefore unique to it, are:

1. commitment to pluralism or inclusivism;
2. upholding the doctrine of *purusārthas* – the goals of life;
3. the mindset of *abhaya*, *asanga* and *ahimsā* – freedom from fear, spirit of detachment, and non-violence;
4. The doctrine of *karma*; and
5. The doctrine of reincarnation.

It is worth mentioning here that while the Moghul emperor Babur considered reincarnation as the principal distinguishing feature of Hinduism; most others regard inclusiveness as its most significant characteristic. According to Gandhi, "If I know Hinduism at all, it is essentially inclusive and ever growing, ever responsive. It gives freest scope to imagination, speculation and reason"¹¹. That pluralism is cardinal to Indianness is demonstrated by the fact that in it "you can be many things and one thing. You can be a good Muslim, a good Keralite and a good Indian all at once"¹².

The inclusive character of Hinduism is best illustrated by the description of the genealogy of *mlechhas*, their language and religious practices in Pratisargaparva, Part I, chapter 161 of the *Bhavishyapurana*. Therein it is said that Adam and Eve (Howwa), following the dictates of Lord Vishnu, were initially living a celibate life in the garden admeasuring about four *kosas* in the Eastern part of the city provided to them by Him and were always meditating on Him. However, Kaliyuga in the form of a serpent lured Eve to eat the evil fruit. This amounted to the violation of Lord Vishnu's orders. Consequently, Adam and Eve were blessed with several sons. They and their progeny are called *mlechhas*. The duties of the *mlecchas* are "to worship Lord Vishnu, to worship fire, *ahimsa*, performing *tapas* (penance), and live a celibate life". The progeny of the *mlecchas*, the descendants of Adam and Eve is traced as follows: Shweta, → Anuha, → Keenash, → Virad, → Hanooka, → Matocchil, → Lomak, → Nyuha, → {Seema, Hama, Yakuta} → → and so on. It goes on to say, "Moosha is the chief preacher of *mlecchas* and is responsible for the spread of their religion." About the origin of the Brahmi script too it says, "This script which is written from right to left was invented by Nyuha (one of the descendants of Adam and Eve) under the direct inspiration of Lord Vishnu. According to *Bhavishyapurana* while "The language of the *mlecchas* has four lakh minor variants, *Yavani* (Greek) and *Gurundika* (English) are its chief forms". It goes on to say, "Just as in Prakrit language '*paneeya*' (water) is called '*paani*', and '*bubhuksha*' (hunger) is called '*bhookha*', in the English language '*pitri*' is called '*pater* – father' and '*bhrati*' is called '*bathar* – brother'. Similarly '*ahuti*' is '*aaju*', '*jaanu*' is '*Jainu*', '*ravivara*' is '*Sunday*', '*phalgun*' is '*February*' and '*shashti*' is '*Sixty*.'"

India was the first country or nation which confronted the 'other' for the first time in the history of the world in the form of Buddhism and Jainism and of course several *panths*. Much later in the time chain it faced challenges from the others in the form of Jews, Christians, Muslims and several other smaller sects. However, the attitude of the inhabitants of India was always one of accepting them as they are or somehow including them as one of the forms or variants of its own tradition. It was able to do so by adopting three techniques – the techniques of silence, logic and creation of myths. "One technique is to remain silent regarding other religions. A second technique

is to state philosophically or mythically what may be offensive to other religions. An argument based on logic, for instance, creates distance from the immediate context: through logic something can be said to be true yet not be interpreted personally. Similarly, stories of the gods and demons can allude to truth and illusion without directly incriminating particular religious groups¹³. Over and above these techniques the principal religions – Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism – avoided an exclusive doctrine of truth. While Hinduism categorically asserted that “*Ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti*”, and explained it through their doctrine of ‘*adhikara bheda*’, the Jainas adopted the doctrine of *anekāntāvada* and the theory of *syādavāda*. The Mahayana Buddhism resolved the issues relating to exclusive truth by their doctrine of *upaya-kaushla* – the concept of skill-in-means, which upholds that ‘seekers find truth to the extent of their intellectual capacities. Over a period of time these techniques of distancing mechanism have become a habit or etiquette of Indians to avoid overt clashes in the most natural manner.

According to Murty, up to the mediaeval period, those who came to India and “who settled down and had the receptivity received from it more than what they gave it”¹⁴. It was in the medieval period that inhabitants of India encountered Islam which had strict do’s and don’ts for its followers, used derogatory term *kafirs* infidels for those who did not follow its dictates and believed in their forcible conversion. The advent of Islam had the first major impact of an alien culture on the hitherto ‘chaste’ Indian society. Before the advent of Islam, according to historian DP Singhal, “India had assimilated all immigrant people and cultures; on the other hand, Islam had usually assimilated the culture of the land to which it went. But in India, Islam neither lost its identity nor conquered the country culturally; both appropriated something of each other”¹⁵. The encounter of Islamic culture “compelled Hindus to reflect on the state of their own beliefs, many of which had been unrecognisably overlaid by tradition, superstition and dogma. Consequently, Hindus began to bring their existing practices in line with new knowledge, mainly by resurrecting the original purity of their own scriptures”¹⁶. This impact produced a synthesis in the culture and values of the two civilisations.

Historically in the Indian tradition, the outsider has been termed as either a Turuska, or a Yavana or a *mleccha*. While *mleccha* signifies the cultural other, Turuska signifies the ethnic other, and the Yavanas the geographical other. Irrespective of the usage – cultural, ethnic or geographical – for the ‘other’ the religions in general, depending on their central teachings, treat the one whom they regard as the ‘other’ either with disdain or with esteem. They have an attitude either of hostility or of hospitality towards the perceived other. Though in theory most of them have, at least initially, an attitude of hospitality towards the one whom they treat as the outsider, in practice there

is an attitude of suspicion towards him. They use an offensive derogatory term 'pagan', or 'Kafir' for those who do not believe in the Bible, Torah or Koran. These religions generally suffer from xenophobia and the effort invariably is to convert the non-believer either by persuasion or by coercion to their fold. That is why the notion of conversion, in one form or the other, occupies a central place in each of the Semitic religions.

Nevertheless, it is not so in Hinduism. Hinduism in general does not have the doctrine of conversion. Either one is born a Hindu, or he is not. There is no way or ritual by following which one can change one's allegiance from an alien religion to Hinduism though vice-versa is possible. It is only for those who were born as Hindus but for some reason were converted to another religion that the ritual and process of *Shuddhikarana* – invented by Swami Dayananda, can be applied to reconvert them and bring them back to the folds of Hinduism. Because of this peculiar characteristic Hinduism has acquired the status of an enigma for the other religions of the world. It is an enigma because Hinduism, as opposed to the Semitic religions regards it as the given fact that there is a "plurality of religious traditions as well as a plurality of methods of studying them – both when such methods are sympathetic to it, or neutral or antagonistic towards it. There is even a plurality of paths admitted within a religious tradition. There is also . . . realisation that there could be plurality of revelations of or from the same reality"¹⁷. According to Murty global outlook and vision is the essence of 'Indianness'. The characteristic of this vision is that it "is not global in the sense that it is the sum-total of aggregate of all imperfect and superficial views. It is global in the sense that it manifests the one dynamic truth which underlies everything and which manifests itself in diverse ways, expressing itself in multiple means"¹⁸.

As explained above the Indian society has been almost from its very beginning a heterogeneous society – in terms of not only variety of religions, multiplicity of languages, but also plurality of lifestyles, values and forms of life. The religious pluralism and cultural heterogeneity could be maintained in India because the just "Indic rulers realised that it was advantageous for a prosperous kingdom that had multiple religious and ethnic identities to keep peace among them by a rhetoric of honour, by substantial material support, and by never allowing the hierarchy based on royal preference to disintegrate into religious wars"¹⁹. They avoided all kinds of conflicts by acting in a manner that fostered the welfare of everyone – *loksamgraha*. Modern India adopted this age old and tried policy and chose to be secular. Its secularism does not mean absence of religion, or irreligiousness, rather it means multi-religiousness. It implies "profusion of religions, none of which is privileged by the state and all of which are open to participation by everybody"²⁰. Indianness,

therefore, has nothing to do with the choice of God whom one worships, or the manner and place in which he chooses to worship. It lies in the principles of *sarva dharma sadbhāva* – in the harmonious attitude towards all religions; *sarva dharma samanvaya* – all religions are ultimately really one; and *sarva dharma sambhāva* – the attitude that all religions are equally worthy of respect. Since the aim of Indian way of thinking is not just theoretical awareness of oneness (*samadārśana*) but also behavioural equality (*samavartana*) these principles in practice leads to the mindset which recognises that faith is a ‘matter of hearts and minds and not of bricks and stone’, or directions or locations, or a given or pre-determined set of imperatives and proscriptions.

Indianness is the secular mindset not only in matters religious but also matters relating to linguistic, regional, class, caste, economic, political, social and physical diversities. Heterogeneity of India is reflected by the fact that on the Indian currency note the money is indicated in fifteen recognised regional languages, besides the official languages Hindi and English. In the multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious and multilingual societies in the West, the ideal of harmony of heterogeneous identities and their constitutive elements is either in terms of ‘melting pot’ or in the ‘salad bowl’, or ‘bouquet’ models or paradigms. In the former, the individual identities merge into a new and separate identity like the cohesion of elements in a chemical compound. The individual groups lose their identity. In the latter, they produce a new effect or appearance like a bouquet, yet they retain their individuality. They are like a mixture. None of these paradigms is applicable to ‘Indianness’. Indianness is like a *thali* – a platter. A *thali* is “a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meals a satisfying repast. Indians are used to multiple identities and multiple loyalties, all coming together in allegiance to a larger idea of India, an India which safeguards the common space available to each identity”²¹.

Such being the case the Indian culture, or what we may call the Indian mindset has an inbuilt “aversion to wage wars upon other cultures and destroy them”, it “allows the peaceful co-existence with mutual toleration of different castes, races, social orders, laws, religions, sects and political institutions”. It enjoins “upon its members not to fight with other cultures”. It has no faith in the principle of colonialism as it “does not teach that its followers should conquer the whole world through wars, commerce or proselytisation, or that they should worship Mammon as their Deity”. That precisely is the reason why it has survived for so long²². *Baki abhi tak hai namo nishan hamara, aur hamesha rahega bhi* – our name has survived so far and shall continue to be forever. That these values continue to be our cherished values is clear from the declarations of objectives adopted by

the National Integration Council in 1968. It declares, “the foundations of our national life is common citizenship, unity in diversity, freedom of religions, secularism, equality, justice - social, economic and political, and fraternity among all communities. The National Integration Council reiterates its faith in these values and dedicates itself to their achievement”.

K. Satchidananda Murty had a firm faith that the Indian mindset as well as the Indian culture and values discussed above are perennially evolving. He narrates the evolution of these values thus: “Time has not stood still in India, , , , There has been continuous progress; and progress means process. The religion of *R̥gveda* is the emergent from the various views that were obtained in Vedic India. The Upaniṣads are the culminations of the spiritualism embedded in the *R̥gveda*. Then again, when this free spirit of Hinduism was killed by dialectical controversies, ceremonial sanctity and moral laxity, the Buddha drew the attention of the misguided age to the simplicity of truth, prevalence of law (*dharma*) in the universe and the need for social reconstruction (*saṅgha*). At the same time when metaphysics was being misinterpreted and an unnecessary retirement from life was being advanced, the *Bhagvad-Gīta* called upon people to look upon the world as the manifestation and not the negation of the Divine and to convert life into a sacrifice unto Divine.

Then came Nāgārjuna and purged the unwholesome ascetic tendencies of corrupted Buddhism summoned people to the worship of Buddha and made Buddhism the Great-way and the Broadway (*Mahāyāna*) to salvation. Years before this, Vyāsa the author-editor of *Mahābhārta* knitted the heterogeneous cults and systems of thought into well knit fabric of spiritual thought, Hinduism. When in course of time, this spirit was lost, a kara came and restored the lost unity into the fighting creeds and warring principalities. Under the influence of Islam, the *bhakti* schools of Bengal and Maharashtra arose. They gave rise to the beautiful theory of *līlā*. Kabīr, Nānak and Akbar endeavoured to construct unified religion through a fusion of Islam and Hinduism, but this did not succeed. Then came the British and this stimulated revivalist and reformist movements within Hinduism. The forceful personality and preaching of Vivekananda stopped this disintegration, and put an end to the discords in Hinduism. The impact of the western ideas created the necessity to approach the old problems in a new way and restate the old truth. Aurobindo, Tagore and Gandhi have endeavoured to do this”²³.

The notion of Indianness, therefore, is in the cauldron. It is a potpourri whose ingredients are not yet finalised. It is still in the process of evolution. I shall conclude with what Murty said about the evolution of the notion of Indianness. He said, “Much that is unnecessary – many a useless shell and many a burdensome form – has to be purged away. . . . It is yet to be seen what type this rejuvenated culture and religion will be. But we need to have neither qualms nor misgivings, because evolution always works for the better, from the partial to the complete, from darkness unto light, and from decay into life. *Asto mā sad gamay, tamso mā jyotir gamya, mrtyor mā amrtam*”²⁴.

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Notes and References

¹ *Hinduism and its Development*, DK Printworld, 2007, p. 15.

² Veetam Mani, *Puranic Encyclopaedia*, MLBD, Delhi, 2006, p.123.

³ Cf. *Indian Spirit*, Andhra University Press, 1965

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.54

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.53.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁸ *The Argumentative Indian*, Penguin Books, 2005, p. 350.

⁹ Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus : An Alternative History*, Penguin/Viking, New Delhi, 2009, p. 22.

¹⁰ *Young India*, 30.04.1931.

¹¹ *Collected Works*, Vol 25, 178.

¹² Shashi Tharoor, *The Elephant, The Tiger & The cellphone*, Penguin, 2007.

¹³ Katherine Young, “Just War Theory in South Asia: Indic Success, Sri Lankan Failure”, Arvind Sharma (ed.), *The World Religions After September 11 Volume I*, Prager, Westport, 2009, p. 51.

¹⁴ *The Indian Spirit*, op.cit., p. pp.66-67.

¹⁵ *India and the World Civilisation*, Vol. II, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972, p.158.

¹⁶ DP Singhal, *A History of the Indian People*, Methuen, 1983, p. 158.

¹⁷ Arvind Sharma, *The World Religions After September 11 Volume III*, Prager, Westport, 2009, p. 43.

¹⁸ K. Satchidananda Murty, *Hinduism and its Development*, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁹ Katherine Young, op. cit., p. 50.

²⁰ Shashi Tharoor, op. cit., p. 63.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²² For a detailed discussion see Ashok Vohra, “Murty’s Notion of Culture: An Appraisal”, *The Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty*, Ed. Sibajiban Bhattacharyya and Ashok Vohra, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 254-273.

²³ *Hinduism and its Development*, op. cit., p. 119.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119-120.