

# Genesis of Indian Culture: A Historical Overview

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## ABSTRACT

**In India, as in some other countries of the third world, great civilizations and cultures have flourished from times immemorial. Elsewhere the link has been broken. Contemporary India reverberates with the echoes of the past and gives them new shape and form each day. The evolution of culture is the result of the interplay of two factors the physical environment and metaphysical ideas. Indian national culture also consists of these two elements: the common temperament and outlook which constitutes the Indian mind and the intellectual influences of various movements and cultures which have been incorporated harmoniously with the national mind. Abstract: The paper focuses on the cultural history of India, it find that whenever any new movement of thought originated here or came from outside, it resulted temporarily in accentuating the existing differences. But soon the Indian mind set into motion its process of seeking unity in diversity, and after some time the conflicting elements were harmonized to lay the foundation of a new culture. This vision assumes a certain objective mental form in their particular social environment and becomes the group ideal, which is then objectified into certain mental and material characteristics making up what is called culture.**

**Keywords: Culture, Movements, National Indian, Mind, Geographical, Environment, Economic And Resources**

## INTRODUCTION

What has to be emphasized here is that the concrete element of culture, which is represented by physical environment and social conditions, may be more or less important than the ideational element (represented by ideas, theories and beliefs), but it is really that which gives local colour to culture and thus constitutes the special national element Ideas, theories and beliefs are not bound to any particular locality. They leap across racial, national and geographical boundaries, and establish themselves in any part of the world; but the concrete element of culture is confined to its own particular locality. It is the atmosphere which gives to the people of a country common outlook and temperament though they may differ in their religious and philosophical ideas. M.F. Ashley Montagu described it as: ... "The first volume of the first genuine history of

India... [and that it] is likely to remain for many generations the most important of all histories of India, and, indeed, renders all others obsolete if not superfluous" (M.F. Ashley Montagu (1952: 76)

This common national temper and mind is the most important source of the common national culture. But it should be clearly understood that only such elements of these different cultures are considered to be part of the common national culture as can be incorporated so harmoniously with the collective mind of the people that all sections and communities regard them as their own. The complex form from these elements is called National Culture. "The Indian culture, often labeled as an amalgamation of several various cultures, spans across the Indian subcontinent and has been influenced and shaped by a history that is several thousand years old" (Mohammada, Malika 2007)

There are two different sets of theories about the origin of culture-the idealistic and the materialistic. Philosophers and historians subscribe to some form of the one or the other or make an attempt to harmonise them. According to the former, at some particular stage of cultural revolution, an individual or a group of individuals through intuition, inspiration or revelation coming from some supreme power, catch a glimpse of higher values or 'ideas'. Thus, for instance, according to the idealistic theory, the of the Vedic Age caught a glimpse of certain ideas through divine inspiration or through their own intuition which, in due course, took the form of an ideal suited to the social conditions and intellectual capacity of the Aryan community. They tried to put this ideal into practice in the physical environment of the Indo-Gangetic valley and in the process were created the ideas and institutions which constituted the Vedic culture. The latter class of theories says that the starting-point of culture is the physical environment. Marxist historian D. N. Jha however describes the first three volumes thus:... as informative as they are revivalist and Hindu chauvinist in approach" (D. N. Jha 1977: 176)

In the first stage, such factors as the climate, the material resources and the instruments of production used by a people put their particular stamp on man's collective life. Then principles and beliefs based on the experience gained from life take shape and finally, by a process of abstraction, we have the ideal concepts which we come to regard as self-existing entities and designate as ideas. Thus

of the Naturalistic Theory will explain the origin of the Vedic culture by saying that it is based primarily on the agricultural life which the nomadic Aryans adopted when they came to India and on that basis they gradually reared the edifice of their religion, their philosophy, their social order. Amongst these are included cultures which existed in India in the prehistoric period, those with which the country had a temporary contact, those which came from outside and made India their home, and lastly the revolutionary intellectual movements which developed in the country itself from time to time. Historian John Keay describes the work as: "... a standard work of many volumes commissioned in the 1950s to celebrate India's liberation from foreign rule and foreign scholarship "(Keay, John 2000:3 )

Perhaps the most prominent feature of India's geographical configuration is the fact that, barring the mountainous regions of the North and the Eastern and Western Ghats of the Southern Peninsula, the whole country is consist either plains or low plateaus, watered by big rivers. Leaving aside a few cold regions, the climate in the entire country is temperate during one part of the year and hot during the other part. In Bengal and some of the hilly regions, there is an abundance of rain but in most parts of the country the rains are moderate and confined to a particular part of the year. In some years' parts of the country receive no rainfall at all. While the larger part of the country can be said to have a uniform climate, actually we find all varieties, from the hottest to the coldest and from the moistest to the driest climates. Likewise, the nature of the soil differs enormously from place to place, with the result that practically all kinds of vegetable and mineral products are available in the country.

Naturally, a country which consists mainly of plains, is well irrigated, and has ample sunshine for the greater part of the year, is especially suitable for agriculture. That is why, from time immemorial, agriculture has been the main occupation of the people in India. As different parts of the country differ in their products, aid these can easily be transported by means of natural waterways or roads that can be constructed without much difficulty, internal trade developed to a considerable extent. External trade through land and sea routes, also flourished on a large scale, but it was carried on by foreigners for many centuries and; Indians themselves played a minor part. The bulk of the Indian people did not take to maritime trade readily because the sea was far removed from the hinterland of the country; only the inhabitants of the coastal regions took it up to any appreciable extent. So under the influence of the physical features and forces. India's economic life developed on an agricultural pattern and this had a marked influence on the shaping of her culture as a whole. It stressed the values of peace and constructive activity more emphatically than those of war and destruction. We meet manifestations of this spirit throughout the history of

Indian culture. The most noteworthy feature of India's economic life is that, while on account of a warm and temperate climate, the basic needs of life are fewer than in colder countries, the resources needed for satisfying them are ample.

People's basic needs in the way of food, clothing and fuel are very limited and these can be produced easily and in sufficient quantity. It is true that partly on account of our own inefficiency and partly as a legacy of an indifferent foreign government, millions of our country men are in a state of abject poverty, but history bears witness to the fact that this was not always the case. Before the British period, no acute shortage of the basic requirements of life was experienced except during periods of drought, from time to time in particular parts of the country. This fact has a special significance for us because although economic urges are always an important factor in the life of man, they begin to obsess his mind and dominate his entire life and activity when he is denied the satisfaction of his basic needs. This truth is illustrated by the fact that the economic elements played a much more important role in colder countries, where during the early stages of civilization, man had to concentrate all his attention and energy on the satisfaction of his material needs. This was not so in the warmer countries and consequently economic urges having played a comparatively smaller role in the evolution of Indian culture.

The influence of climate and economic resources on the material aspects of culture, e.g. food, dress, modes of living, etc., is too obvious to need any discussion. No one would deny the fact that the material aspect of Indian culture is also moulded on the pattern of its physical and economic environment. But when one notices the differences which characterize the people's modes of living and behavior in various regions, one is apt to wonder whether, barring certain common features which the imitation of Western civilization has produced in the educated classes, there are any common elements at all in civilization.

Beside influencing material culture, the physical environment shapes the physique and features of a people and no matter how marked may be the differences in features among the people of India, there are some common characteristics which distinguish them from other nations, This direct effect of the physical environment on the development of their physique is fairly obvious. But its indirect effect on their temperament and character, on their mental, social and moral life is not so apparent. It is therefore necessary to explain at some length how geographical factors, specially the climate of the country, have given to Indians a general outlook and temperament and helped to mould their thought and action. Indian mind has two main characteristics - the capacity for contemplation which dominates all other mental powers,

and the capacity to see and apprehend unity in diversity. Students of India's cultural history know that thought has always had a high place in the scale of values in India. But it was not purely abstract or speculative but emotional thought, i.e., not a mere conception of the universe but its direct intuitive apprehension in which the thinker finds himself steeped in love and reverence for the object of this thought. Such thinking is more religious than philosophical. That is why religious philosophy has always occupied a central place in India's cultural life. Likewise, on account of the second characteristic mentioned above, the Indian mind in its interpretation of the universe and in the formulation of its thought has tried to reduce the diversity of its manifestations to a unity.

Let us not misunderstand the import of what has been said above. It should not be taken to mean that we regard these characteristics of the Indian mind, or others to be mentioned later, as absolutely valuable or that we are unaware of the dangers associated with them. We are fully conscious of the fact that the natural inclinations of individuals as well as groups are often one-sided and it is necessary, for the proper development of the individual or national character, to cultivate them with a proper combination of encouragement and restraint. At the same time, it is a recognized fact that the fundamental nature of individuals and nations cannot be entirely changed; it can only be modified within certain limits set by its own natural capacities. There is no doubt that often speculation has so dominated the Indian mind that it has weakened the powers of action and some Indian thinkers had to revolt against it. Similarly, the search for and love of unity, was sometimes carried to such extremes as to altogether deny the reality of the manifold phenomena which made up the physical world. Then, in order to restore the balance, emphasis had to be laid on the purely materialistic side of reality.

These characteristics of the Indian mind have also considerably influenced the moral values of the people. We have already noted the fact that, on account of its peculiar intellectual trend, it regards the apprehension of Ultimate Reality to be the highest value and gives the practical values, a lower status. Similarly, its perception of unity as the principle of life leads it to regard harmony, rather than struggle, as the basis of the moral order. In this respect the contrast between the Indian mind and the modern Western mind stands out clearly. The Western mind assigns great moral importance to the struggle between man and his physical environment and regards the conquest of nature as the key to cultural progress.

The Indian mind, on the other hand, has developed in an environment which is blessed by a warm climate, a rich soil, abundant productivity and easy communication. Its normal relationship to nature is not, therefore, one of struggle but of harmony. Its fundamental moral consciousness does not

regard the world as full of forces of evil, which man must fight and overcome, but as a place where the law of goodness and justice operates and to which man has to adapt his life. If this feeling of harmony with the universe is directed properly in the light of the highest values of life it becomes a vitalizing and practical ideal. Otherwise, it is apt to degenerate into fatalism and inaction.

One would expect that in a mind where contemplation dominates, passion and desires would not be very strong. But that is not entirely the case with the Indian temperament, which is emotional and imaginative, as well. Emotionalism and sensuousness are essential characteristics of the Indian, but as these tendencies are opposed to speculative trend, there is always a strong effort to suppress them. We can constantly see this ebb and flow of abandon and repression, self-indulgence and self-denial in the cultural story of the country and its worst periods have been those in which self-indulgence dominated the life of the people. They were, however, followed by a natural reaction and the phase of self-denial which served as a purgative to cleanse the soul of its accumulated grossness and to bring it back to normality.

We have seen that, on the whole, in most parts of the country, there is a certain regularity and moderation in the changes of the weather. Barring the amount of rainfall which may differ considerably from year to year, the climatic conditions are fairly steady. Every season begins at fixed times and its intensity varies within fixed limits. Cataclysmic phenomena which disturb the normal routine of the natural process are rare. There are no volcanic eruptions and earthquakes are slight and infrequent. No stronger natural accidents than storms and tempests of moderate intensity are experienced by the people. How has this long observation of regularity and continuity of natural process influenced the Indian mind? Perhaps the most important effect has been the feeling that the operation of the moral law is just as regular and continuous as that of the law of nature.

In primitive stages man does not distinguish at all between the moral and the physical world. His moral conceptions are based entirely on observation of nature. So from the very beginning, the Indian mind has adhered firmly to the conviction that the moral consequences of every action are as definite and inevitable as the succession of seasons. The doctrine of predestination, which is apt to degenerate into fatalism, is in reality the connecting link between the working of the moral law and the natural law, as conceived by the Indian mind. Its essence is that the consequences of man's action take place in the physical world and are to some extent subject to laws of nature, over which man has no control. Obviously this theory is not objectionable in it, but just as the element of quietism present in the Indian mind, can, during the periods of decadence, easily lead to

inaction, so can predestination easily take the form of fatalism.

There is another characteristic of the Indian mind which also originates from the influence of the regularity and continuity with which the laws of nature operate in this part of the world, namely, that the changes which occur in its habits of thought and action are gradual, not abrupt. In other words, the law of its being is not revolution but evolution. But this does not mean that the Indian mind is incapable of undergoing big changes or that it always takes a very long time over them. What we want to suggest is that the process of change can be felt at every step and its stages can be clearly marked out. The main difference between evolution and revolution is that in the former we can see all the links in the chain, while in the latter, some of the links are not perceptible and so, when the chain is complete we experience a sudden and intense shock. The Indian mind is spared such violent jolts because its reaction to new ideas and movement is conscious and gradual.

We have already seen how the warm, and in some parts moderately hot, climate of the country, the fertility of the soil and the abundance of water made India suitable for agriculture. So agriculture was started here as soon as the crudest implements of tilling the soil were available. As a rule communities which took very early to agriculture are matriarchal and have a deep and strong feeling for family and social life. All those constructive qualities which are necessary for cultural development are more prominent in them than in communities which were originally nomadic. They are more peace-loving and humane. That is why in certain parts of the country, e.g., in the Indus Valley, culture had passed out of the primitive into the secondary stage of its development a couple of thousand years before the advent of the Aryans. Later, many nomadic and warlike people came to the country and their admixture modified the national temperament considerably. But qualities like the depth of feeling for family life, love of peace and kindness have always been, and will continue to be, important ingredients of the Indian character.

Agricultural life and the general geographical conditions have also played a great part in shaping the political structure and development of the country. Obviously, in an agricultural country population is not concentrated in a few cities but is scattered over the villages. Even today, the number of cities is comparatively small in India and about 70 per cent of the population lives in villages which are, in many parts, wide apart from one another. Towards the end of the ancient period, the population of the country did not, according to historians exceed 100,000,000 and, therefore, it must have been more scattered and the villages situated at greater distances. Under such conditions, political development tends towards decentralization and so, from the very beginning down to the advent of the British, the basic political unit in India was the village in which the

natural democratic tendencies of the rural community expressed themselves in the form of the village assembly or Panchayat. But on account of certain other circumstances this democracy remained confined to the local level.

So the institution of democracy in a nascent state was always present in India though it could not grow to its full stature. Another noteworthy fact is that, although generally the country was divided into many small states, and even when some extensive empire was established, it functioned as a rather loose federation, the idea of political unity has always had a powerful appeal for the Indian mind, so much so that there is one common idea running through the theories of the state developed by such political thinkers of different views as Kautilya, Manu, Vishnu, Yajnavalkya and others namely, that it is necessary for an ideal ruler to conquer other states within the country and bring them under one sway. At the same time the conquering king is advised to entrust the government of the conquered territory to some member of the ruling family and to preserve its ancient social laws and customs. Thus from the point of view of political organization also we find the same idea of unity in diversity dominating the Indian mind.

These are a few examples to illustrate the characteristics of the Indian mind and the temperament produced by its special physical and economic environment. They permeate, as a permanent and common element, all the cultures that we either born or came from outside but developed in this country. The sum total of their common characteristics, the national mind, has the same relation to the life of an individual. It may be cultivated, improved or modification cannot be killed or repressed or entirely changed. "She characterized Indian history, including medieval Indian history, as one of consent: 'emphasis appears to have been on consensus, i.e. adjustment, give and take, synthesis or at least an active acceptance of coexistence'" (Gottlob, Michael 2011:24 )

But the influence of the physico-social environment is only one of the elements, the realistic element, in the formation of culture. The other important element is the ideational, i.e., ideas, beliefs, principles which have their own original the consciousness of the higher values. This latter element, as we have seemed, is not rooted in a particular locality but it can and does find its way from one country or people to another.

If we look at the history of the world we will find numerous examples how a religion or a system of philosophy or a political or economic theory originates in one part of the world and in course of time, spreads over others. Different cultures, belonging to varied types of geographical environments, may accept it in full or in part, according to their special needs and circumstances.

### CONCLUSION

On the whole the supremacy of thought and perception of unity in diversity are precious traits of the Indian mind and they are mirrored in all the cultures which had developed in India. Thus, when we consider the ideational aspect of the Indian mind we have to remember that in the first place the ideas which have gone into the making of this mind are not all the products of this soil but some have come from outside. Secondly, they have influenced various groups and classes of people in the country in different degrees, with the result that we find different religions and cultures in India; but there is a certain part which has been assimilated by the common mind and has become the greatest common measure of the various sections of people.

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