

CHAPTER III

THE CIVILIZATION AND ETHICS OF INDIA

THE DISTINCTIVE feature of Hindu culture is its femininity. While the northern branch of the Aryan family represented by the European group had to undergo hard struggle with unyielding nature on account of a barren soil and the severity of cold climate, which developed in them the masculine qualities of aggressiveness, force, and exertion, the southern branch of the Aryan family, who migrated into the smiling valleys of the Indus and the Ganges, found in their new home abundance of physical comfort. The extreme fertility of soil and the warm climate made existence easy and left them leisure for speculation and thought—conditions which have tended to make the people of India emotional, meditative, and mystic. The bounty of nature released them from struggle, and the resulting freedom from material cares and security of existence developed in the Hindu character the benevolent qualities of tolerance and thankfulness.*

The peace-loving nature of the Hindu mind shows itself in its early ventures into the study of the higher and deeper problems of life. When they began to inquire into the secrets of the universe and its relationship to human life with a view to discovering the mystery of our existence on this planet, they were dominated solely by an absolute and unqualified love of

* Max Müller.

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truth. "They never quarreled about their beliefs or asked any questions about individual faiths. Their only ambition was to acquire knowledge of the universe,—of its origin and cause,—and to understand the whence and whither, the who and what of the human soul." The early pioneers of Hindu thought lay down for rest on the open, fertile plains of the Ganges during the fragrant summer nights of India, and their eyes sought the starry heavens above. Then they looked into themselves, and must have asked, "What are we? What is this life on earth meant for? How did we come here? Where are we bound for? What becomes of the human soul?" and many another difficult question. The answer that the Hindu sages of old gave to these difficult questions is to be found in the one simple rule of the Unity of All Life: One Supreme Being is the source of all joy; He is the master of all knowledge; He is eternal, stainless, unchangeable, and always present as a witness in every conscience; He alone is real and lasting, and the rest of this material universe is *maya*, a mere illusion. Human soul is made of the same substance as the Supreme soul. It is separated from its source through ignorance. Through succeeding incarnations it strives to reach its ultimate goal, which is its identification with the Supreme Being. That is the final end of all human effort—the realization of the Self—which accomplished, man's existence becomes one with the rest of the Universe, and his life thereafter is one of limitless love. His soul unites with the Universal soul and he has obtained his *Moksha* (*salvation*). He begins to see "All things in self and self in All."

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This idea of spiritual freedom, which is the release of the self from the ego concept, forms the foundation of Hindu culture, and has influenced the whole character of India's social and religious ideals. Let us try to explain it a little more clearly. The recognition of the unity of all life assumes the existence of one God, "one source, one essence and one goal." The final purpose of life is to realize this unity, when the human soul becomes one with the Universal Spirit. Ignorance is the cause of all evil, because it forever hides from us the true vision. The wise man continually strives to overcome ignorance through the study of philisophy and through self-restraint and renunciation. He seeks to achieve knowledge of Self, in order that he may see God face to face. Then he will attain *Moksha* (salvation). Until he has realized the absolute Truth, he must hold on to the relative truth as he sees it, which is accomplished through the exercise of such virtues as universal love, faith, devotion, self-sacrifice, and renunciation.

"Despising everything else, a wise man should strive after the knowledge of the Self."

Human life on this earth is a journey from one village to the other. We are all pilgrims here, and this abode is only our temporary home and not a permanent residence. Instead of being continually in search of material wealth, of power, of fame, and of toiling day and night, why should we not regard life as a perpetual holiday and learn to rest and enjoy it? Would it not be better if we had a little less of work, a little less of so-called pleasure, and more of thought and peace? It does not take much to sustain life; veg-

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etable food in small quantities will maintain the body in good health, and the shelter of a cottage is all that a man requires. That he should build palaces and amass riches proves his lack of knowledge; that he should try to find happiness from the ruin of the happiness of his fellow beings, the inevitable consequence of the building up of great fortunes, is absurd. Nothing is real except His law and His power. Human life, like a bubble on the surface of a mighty ocean, may burst and disappear at any moment. "There is fruit on the trees in every forest, which everyone who likes may pluck without trouble. There is cool and sweet water in the pure rivers here and there. There is a soft bed made of the twigs of the beautiful creepers. And yet wretched people suffer pain at the door of the rich."

"A man seeking for eternal happiness (moksha) might obtain it by a hundredth part of the suffering which a foolish man endures in the pursuit of riches."

"Poor men eat more excellent bread than the rich; for hunger gives it sweetness."

Thus the doctrine of Maya has taught the people of India that all material things are illusion.

Thus, guided by the vision of Universal Spirit, which sustains the entire creation, and saved by the right comprehension of the doctrine of Maya, the Hindus have developed a civilization in which people are inspired largely by the ideals of human fellowship, by love and by spiritual comfort. The wisdom of the Hindu's retiring, passive attitude toward life will not readily be acknowledged by his sturdy, aggressive, and combative brothers in the western world. The

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Occidental's necessities of life have assumed such immense proportions, and social relations have become so intricate and insecure, that a man's whole life is spent in making sure of mere existence, and in providing against the accidents of the future. Such is the deadening influence of the continual hurly-burly of every-day life around him, that he has begun to regard life as synonymous with work. He has never himself tasted the sweetness of security and peace, and when he hears anyone else discuss it, he is likely to brand the doctrine as dreamy, unreal, and impractical. "But is it surely wise to destroy the best objects of life for the sake of life? Is the winning of wealth and the enjoying of pleasure always a superior choice to that of spiritual freedom?" To love leisure, ideals, and peace has been the criterion of Hindu wisdom. Those who have closely studied the history of the Hindu nation know the illumination, the peace, the joy, the strength that its lessons bring into the lives of those simple, virtuous people.

Hindu civilization has been, on the whole, humane and wholesome, and the life of the people of India has been one of unalloyed usefulness and service to humanity. India has always been the home of various religions and its people have always been divided into innumerable faiths. At no period of its long history, however, has religious persecution been practised by any class of people in the country. "No war was ever waged in or outside of India by the Hindu nation in the name of religion. India has never witnessed the horrors of an inquisition; no holy wars were undertaken, and no heretics burned alive for the protection

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of religion." In the entire history of the Hindu nation, not a drop of blood has ever been shed in the name of religion. To those who have read the accounts of the bloody tortures and the massacres that have been enacted for the sake of religion among the Christian nations of the world, this *is saying much*.

The hobby of the Hindu is not Catholicism, Presbyterianism, Methodism, or any other form of ism known to the western world; his interest does not lie in Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism. His passion is for religion. "He loves not a religion; *he lives for religion*." It was his love of religion which an old English missionary found among the inhabitants of a small village in Northern India. Tired from walking in the hot summer sun, this wandering friar lay down under the cool shade of a banyan tree for rest, and fell asleep. How long he slept and what brilliant dreams of His Master Lord Christ's mercy this humble mendicant had, no one knows. When in the late afternoon he opened his eyes, he saw a beautiful young girl gently fanning his face, while her little brother stood near, carrying in his arms a basket of choice fruits and a jug of fresh, cool water. As the old friar's eyes finally met the maiden's kindly gaze, he exclaimed: "At last after all these weary travels I have found a Christian people!"

Religion to the Hindu is not one among the many interests in life. It is the all-absorbing interest. The thought of a Universal Brotherhood taught in his religion guides every social, commercial, and political act of his life; while the hope of divine sanction inspires his efforts in the intellectual and spiritual spheres.

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Religion is not the mere profession of a certain theological faith, whose ritual may be observed on appointed occasions and then be forgotten till time again comes for worship and prayer. Religion is the "Yearning beyond" on the part of man, and when once its essence is realized, the spirit must influence every interest of the individual's life. This is the way in which religion is understood in India. "It is not a matter of form, but of mind and will. To the Hindu, it is more religious to cleanse the soul and build a good character than to mutter prayers and observe a strict ritual. Morality should form the basis of religion, and emphasis should be laid, not on outward observance, but on inward spiritual culture."

"By deed, thought, and word, one should do good to (all) living beings. This Harsha declared to be the highest way of earning religious merit."

The main purpose of life is the realization of Self, to which all other interests must be completely subordinated. The material things of the world are but a means to this end; and the end being religion, its thought must not be lost sight of in arranging the details of life. Hence, religion pervades the entire fabric of Hindu society. Study Indian art, law, ethics, and political economy; everywhere you will find the same thought of God and his all-embracing mercy underlying them all.

The religion of the holy Jesus, who taught the doctrine of non-resistance and whose Sermon on the Mount is resplendent with love for humanity, has inspired many a Gandhi in the East. It has, however,

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been the cause of much bloodshed and slaughter. Under its banner slavery was sustained until the economic conditions throughout the world made its abolition inevitable and imperative. The negro-traffic, involving human brutality which makes us shudder and horrors which freeze our blood and leave us aghast, was carried on by Christian people with the express sanction of the most holy See and her august lieutenants of God. As late as the end of the nineteenth century China was subdued in the name of Christian religion. The immediate provocation of the Boxer War was the murder of two white missionaries in the interior of China. What deeds of chivalry the soldiers of the western nations, who were sent to China for the defence of Christianity, did, are recorded by Mr. Gowen in his *An Outline History of China* thus:

“But in Tung Chow alone, a city where the Chinese made no resistance and where there was no fighting, five hundred and seventy-three women of the upper classes committed suicide rather than survive the indignities they had suffered. Our civilization of which we boast so much is still something of a veneer.”

The religion of the Hindu requires him to practise love toward his fellowman, tenderness toward animal life, and toleration of religious diversities with other people. He believes that the Christians, the Mohammedans, and the Jews may be as good men in their human relationships as he and be on as straight a road to heaven as he is. He does not question the divine revelation of the holy books of other religions, nor does he deny “that Christ was the Son of God, and Mohammed the Prophet of God.” All that he

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wishes in this life is that he should be allowed to worship his Deity as he chooses. Says Krishna in Bhagvat Gita, the Bible of the Hindus: "Whosoever come to Me, through whatever form, through that I reach him; All men are struggling to reach Me through various paths, and all the paths are Mine."

"There is in the Hindu religion a doctrine called *Ahimsa*, namely, non-injury to any form of life, which transcends any ethical ideal known to the western ethics. The idea finds expression in the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children and Animals." The Hindu religion is the only religion in the world which forbids the eating of animal flesh. If all life is of one essence, if the animal pleading for life suffers as truly as man under the same conditions, is it fair to kill the animal for the sake of a simple pleasure? This gentle doctrine of harmlessness has helped to develop in the Hindu character the noble virtues of benevolence and universal love. The Hindu may lack the so-called "manly virtues"; his spiritual nature may be shocked to hear that perfectly civilized men and women kill animals for sport, that they go on pleasure excursions on the ocean to shoot the flying fish. The fish is harmless, and when shot merely falls into the ocean; merely in shooting it lies the sportsman's amusement. Which of the two extreme doctrines is right, we shall leave the reader to judge for himself. But the general doctrine of "harmlessness" must commend itself to the enlightened moral sense of the West. A right comprehension of this principle will assist greatly in getting rid of the curse of cruelty and war.

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Two features in the Hindu character which stand out most conspicuously are truthfulness and chivalry towards women. The name for truth in the Sanscrit language is *satya*, which means *to be*. "So truth in the Hindu's language means that which is. It may not necessarily be the same as that which is believed by the majority of people. Again, the highest praise given to the gods in the Veda is that they are truthful and trustworthy. We know that people will ascribe to their gods the same qualities which are held in highest regard among themselves. The whole literature of ancient and modern India is full of episodes proclaiming the virtue of truth. Rama's answer to Bharata in the epic poem of *Ramayna* [quoted on page 13] is typical of the Hindu's regard for truth. In Mahabharata again we find the same devotion to a pledge once given. Bhisma, for example, was willing to suffer death rather than to disregard his pledge never to hurt a woman. The poets of the Vedas, the sages of Upanishads, and the writers of the law books were all inspired by feelings of profound love and reverence for truth. The whole literature of India is vibrant with the same keynote—highest regard for truth."* A perusal of the accounts of the character and culture of the people of India left by foreign travelers in ancient and modern times shows that the traveler was most deeply impressed in each instance by the Hindu's love of truth. Let us examine a few of these accounts.

* Max Müller.

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The Chinese traveler Hiouen-thsang writes:

“Though the Indians are of a light temperament, they are distinguished by the straightforwardness and honesty of their character. With regard to riches, they never take anything unjustly; with regard to justice, they make even excessive concessions. . . . Straightforwardness is the distinguishing feature of their administration.” *

The Mohammedan historian, Idris, writes thus in his Geography (11th century):

“The Indians are naturally inclined to justice, and never depart from it in their actions. Their good faith, honesty, and fidelity to their engagements are well known, and they are so famous for these qualities that people flock to their country from every side.” *

Marco Polo, the Venetian explorer, says:

“You must know that these Abraiaman (Brahman) are the best merchants in the world, and the most truthful, for they would not tell a lie for anything on earth.” *

Major-General Sir W. H. Sleeman, K. C. B., who resided in India nearly a quarter of a century, and who was during this period employed in various capacities in which he came in direct contact with hundreds of people every day, writes of the Indians thus:

“I have had before me hundreds of cases in which a man’s property, liberty, or life depended upon his telling a lie, and he has refused to tell it.”

At another place while speaking about the Indian merchants Major Sleeman says:

* Quoted from Max Müller.

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"I believe there is no class of men in the world more strictly honorable in their dealings than the mercantile classes of India. Under native government a merchant's books were appealed to as 'holy writ,' and the confidence in them has certainly not diminished under our rule."

Finally we shall quote from a speech made by Sir Guy Fleetwood Wilson in 1913 when he was retiring from the high office of Finance Member of the Indian Government:

"I wish to pay a tribute to the Indians whom I know best. The Indian officials, high and low, of my department, through the years of my connection with them, have proved themselves to be unsparing of service and absolutely trustworthy. As for their trustworthiness, let me give an instance. Three years ago, when it fell to my lot to impose new taxes, it was imperative that their nature should remain secret until they were officially announced. Everybody in the department had to be entrusted with this secret. Any one of these, from high officials to low-paid compositors of the Government Press, would have become a millionaire by using the secret improperly. But even under such tremendous temptation no one betrayed his trust." *

Comment after these unequivocal testimonies of eminent foreign chroniclers of India is unnecessary. Where else in the world could the experience of the Finance Member Sir Guy Wilson be repeated? If everyone who visited the country was equally impressed by the truthful character of the Hindus there must surely be meaning in the statement that the

* Quoted from *Sister India*.

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Hindus are honest, truthful, and straightforward. Foreign travelers have visited other lands during various historical periods, but nowhere else were they so singularly impressed by the integrity of the people as in India. But we are not obliged to look into ancient histories to establish the Hindu's honesty and love for truth. Go to-day into any town of India. Walk in the business section of Bombay, Calcutta, or Karachi and there you will find transactions amounting to hundreds of thousands carried on day after day without a receipt taken or given. An entry in the ledger books of both parties is all that is held necessary in such cases. In my own family, low-paid household servants drawing salaries up to a couple of hundreds a year were intrusted in the course of their duties with the handling of many thousands of dollars. And there was no least feeling of hesitation or anxiety on the part of the family, not because the servants were bonded, but because they were trusted.

A people who respect truth so highly must be lovers of learning. At every period in the history of India, a genius has been recognized and accorded assistance, even if his thesis ran contrary to the popular prejudice of the day. Whether a new sage lifted his head in the field of religion, or a thinker in the philosophical or scientific field was born, he was always allowed an opportunity to express himself under the most favorable circumstances. He did not have to fear persecution on account of his ideas. So long as he had a message to offer to mankind, he was assured an audience. *"Freedom of thought has always prevailed among all classes of people in India."*

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Chivalry toward women, which has been named as another outstanding feature of Hindu character, has already been discussed in a previous chapter.

To review in detail the achievements of Hindu civilization would require volumes. India's contributions to the world's study of philosophy, science, religion, and social organization are legion. While the continent of Europe was still in a state of barbarism, the Hindus invented the sciences of grammar, arithmetic, and astronomy. They were already masters of a perfect alphabet, of a polished language, and of the most complete systems of law and social ethics that the world has ever seen. When the forefathers of the Anglo-Saxon races roamed in forests with painted bodies, the Hindus had an extensive literature, an established religion, and a developed civilization. In fact, India has ever been esteemed as the birthplace of the most natural of natural religions, as the nurse of sciences, as the inventress of fine arts, and as a fertile home for all forms of genius. Her lawgivers evolved the most wonderful fabric of social organization, and composed systems of ethics worthy of the highest praise; her philosophers invented six most profound systems of philosophy famous for their subtlety of thought and acuteness of logic; and her religious teachers formed the two greatest religions of the world, which are to this day professed by more than half of the human race. Even in the domain of natural sciences Hindus have advanced to a high state of development, a fact which is little realized by most people. Says Sir Monier-Williams:

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“Indeed, if I may be at all allowed the anachronism, the Hindus were Spinozites more than two thousand years before the existence of Spinoza; and Darwinians many centuries before Darwin; and evolutionists many centuries before the doctrine of evolution had been accepted by the scientists of our time, and before any word like ‘evolution’ existed in any language of the world.”

The Hindus belong to a race of mankind which has outlasted all the nations of the earth. “Before the days of Abraham India had achieved a great civilization. Other civilizations had lived and died. Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria—each came and went. After India had been flourishing for more than two thousand years, Greece appeared and passed on. The vast Roman Empire, dominating half the earth, paid huge tribute to the art and industry of India, then closed its day while the Hindu people continued to develop magnificent achievements in science, literature, art, architecture, law and government, philosophy and religion.” Lord Curzon, whose judgment undoubtedly was not biased in favor of India, writes:

“India has left a deeper mark on the history, philosophy and religion of mankind than any other terrestrial unit of the universe.”

We have thus shown that as a nation the people of India have devoted their efforts more to the development of the spiritual side of life than the material. Unlike the aggressive and combative character of western civilization, the prominent features of Hindu culture are a passive and reflective attitude toward life. Compared with the record of her sister nations in the West, the history of the country has been hap-

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pier, less fierce, and more peaceful and stable; the inhabitants have been more careful and thoughtful, passive and tolerant.

Two great civilizations of the world—India and China—separated only by a long border, have flourished for centuries, and not once in their entire history have they been at war with each other. They early realized the truth that the object of human life is not possession of immense wealth and dominion over weaker races for the sake of physical comforts. The aim of human effort, as they saw it, should be the development of the “mental, moral, and spiritual powers latent in man.” The Hindus evolved for themselves the idea of a God that was omnipotent and all-merciful, of a human soul that was part of the Universal soul and must be pure, of a life that has the divine spark in it and must be boundless and consecrated to the service of all. Truthfulness, generosity, kindness of heart, gentleness of behavior, forgiveness, and compassion were taught in India as everyday precepts long before any such thing as ethics existed in any other part of the world. Their insistence upon kindness and charity are marks of true virtue; their belief that ethics must form the basis of religion and a moral life is the criterion of religious mind; their realization that all men are brothers and that a virtuous slave is better than a corrupt master, mark the Hindus as a race of highly intelligent and moral people.

Many of these statements may not be novel, but they have for us a significant appeal in the fact that “they were thought out and enunciated many centur-

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ies ago, and that they reflected life, not as it might be imagined in a Utopia, but as it was actually lived by the common people in the small villages and towns of India."

Thus wrote Manu, the great law-giver of India :

"That man obtains supreme happiness hereafter who *seeks to do good to all creatures.*"