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# OUR CULTURE



# OUR CULTURE

By  
C. RAJAGOPALACHARI



1963

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN  
Chowpatty, Bombay 7

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## FOREWORD

Rajaji's impact on the thought of India is an established fact. His contribution has been made on many levels for he is an unusually versatile man. It is difficult to think of anyone better suited to the task of interpreting trends, and evaluating our capacity to absorb and benefit by them, than Rajaji. It was therefore appropriate that the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan should have invited him to deliver lectures on Indian culture and that the lectures should now be available to a wider public in book form.

The word culture has been much misused and abused. Under its cover we have committed many crimes but fortunately we are beginning to discover that like truth, culture can have only one meaning even though its forms are many and varied. Also that culture is something apart from politics. I make this obvious and rather trite statement because the memory of culture being equated to the pattern of the foreign ruler is still fresh in my mind. I have not quite forgotten how some of us reached out to grasp the shadow allowing the roots which had sustained and nourished us for centuries to dry up for no better reason than to appear the "equal" of the foreigner. This period

has, mercifully, passed and India is awake, alert and anxious to find her Soul again.

In the three lectures contained in this book Rajaji has drawn upon his vast knowledge and explained the sources of our culture. He defines culture as "the habit of successful self-control". After the needs of the body and the mind have been met, culture is the third dimension which lends depth to man's personality.

The principal values that have been the moorings of our culture have been eroded through the vicissitudes of centuries. But they have persisted and will continue to do so. I may say that our culture is the one silver thread that gleams unbroken all through the vista of our history and has sustained our nation in its many hours of travail. Providence has posed one such challenge to our values and way of living just now. It is doubly appropriate, therefore, that one of our distinguished contemporaries should have taken time and effort to remind us of our heritage and summon us to stand true to its essentials and verities.

I am grateful to the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan for having asked me to inaugurate these lectures when they were delivered and for the opportunity of writing this foreword.

VIJAYA LAKSHMI PANDIT'

Bombay,  
17th January, 1963.

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# I

## GENERAL

I am not a cultural virtuoso. I have not cultivated any special capacity for the appreciation of artistic excellences. I am not a musician or painter or critic of music or other arts. There are many who could have done better justice to this invitation of the Bhavan to deliver a series of lectures on Culture. I presume I am not expected to speak on culture as the word is understood in the allotment of subjects to the Central Minister for Cultural Affairs. Nothing can be expected from me on music, dance, the theatre or the silver screen.

Culture on which I shall attempt to say something is the sum-total of the way of living built up by groups of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another. People each with their own long history build up separate patterns of cultures. There is much that is common, but also a great deal that is particular to each nation.

Before dealing with what may be called the culture of India, let us look a little at what is common in the culture of all nations.

We should not use words vaguely. Whatever language we speak, we should try to be precise with our words. When we say a man is a cultured man or that he is an uncultured person, we don't mean to say he is a good man or a bad man. The two things are different. *Good* is different from *cultured*. There are good people, very good men and women, who are not what we call cultured persons. Culture is not literacy or ability to play on the *veena*. It has to do with general behaviour, speech and conduct, and is different from goodness and badness of character. I can illustrate the difference by means of an analogy. Bodily cleanliness is different from cleanliness in dress. A man may be clean in body; but he may not have clean clothes to wear. And one may wear very clean clothes; he may not bathe every day, but put on good clean clothes. The two kinds of cleanliness may be much connected with each other, yet they are different.

Culture is not just character or morality. Character is the inside of a man. Culture is external rather than internal. Culture has more to do with behaviour and way of living than with

character. Broadly speaking, culture is external though of course it has much to do with character too. Because, the outside has always much to do with the inside.

Man is endowed by nature with the senses : the eyes, the nose, the palate and the tongue, the ears, the fingers that feel. The senses give him the power among other things to find pleasure in life and incentive to live. Power corrupts men, we have been told, and so often reminded. The statement is usually associated with Lord Acton. But the fact is a very old fact and Acton referred to it in connection with politics. We are dealing here with a different kind of power. Man has the power to derive pleasure from the senses. The senses have certain functions to perform which are necessary for life. But they are the springs of physical pleasure also. Like all power, this power that the senses endow man with tends to corrupt him. The human animal unlike his brothers in the dumb world is inclined to overdo the use of his senses under the influence of the pleasures derived therefrom. Civilization seeks to curb this tendency and put it down. Civilization in the true sense of the word is the development of restraint. The consensus of society, the total combined will of the people living together,

seeks to curb the individual's tendency to overdo the use of his senses. This is the difference between civilization and barbarism. An individual may be a civilized person or he may be a crude and uncivilized man. Whole groups of people too may be civilized or uncivilized. When the total conscience of the people living together seeks to curb indulgence in sensual pleasure and direct the activities of individuals into refined channels, those people are considered to be a civilized people. The effort to control and keep within limits the use of the senses for individual pleasure and the willing and intelligent submission to that control is given the name of civilization. The term 'civilization' is used to denote other things too, but the truer and more important sense of the word is this control of the senses and willing acceptance of it.

Civilization is not mere advance in technology and in the material aspects of life. We should remember it is an abstract noun and indicates a state of living and not things. Mainly, civilization connotes the curbing of wildness, barbarity and over-indulgence of passions and appetites.

Civilization has two instruments to achieve the object of curbing the sensual instincts and preventing or deterring over-indulgence. One instrument

is Government, which is an essential part of all civilization, and which works externally. The force and compulsory power of the state are set up by consent of the people as a whole to do this curbing of the individual's tendencies. The total good sense prevails over individual appetite and that good sense takes the shape of government. Excesses of all kinds are brought under the penal laws. Men submit to these penal laws or they are kept apart from society by excommunication as in the old days or by confinement within prison walls.

The other instrument of civilization is culture — which acts through family training, tradition, religious belief, literature and education. Culture puts down over-indulgence acting as an internal force, as distinguished from penal laws which operate from outside. Where it fails, it acts through social obloquy and, in very bad cases, through social ostracism.

Government and laws use physical force and compel people to restrain themselves. Culture is a subtle instrument. It acts silently. It makes people feel they are not forced to obey, but do it of their own free will and gives them a sense of pride in good behaviour. When any one acts contrary to the general wish and falls much below

standard, the others look down upon him, shun him or otherwise make him feel that he is not liked. We all know how strong this sanction is ; often it corrects where force does not correct. Force generates a reaction of obstinacy. But the subtle forms of the displeasure of society are very effective, as they give a chance to the culprit to improve without a confession of guilt. They do not generate obstinacy.

The discipline for self-control voluntarily imposed on oneself is *tapasya*. *Tapasya* involves pain. But many of the legitimate means of developing self-control give a kind of pleasure at the same time and are not painful. The fine arts, music, dance and painting and entertainments of many kinds are all cultural means, not merely to give pleasure, but operate to control and limit indulgence in sensual pleasures. Incidentally they give pleasure, but the main purpose is sustained control of the instinct for sensual pleasure.

Religion too gives joy while it helps self-control. The *bhakti* types of religion in particular give intense joy — pleasure of a high order. The churches and temples with their impressive atmosphere and beauty help to keep men off from over-indulgence of the power to derive

pleasures from the senses. They serve to prevent the vicious over-contemplation of pleasures even when not enjoying them. The refined means of satisfying the various appetites train the senses to find enjoyment without over-indulgence or indulgence in crude forms. The fine arts may be looked upon thus as instruments of restraint. They shape persons inclined to excessive indulgence into cultured men and women.

Indeed, it may be truly said that culture is the habit of successful self-control; and that nothing that reduces self-control or which does not help self-control is culture.

Culture and character, as I have already explained, are not the same thing; though, of course, there is no harm in occasionally confusing one with the other and using the two terms loosely and giving to culture the same importance as to character. The peel encloses the fruit. The orange or the banana peel carries a delicate variation of the quality of the fruit enclosed within it. Often, the aromatic smell of the peel is even more pleasant than the inside of the fruit. Cultured behaviour is often more pleasant than even solid virtue. Culture is a social virtue and therefore comes to notice and pleases more clearly than

virtue. Peel and fruit grow together from tiny beginnings to the ripe state. So also do character and culture, the mind inside and the external activities, conduct and behaviour, grow together. Culture would be hypocrisy if the inner character does not correspond to it. And hypocrisy is not culture. It is the opposite of it.

Self-restraint in expression is one of the main forms of culture. Self-restraint in conduct is a sign and an essential of what is called culture. But self-restraint in thought is at the root of both !

*Aatmaupamyam*, finding out what is right and what is wrong by putting yourself in the position of the other person, referred to in the Gita VI 32

(आत्मौपम्येन सर्वत्र समं पश्यति)

is Yoga of the highest type. Sita admonishes Ravana to do this introspection and be happy with his own wives.

आत्मानमुपमां कृत्वा

स्वेषु दारेषु रम्यताम्

Consideration for the feelings of others, for the rights of others, for the faults of others, these are the highest marks of culture, without which a man would be definitely uncultured.

Humility is an essential part of true culture.  
*vidyaa vinaya sampanne braahmane*

(Gita V 18)

*Vidya* and *vinaya*, knowledge and humility, together form the *sampat*, wealth, for the *Braahmana*. Without humility there is no culture. A boastful man is wanting in culture. Humility should be honest and shown in behaviour and action and not expressed merely in words. It results from innate consideration and respect for others and a sense of true values. The humility of the cultured man is more likely to be near the actual truth than the self-estimate of the boastful man even if he be a gifted person. Humility is not the humility of Uriah Heep, but what makes the other man feel easy with you though you may be definitely superior to him.

What makes community-life pleasant, what adds to joy in life, over and above feeding and clothing the body and satisfying the appetites — all these together make up culture.

“Trot!” said Aunt Betsey to young Copperfield when she rehabilitated him and sent him to school, “be a credit to yourself, to me and Mr. Dick, and Heaven be with you! Never be mean in anything; never be false; never be cruel. Avoid

these three vices, Trot, and I can always be hopeful of you.”

Meanness, dishonesty, cruelty : the avoidance of these three vices make culture.

Do not be mean : be noble, be large-hearted. Do not be false : be honest always and in everything ; detest dishonesty, keep away from it as from offal. Do not be cruel : show tenderness to every being that is weaker than yourself. Every living thing loves its own life and is sensitive to pain as you yourself are. Every being, be it dog or child or girl, or man or woman is sensitive to pain; be tender to them all. If you are mean, false, or cruel, everyone will know it and know you are not a cultured man or woman. Do unto others as you would be done by : आत्मानमुपमां कृत्वा । This is the essence of culture in word and action.

We can exaggerate and caricature every discipline. It is easy to paint the picture of foolish concern for the bugs and the ants and the mosquitoes. It is easy to prove the impossibility of avoiding all killing and to establish that eating one another is the law of nature. But culture consists essentially in putting yourself in the other man's position and thinking and feeling in that position.

यस्तु सर्वाणि भूतानि आत्मन्येवानुपश्यति ।  
सर्वभूतेषु चात्मानं ततो न विजुगुप्सते ॥

When Rama spoke cruel words to Sita on the great occasion when she was brought before him after the battle was over and Ravana had been slain, Sita burst out : "Why do you utter these harsh and unworthy words like an uncultured man speaking to an uncultured woman ? "

किं मां असदृशं वाक्यं  
ईदृशं श्रोत्रदारुणम् ।  
रुक्षं श्रावयसे वीर  
प्राकृतः प्राकृतामिव ॥

*Praakrta* is uncultured. *Samskrtam* is culture, the result of discipline and enlightenment. The cultured man avoids harsh words. The soft word is what definitely marks a man as cultured. Tiruvalluvar the Tamil saint-poet in his world-famous *Kural* says : "The speech of cultured men consists of truth soaked in affection. Gentleness of speech is not pleasant falsehood, but truth spoken by one who knows the whole of the law and is not misled by dry dogma, who is full of affection for the person to whom the truth is addressed and therefore is able to find the words that save truth from harshness. The kindly word and the glad and loving look accompanying a

gift are appreciated by the poor man receiving it, even more than the gift itself. To give is good. But the sweet manner accompanying the gift touches the heart of the receiver, even more than the gift. That is culture. The relief of distress consists in the kindly countenance and speech marked by genuine consideration for the feelings of the man who is in distress. The gift that is thrown by the uncultured man at the distressed, without these accompaniments of the welcome look and soft word, does not reduce suffering, but hurts."

"Not jewels, but courteous deportment," continues Tiruvalluvar, "and gentleness of speech are the things that truly adorn the housewife. It is strange indeed that people speak harsh words when they have themselves felt and experienced the joy that the kindly speech of others begets in them. Every moment we have direct personal experience of the marvellous effect of kind words from others. Yet when we speak ourselves, we forget it and indulge in harsh speech. Is it not foolish to pick unripe berries when ripe ones can be had for the plucking? Equally foolish it is, to choose the word that hurts when gentle words are available."

I have given you this somewhat long quotation

from the Tamil poet, although I know that you have exactly similar advice in plenty in the languages of the North. Courteous but frank speech is one of the principal elements in culture.

The accomplishments that go to make culture in the artistic sense give pleasure to others besides making one's own life sweet. The man who sings and the man who listens both enjoy the music. The painter, the sculptor, and others all add to the joy and help the self-restraint of others around them besides themselves finding delight in the practice of their art.

Man attains completion only when culture is added to what he has acquired for fulfilling his wants for the physical body and for satisfying his thirst for knowledge.

The culture of a group of people or of a nation which we take up for enquiry may either be the ideal aimed at by those people, the standard of behaviour laid down by the enlightened of that group and accepted by the general opinion; or it may be the prevailing behaviour of that people including the prevailing lapses and failures. This is a common source of confusion in criticism. The standard placed before the people and accepted by their communal conscience and maintained steadily, as the footrule for measure and judg-

ment, should be taken as the culture of a particular nation or community, rather than the factual conditions. The historian records and surveys facts and not ideals, although he may take notice of the latter. Semantically speaking, it is the standard of behaviour set before a people, and kept up steadily by the enlightened among them, that should be called the culture of that group and not the actual performances and failures.

I should not be misunderstood. The unreachable abstract ideals laid down by the high moralists of a people cannot of course be taken literally and as a whole as the pattern of their culture. This would lead us nowhere. Undoubtedly culture has definite relation to fact and prevalence and cannot rest on mere ideology. The culture of a people is what is desired and *expected* by the best among the people, actually to prevail and govern their daily life. It is what the people accept as a practicable standard of conduct and deportment, which men and women would claim they are acting up to and which they would be ashamed to admit as having disregarded. To a certain degree what may be derogatorily called lip-service to an ideal has a large function in the definition of what is the particular culture of a people or a community or

a country. But it is not only lip-service to an ideal admittedly unreachable ; it is a standard to reach which the people strive every day or at least appear to be doing it and wish to be taken to be doing it.

Another remark I should like to make is that since culture has a general as well as a particular sense, the difference between one pattern and the others may be taken by some, not as its distinguishing feature giving it its individual character, but as merely the result of impeded growth; the idea being that all proceed under the pressure of truth and human desires to reach the same ideal and make progress in the same direction, but that some get stunted, not by choice but by reason of unwelcome circumstances. For example, if a national culture is marked by simplicity, we may put it down either as just impeded development, progress having been stopped by historic causes, or as a deliberately adopted ideal. I am inclined to the view that so far as India is concerned, where we find simplicity in the pattern of our culture, it is not mere stunted development, but a deliberate preference for simplicity and a conscious rejection of the complicate life and multiplication of wants, this being consistent with the philosophy and ethical code of our people.

## II

### FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

The virtues and aims that prevail among us in India no doubt obtain among other people also. The measure and the forms differ. But there is no harm in nursing our virtues as our own peculiar excellence, provided we are careful enough to preserve humility, and avoid national vainglory and the unpardonable folly of a contempt or dislike of others.

The particular shape that the generality of culture takes in each nation is due to its location in the physical world, its religion, philosophy and history. Some of the elements get emphasized in one nation more than in another. For example free and frank expression of feelings can be observed in one nation while restraint and reticence markedly prevail in another. The variation in emphasis in different countries does not affect the value of the element. On the other hand, it adds to the pleasure arising from international contacts.

The development of arts, entertainments and sports that add joy to life varies in different nations. They take pleasing variations in form. These generally go by the name of national culture and attain fame even to the exclusion of the more important things that go to make different cultures. The semantic ambiguities attaching to the word 'culture' cause considerable confusion. Near ideas going by the same name cause greater confusion than well-recognized multiple senses of the same word. The nearer two different ideas are to one another, the more important is the difference to be kept in mind. It would be good always to give different names to different things so as to keep the ideas clearly defined and distinct as in the case of the letters denoted by the symbols in the Nagari script, क, ख, ग, घ, the voiced and the aspirated letters are clearly distinguished from the basic letter. The sounds are near to one another but the symbols are deliberately made quite different from one another. But this principle of clear and distinct representation is not always observed and a lot of confusion prevails for instance as to what is South Indian culture or Assamese culture. The musical forms and dances are often taken to be Indian culture or Assamese

culture, and only they — which is a grave mistake.

Indian culture is predominantly self-restraint : sharing your substance with the poor, chastity, the rigors of widowhood, austerity, *sanyas*, all-round religious tolerance, — these forms and aspects of restraint make up Indian culture, not our musical forms or *Bharata naatya*. Music and dance are not unimportant, but everything can be overdone. What is overdone loses beauty. Refinement's foundation is restraint.

*Kula dharma* is the culture of the group or caste. The Gita has this phrase in Chapter I, 40th sloka. Similarly the pattern of behaviour prevailing and recognized as good in our motherland as distinguished from what prevails among other people may be called *Desha dharma*. *Desha dharma* is an organic growth which it is our duty to respect and which we should not treat as mere Indian superstition or under-development or eccentricity. It is the distinctive feature of life in India, whatever political or other changes might have occurred or may occur in the course of history.

The national pattern of behaviour, our *Desha dharma*, may be looked at as seen in the family, as seen in the caste or *jaati*, as seen in the region,

a unit holding different castes supplementing each other's occupation, and as seen in the larger community called the nation.

The large joint family is a special pattern of ours. It is an institution which gives a distinctive feature to life in India. The institution is still alive, not quite wiped out by the impact of the West and its cult of individuality. The family in India is not just man, wife, and minor children. It includes very grown up sons, and their wives, grandsons and great grandsons. It consists consequently of numerous cousins and their wives and children. The word for a near cousin in our languages is 'brother.' There may be varying degrees of affection among them or even the opposite of affection. But the obligations imposed by family *Dharma* are binding, and demand fulfilment over this wide circle; and failure brings about social obloquy and self-accusation. Self-accusation and shame are the acid tests of what is the prevailing culture and pattern of conduct.

The sizes and restraints of the joint family are relieved by a Westminster Statute included in this Commonwealth pattern: the right to get away for the asking is recognized. The joint family is a socialist institution within itself and at the same time, the individual is a potentially

free person. The joint family is perhaps the chief characteristic of Indian life differentiating it from the Western way of living.

Our marriages are entered into and arranged very differently from what is done in Western countries. Changes are inevitable in this as in other matters as a result of international contacts and economic compulsions, but the basic pattern is still there. Marriage is not an affair of the individuals. It is a family affair and very much that. Its rituals if vernacularised would indicate only a contract. But it is an inviolable contract of partnership. Inviolability is indeed its chief characteristic.

It will lead us into a very lengthy and inconclusive debate if we enter into a discussion as to whether our arranged marriages are better than the so-called love-marriages of the West, and how much substance there is and reliability of quality in what we call love and attraction in the Western pattern. It would be enough if we note and admit the difference in the pattern. Arranged marriages do not exclude considerations of individual fancies and preferences. The general formula in India is : every one should lead a married life and it should not be left to chance and romance.

Now we come to the most important element in the organization of our society. It is not a single jump in India from the family to the nation. We have in between, the community or the *jaati*. It is not a vague something which is often forgotten. It is a very concrete reality and never allowed to be forgotten. The community is a larger circle than the joint family and it greatly partakes of that same character. The *jaati* is a larger family circle. The obligations of mutual help and respect are real though necessarily thinned out by reason of extension over a wider circle. The principle is that one's duties do not end with one's wife and children; it does not end with son and father, grandfather and cousins. It extends to the members of the *jaati*, to all those who 'belong' to one, as being in his group of potential relatives, though there may be no traced or traceable blood connexion. It is not just an artificial extension. It is a circle which includes likely relationship through marriage. It is associated with a very real sense of identity and mutual liability. So much so, that anything seemingly done in the public services on account of that connexion is in the present day looked upon as nepotism. Nepotism it may be under modern notions of administrative purity; but all the same

Indian culture demands that a man should use his influence and share his prosperity with members of his *jaati*. In adversity he is entitled to expect assistance and material help and sympathy from members of his community. Failure is looked upon with great disfavour, may be silent these days, but none the less real. This element of our culture, if disentangled from the need for purity in public administration and restricted to personal assistance and private sacrifice, can be looked upon as a loose form of trusteeship governing conduct in one's group. Out of this, Gandhiji's conception of the trusteeship form of socialism was evolved. Individualism, neglectful of the wants of others in the community, is treated not merely as selfishness, but as something allied to a father's neglect of his son or refusing to share in his misfortunes and difficulties. Failing to be helpful to members of the large joint family circle or to members of one's community is treated as a very base form of selfishness.

There is a whole chapter in the *Kural* about one's duties to his people in the sense of the *jaati* circle. All this is found in the corresponding chapters of Samskrit literature. It is Indian culture, the duty of sharing one's prosperity with one's community, what may be appropriately

called decentralized socialism, without the compulsions of statist polity but enforced by effective social odium on failure. The duty of looking after the tribe and the duty of looking after the local community, a larger circle than the tribe and related to place rather than blood, are both emphasized in our *shastras* and in Samskrit and Dravidian literature. And we can see the obligations working even now in the present times, although we have in the name of national unity a tendency to see the dark side of such obligations and attachments and give to this decentralized non-statist socialism in automatic action, the names of nepotism, parochialism, communalism, etc.

Helping oneself is selfishness. It generally escapes criticism. Helping one's family is called nepotism by those who do not belong to the family. Helping the community is called communalism by those who fall outside the *jaati*. Helping the local community covering every one in a territorial unit irrespective of *jaati* is given the derogatory names of parochialism and provincialism. We give a term of abuse taking up for disapproval what the sense of obligation does *not* include, rather than feeling comforted seeing that it includes a wide circle outside of one's self,

and works out an effective kind of decentralized socialism. We fail to consider that if every one in prosperity felt the obligation even as limited to his circle, the entire nation would be satisfactorily covered in this voluntary way, leaving a minimum to the state to fill any gap left out. There are fortunate and prosperous men in all communities and all of them would, if encouraged, be willing to be unselfish each in respect of his own circle. They would do this very willingly, much more willingly than pay taxes to the welfare state.

Where the sanction is social resentment, the smaller the circle wherein intimacy is real, the more effective is the sanction. As we attempt to extend the circle to cover a wider area, the sanction and the performance both get reduced. The question therefore is how to utilise the traditional position to the best advantage for the general community. Shall we try to enforce the obligation on the individual in respect of the entire whole and reconcile ourselves to lapses and failures? Or shall we utilize the natural force actually prevailing in smaller circles and add it all up to make it serve the whole?

This culture of family extension can be treated as a special pattern belonging to India. We may

see in it something to be proud of and worthy of preservation. Unfortunately it has been considerably weakened as a result of the impact of Western individualism and perverted movements of so-called social reform. A fierce battle was waged in the nineteenth century against the Hindu joint family and the numerous crowd of 'dependents' which Indian culture encouraged. The battle was waged in the name of progress. As a result, the decentralized socialism that prevailed in older days and made up a welfare state without being so called has largely disappeared. Perhaps we may see light yet and revise our opinions and revive and strengthen these so-called reactionary virtues of helping people around us and acquiring merit in the eyes of the gods and saving the welfare state a lot of trouble.

We have and hold something of value. We fail to appreciate it as we should. We are not grateful and happy for having it, but are unhappy because we do *not* have something *else* also. We see a man thinking of others than himself, who are related to him in some way, restraining his egotism and sharing his substance with them cheerfully. But we are not pleased with this. We quarrel with him for not sharing it with those not related to him by blood. We forget arithmetic and fail to

remember to how little the share will be reduced if that were done, justly and not casually. We see a man sharing his prosperity and opportunities with others in his community or town or district. We do not congratulate him on that account. We blame him for his ideas and attachments not going beyond his large family and *jaati* circles or beyond his district. We forget the natural laws of propinquity and of emotions. We fail to be pleased with what we have and even refuse to see it and dwell with bitterness on what we do not have, and believe that that bitterness will help us.

Recalling my earlier thought that culture is mainly, if not wholly, the rule of self-restraint and, along with the state and the disciplines enforced by it, culture maintains order in all societies, let me take a step forward and explain what historians have often stated about what we owe to the caste system in India. India had probably the largest number and very big time-lengths of intervals between one effective government and another. There have been a great many periods during which the people had neither central nor regional governments exercising effective authority. All these periods of what may be called a no-government condition could not possibly have been tided over but for the self-restraints imposed

by our culture, the joint family, and the *jaati* discipline. Not only was order maintained, but trade and arts flourished, the fine arts as well as the common artisans' work so essential for life. The absence of government made no great difference. A mere figure-head of a king was enough to do duty. Sometimes even that was not found necessary. Philosophy was not neglected, public health maintained itself tolerably well under the caste discipline, contracts were entered into and fulfilled and property was respected and was at least not so insecure as it was in other countries during similar periods of anarchy. Life depends on property, contracts and security of possessions. All this was managed by culture wherever and whenever there was no law in the Austinian sense. Charities were founded, and markets and business went on, whether there was any government or not. The people did not move about in nomadic confusion because there was no ruler or government to maintain order. The family and the caste were firm anchors and the ship of society survived and was able to go on in spite of the absence of effective governments during long and repeated periods. The nation did not break up, but held together by reason of the castes and the joint families and the *dharmā* of

the nation. There was at all levels something that held people together in good behaviour—the *kula dharma*, the *jaati dharma* and *Bhaavata dharma*. Culture not only made life fuller ; but in India, during many long periods of anarchy, it did duty for kings and officers who vacated their posts.

There are no written records to prove and illustrate this functioning of culture as a government. By its very nature the fact was unrecorded. *Dharma*, that is, restraint, was taken for granted; and, so to say, family culture and community culture functioned as government, as part of unquestioned nature. The family and the caste were both unquestioned facts, and carried on their functions without noise and restrained and maintained national life even as physical laws governed individual life. The body does not keep a register or have a written code of laws. It works and proves itself and its laws in silence. So did our family and community culture and the restraints they enforced work without police or bureaucratic fuss. No records having been left of their achievements, we have to discover and appreciate them only by historical imagination. I do not believe culture managed affairs on such a vast and effective scale among

any other people in the world and through such long periods of government-less civilization. I have not been trained as a systematic historian to dwell on and explain such a subject at length, adequately exhibiting and illustrating all the points involved. I leave it to able scholars to do what can be done in this direction.

Modern forces have made short work of many things that went into the Indian way of life. But notwithstanding the onslaught, certain things do survive and the deeper layers of our way of life do continue and may yet get new life and strength and shoot up. The question may be asked whether it is not good that the old pattern of family and community discipline operating through culture has been largely substituted by state discipline. We may have an ideological opinion on the subject as well as a realistic view, and these may differ from each other. The tyranny of the community may by some be considered worse than that imposed by any form of state control. The opposite opinion may be held by others. But realistically the answer would depend on what sort of people make up what is called the state. One argument is always in favour of cultural control. It is exercised by people who know much more about you and much more

intimately, than the state bureaucracy can ever know. They are people who can make necessary distinctions and exceptions. There is more flexibility associated with that discipline than even judge-controlled executive authority. More on this subject may take us to current politics and may be left to people to develop in their own reflective minds.

### III

## THE INFLUENCE OF THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

If there is any honesty in India today, any hospitality, any chastity, any philanthropy, any tenderness to the dumb creatures, any aversion to evil, any love to do good, it is due to whatever remains of the old faith and the old culture. Modern ideas and education have done their best to caricature and stifle these emotions and substitute materialism and selfishness for them all. I must begin however by asserting with a degree of trepidation that much as the Vedanta of the *advaitin* is admired and studied and is the subject of Indian pride, it never had any significant influence on our way of life. Its philosophy and its deep truth are far too far removed from the illusions that are the reality of our daily lives. The *Bhakti* school of theology has left a far greater imprint on our conduct and behaviour than the *advaita* doctrine associated with Sri

Sankara's name. I put it this way because *advaita* and *dvaita* and *visishtadvaita* are much older than the great exponents of these theories of God and life and nature. We find the doctrines in the old Upanishads out of which the *acharyas* took out *mantras* as text for their teaching. On the other hand the doctrines of *karma* and transmigration have tremendously infused into and shaped Indian culture and even today the influence is alive and active. The good as well as the bad points in our way of life can almost all be traced to this belief in the doctrines of transmigration and the inescapable reaping of the fruits of *karma* through new births if not at once. The prevalence of indiscriminate individual charity in spite of the effects of the nineteenth century movement towards organized charitable foundations in preference to individual almsgiving, is due to this firm belief in the doctrine of *karma*. The disinclination of most wealthy folk to institutional charities and their preference for making personal gifts is due to these doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. Donations to institutions go into an unrecognized whole whereas personal gifts are duly recorded in the account books of Chitragupta.

The quixotic lengths to which tenderness towards life of all grades and types is taken, the

unreasonable and definitely superior status allotted to vegetarianism, the horror of being responsible for any kind of killing, are all connected with these doctrines of transmigration and *karma*. I mention the unwise types of charity and not too commendable excess of tenderness towards all life without examining the consequences, because these features which are open to criticism prove the influence of theological doctrine on our culture even more conclusively than the legitimate, laudable and utilitarian forms of the same feelings which also prevail. The latter can be attributed to reason, delicacy of feeling and sound thinking and not necessarily traced to religious dogma. Fortunately these feelings of tenderness, philanthropy and charity prevail in all forms, sound and beneficial as well as excessive and of doubtful value. They all stem from and are supported by the faith of the mass of our nation in the doctrines of *karma* and transmigration.

Our great epic legend tells the child that the monkeys served Rama in his misfortune. How can our children look upon the poor monkey except as a good though truant and mischievous brother? The people of India are sad, when they are told that monkeys are deceived and caught and taken alive for torture at the hands of science in distant

countries. Any Indian who personally sees the guinea-pigs in a laboratory and watches their innocent eyes cannot but be sad.

The cruelties are perhaps unavoidable. We are dealing however with the pattern of our culture and not laying down the law or morality for any one. This world is a mystery and we can never hope to solve it all, according to our standards of right and wrong. But let us make the best of it while we grope in puzzlement from birth to death. To avoid cruelty whenever and as far as we can is a good thing. And that is culture. The helpless animal moving about hungry and afraid and the beautiful bird hopping in the trees in front of you, always in fear of an enemy, the crawling worm intent on hiding itself for love of life, may hold the soul of a lost father, brother, wife or child or friend. This is not mere fancy for people brought up from childhood in a firm belief in rebirth and metempsychosis. Their attitude towards these dumb creatures cannot but be affected by that faith and has been handed down from generation to generation.

Again the philosophical teaching by which people are brought up from childhood in the faith that God resides in the heart of every living being, cannot but have an effect on the attitude

of men towards the dumb animals. To add to this, the Divine is offered for worship in various forms not always restricted to the human form in the *avatars* of mythology and in the temples. The very multiplicity of our pantheon adds to this broad approach towards beings animate and inanimate. If we keep in mind the truth that God resides in and gives its being to everything in this universe, *Isaavaasyam idam sarvam yat kincha jagatyaam jagat*, polytheism is not a stage of superstitious worship, but a perfectly reasonable form of worship.

The debtor in India has in his mind what he has been taught from childhood firmly to believe, that he will have to discharge his debt, if not in this birth, in the next. He may be born as father or wife or child and go through the misery of affectionate service to end with death and mourning, for the clearance of debts not duly discharged as promised now in this birth. If the father dies without discharging his debts, the son feels bound by pious duty to pay off those debts and this pious obligation was incorporated in the personal laws of the Hindus making the son liable for his father's unsecured debts. Apart from the law, we are concerned with the actual feel-

ings of sons and of debtors and they are a reality in our culture.

Marriage is a life-partnership. Divorce and separation are looked upon with great disfavour. Even if separation be sometimes considered reasonable under circumstances compelling it, the second marriage of a divorced wife is most rare. Widows, if very young, do sometimes re-marry now ; but even today the general rule is that the widow continues to be a wife and should not think of another husband. This is our culture as shaped by our religious beliefs. Even death does not part the couple once they are tied together before the holy fire.

The way of life of a married couple, their mutual behaviour, their relative position in the family are all well fixed in our particular pattern of culture and are different from the corresponding practices among other nations. At bottom, human feeling is one ; and all husbands are alike and all wives too the same all over the world. But behaviour-patterns do distinguish one people from another; and it is these differences that are classified as the particular culture of a nation. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in Indian culture—and in this, Hindu is not different

from Indian Christian or Indian Muslim—the merger of the feelings and rights and the personality of the wife in those of the husband is carried to the point of a complete wiping out of the wife's individuality, whatever shining exceptions there may be. The domination of the husband over the wife which is common enough all over the world, is in the Indian way of life very thorough; and it is traceable to the force of religious doctrine universally accepted among high and low, the literate and the illiterate.

It may be remembered however that I am referring to the external, which is that which culture is concerned with. The wife is not, in fact, a nobody in India and her share is often a larger share in family life than that of the husband. But that issues out of nature, the supreme natural importance of the mother; and India is not an exception in that respect. Externally, however, Indian culture lays down a subordinate though highly respected status for the young wife in all situations. She is released from this and raised to a higher level when she becomes a mother; and then too she observes the external form of subordination but with dignity. She suffers it with a sense of quiet humour.

The ritualistic side of Hindu religion insists on the female as absolutely necessary to complete the image of the Divine. Every deity has a female counterpart and the worship of the goddesses is an important part of Hindu religion. The highest flights of Advaitic philosophy are associated with Sri Sankaracharya. But there are no more fervent hymns than Sri Sankara's hymns to the Divine Mother in all Her forms.

This aspect of Hindu religious practice has a great impact on the status of women in Hindu culture. It is this that gives all the dignity and importance to women in Hindu society notwithstanding the definitely subordinate status allotted to them in formal and external practice.

The shape of the living houses of the mass of our people with their street pent-houses, 'pials' as these open verandahs are called, is the visible embodiment of the religious duty of providing shelter to the wayfarer. We can see here the difference between the older house models and the present-day houses with fortifications against trespassers. Whatever the size may be, large or small, there is a place for worship in every house and it is near the kitchen, because all food is first consecrated by being offered to the Deity and

then received by the members of the family as a gift from God.

Just as the *Bible* has fixed its imprint on the culture of Britain and all Europe and America, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the legends about Krishna enter into the pattern of thought, speech and action which prevail in India. Indian mythology, Indian religious rites, and Indian philosophy—these are all intertwined—can be recognized in every part of our culture, just as on the other hand, our way of life can be seen showing itself in all our philosophy, religious rites and mythology. No one can tell which was the cause and which the consequence.

Our way of life is necessarily shaped very much by our climate. The great importance attached to personal cleanliness and the religious status which cleanliness of body and of clothes enjoys in our culture is also a distinguishing feature. It may be urged in contradiction of this, that there is such a great deal of dirt and uncleanness prevailing in India. True, but amidst all the poverty and difficulties prevailing, we can clearly see the importance attached by the poorest to cleanliness. He wishes to be clean although it is made impossible for him by reason of poverty.

If bathing and washing sometimes deteriorates into mere hurried ritual and not attended to as it should really be, it is none the less our way of life. And for that reason it is observed at least ritualistically and not abandoned.

Our music is, practically all of it, religion, philosophy and prayer. Even the few erotic pieces in vogue are given a religious interpretation. So also our dances. Our beggars go begging singing religious songs and deep philosophy, telling the people how to live. Nothing illustrates our culture so well as the songs of our vagrants and beggars.

In spite of the revolutionary changes brought about by the modern school system, the caste culture, which is essentially occupational, still prevails; and the parents' profession is handed down to the children. The arts and professions vital to national life are still hereditary. Family training does that for which technical schools are relied upon in other countries. The customs that restrict marriages to be within one's caste make wife and husband come from the same group in relation to handicraft. This makes the family a complete school-centre and men and women and children work together in each craft. This pro-

vides certainty of calling as well as early training for the millions of our people. The new technical schools are indeed of no real significance if we take the numbers involved into account. If national life depended on these technical schools and there were no caste occupations, our people would have to go without the necessities of civilized life.

It is true that among the people of India, there is a great deal of selfishness, materialism, terrible attachment to life, sordid love of wealth and anything but philosophy or vedanta or realization of the fleeting character of worldly things which are so greatly emphasized in our *shastras*. These vices do unfortunately prevail in spite of all the philosophy and all the proverbs and sayings current in such abundant measure in our country. All the same, these high ideals do characteristically show up in our culture. The imprints have faded but not quite gone. Even if the doctrines of *Maaya* and *Vedaanta* are but very vaguely impressed in our actual way of life, Rama and Sita and Bharata can be seen and felt in all the facets of our culture and in the daily lives of our people, especially in the lives of our unlettered folk. The new education that has invaded our culture

has largely wiped out the old pattern, but has not wholly completed the effacement.

And there never has been a lack of reaction and healthy restoration from time to time, coming up in order to keep the old pattern of behaviour from being lost altogether. From among our millions suddenly comes up some one who gives a new lease of life to religion and philosophy among our people.

The widespread and still quite current belief in re-birth gives shape and strength, as already observed, to the attitude of our men and women towards beasts and birds, wild as well as domestic, and towards the smallest insects. It explains the large number of vegetarians by birth among our people and the high status that abstinence from meat-diet undoubtedly enjoys in our society. At some stage or another in almost every one's life, a fit of *sanyas* seizes the mind even of our intellectuals, professionals and businessmen. Wandering beggars are honoured in spite of their obviously unsatisfactory ways of life. The poor man commands not only respect but a religious status by reason of his poverty. Sacrifice and austerity extort a following in our country far more than would be considered rational in other countries.

Politics as every one knows has taken a great deal from this circumstance. All this is due to the impact of our religion and our philosophy. On the whole our culture and our sense of values still lean towards spirituality.

May this leaning be a permanent feature of our national culture and may our way of life grow into being one with *Dharma*, which alone can firmly support and sustain national life.









