



## India's Spirit and Form

In *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, Sri Aurobindo examines the nature of Indian civilization and culture, its central motivating tendencies, and how these are expressed in its religion and spirituality, its art, literature, and politics. The first section of the book provides a general defense of Indian culture from disparaging criticism due to the misunderstanding of a foreign perspective, and its possible destruction due to the aggressive expansion and infiltration of Western culture. This section is interesting in the light it sheds on the nature of both Eastern and Western civilizations, how they have developed over the centuries, how they have influenced each other throughout the ages, and the nature and significance of these exchanges in the recent period. The principle tenet of the exposition is that India has been and is one of the greatest civilizations of the world, one that stands apart from all others in its central emphasis, or rather its whole foundation, based on spirituality, and that on its survival depends the future of the human race—whether it shall be a spiritual outflowing of the divine in man, or a rational, economically-driven, and mechanized association of peoples.

After an overall view of the culture, we are taken on a more detailed tour of each of the primary components of Indian culture, beginning with its religion and spirituality, the heart and soul of Indian culture, and the basis for all its various manifestations. Sri Aurobindo quickly takes the reader to the core of the matter:

"The fundamental idea of all Indian religion is one common to the highest human thinking everywhere. The supreme truth of all that is a Being or an existence beyond the mental and physical appearances we contact here. Beyond mind, life and body there is a Spirit and Self containing all that is finite and infinite, surpassing all that is relative, a supreme Absolute, originating and supporting all that is transient, a one Eternal... This Truth was to be lived and even to be made the governing idea of thought and life and action... All life and thought are in the end a means of progress towards self-realisation and God-realisation." (p. 125)

But Sri Aurobindo does not simply reveal the essence of Indian religion and spirituality, he sets this in the context of its religious and spiritual traditions, examines its development through the ages, and puts it into relief and contrast with European religion. We are shown how the spiritual essence was already present in the Vedas, the world's oldest spiritual scriptures, though much of these sacred teachings were couched in a veiled symbolic language accessible only to the initiate. Subsequently, the Upanishads revealed the same essential teachings to the masses in a



philosophical language, and still later, the various multifaceted spiritual approaches to the Infinite were developed in epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, with the core spiritual teaching placed in the latter's episode of the Bhagavad Gita, as well as through many other religious movements and spiritual teachings. Of these important spiritual scriptures, many of which were translated and interpreted by Sri Aurobindo in other major works, we shall have more to say later. In the present section, while touching on the central messages and importance of these scriptures, the primary focus is on how these various developments influenced Indian culture and shaped its life and institutions.

Sri Aurobindo next examines the nature and qualities of Indian art, concentrating on its architecture, sculpture, and painting. His focus is on revealing the essence of Indian art, its foundation in spirituality, its rich complexity, its depiction and expression of the Divine and the inner worlds and the soul of mankind. As he puts it, "Indian architecture, painting, sculpture are not only intimately one in inspiration with the central things in Indian philosophy, religion, Yoga, culture, but a specially intense expression of their significance... They have been very largely a hieratic aesthetic script of India's spiritual, contemplative and religious experience." Sri Aurobindo reveals an extraordinary knowledge and appreciation of Indian art. At the same time, he is sensitive to cultural differences in understanding and appreciation, and is carefully instructive in considering the differences in European and Indian art, and in the aesthetic sensibilities that are likely to arise from these differences. As a result, this section gives the Western reader the essential keys to enter into a deeper appreciation of Indian art, while giving the Indian, who may be influenced more or less strongly by Western cultural pressures, a better understanding and firmer confidence in India's artistic traditions.

In the chapters on Indian literature, we are shown again the fundamental spiritual basis of Indian culture, as the earliest and greatest formative works of Indian literature are spiritual and religious. We are given introductions to the Vedas, the Upanishads, the great Epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, the later classical age of ancient literature including the poetry of Kalidasa, various philosophical writings of the middle ages, the religious poetry of the Puranas, the yogic and spiritual texts of the Tantras, Vaishnava poetry, and others. Here we are given only a taste of the spiritual substance of this sacred literature and some appreciation of the tremendous influence it had upon the development of Indian spirituality and culture. Sri Aurobindo further developed his exposition of the most important spiritual texts — Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita (an episode in the Mahabharata) — in separate books: *The Secret of the Veda*, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, *The Upanishads*, and *Essays on the Gita*. In *The Foundations of Indian Culture* we are given a wonderful overview of this literature, enabling the reader to appreciate the nature of each body of work while at the same time achieving a sense of the overall breadth and the development over time of the literature as a whole.

Sri Aurobindo also examines the Indian polity, the development of India's administrative and governing structures set in their historical context. Here as in the other aspects of Indian culture, we find a fundamental basis in spirituality, and a sophisticated, intuitive, and humane



development. We are shown in considerable detail and with an obvious mastery of facts, the arrangement and workings of the governing structures from ancient times to the present. A central tenet of the system was its focus on the upholding of Dharma, the duty and right rule of action for individuals of varying positions in the society, including the king. The governing structures developed organically, from the extended family, to the clan and villages, to associations among smaller grouping, to larger grouping within kingdoms. Power and legislative authority was distributed throughout the system, and included civic and general assemblies that represented a cross-section of the peoples. The monarch was in effect a constitutional monarch that could be removed due to mismanagement or abuse of power through the assemblies. We are shown how the system eventually broke down under foreign invasion and influence. We are led to the admission that in an important sense the political system failed in that it was unable to achieve a unity of the all the Indian subcontinent, a difficult endeavor in any case, nor could it sufficiently protect its peoples from foreign military invasion and subjugation. Interestingly, this is ascribed in part to the inner and spiritual basis of Indian culture and polity, which is inconsistent with a superimposed, artificial administrative structure, which would have been easier to establish. This inner basis of India's unity, reflected most directly in her spirituality and religion but also in the other fields of culture, has remained intact throughout the millennia, despite India's frequent and enduring foreign occupations.