

ESSENCE OF INDIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Spiritual Significance : Aspiration
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Deliberations on Indian spirituality could effectively start with thoughts on Indian conception of life. Indian seers saw life as emanating from an inner core of existence. Although the externalities of life are not to be ignored but they shouldn't be thought of as the quintessence of being. To an Indian seer, life in the material plane is imperfect and its very objective is the seeking of perfection. Existence, therefore, is not confined to the interplay of externalities but has its roots in the essence of the spirit or the true self. The basis of existence is more psychological and spiritual than physical.

It is not enough to merely deem the self as greater than the mind and body. Spirit force or self must be realized, I repeat realized, as the precursor and cause of the mind and body. Externalities, in other words, are effects of internalities. The self within the human body, however, is not an end in itself. It is an intrinsic part of the Supreme Self or what may be called as God or the Supreme Brahman. The material universe is just an infinitesimal part of the sport of the Supreme Brahman.

Man should thus not be thought of as a package of life and mind emerging from evolving matter, who is governed largely by the requisites of physical nature. He is rather a spirit that has life and mind at its disposal. Man's objective in life is to use these tools to their fullest potentials so as to be one with the Divine. That is the central idea of Indian spirituality.

The idea of reaching out to the Divine is the most fundamental prescription of Indian religion. The Divine or the God or the Supreme Brahman transcends the apparent mental and physical realities of earthly existence. Sri Aurobindo's description of this truth mesmerises us – *“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. A one transcendent, universal, original and sempiternal Divinity or divine Essence, Consciousness, Force and Bliss is the fount and continent and inhabitant of things. Soul, nature, life are only a manifestation or partial phenomenon of this self-aware Eternity and this conscious Eternal”* (Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, Vol. 20, p.182).

It is essential to note that Indian spirituality is not a result of human cogitations. It is not a mere documentation of the thoughts on God of Indian seers. To think of Indian spirituality as a collection of intellectual observations by philosophers of all ages would be a gross bypassing of its spirit. No matter how strange it may sound to an occidental critic to whom anything unperceivable is as good as non-existent, or to an oriental critic with a strong bias against anything strictly Indian and more particularly Hindu in nature, Indian spirituality is an expression of true spiritual experiences. The spiritualists put down in words the experiences they had of the Divine. Many a critic would find fault with this idea on the ground that if Indian spirituality is verbalization of ethereal experiences then how is it that there are so many ideas surrounding the so-called Divine; after all the Divine is one Supreme Brahman, how can then the seers have different experiences of the same Supreme Brahman? The answer is pretty simple and I am surely not the first to advance an answer to this mindless doubt—the different experiences of the Supreme Brahman are clearly different ways of reaching Him. There is but one Supreme Brahman but the ways to reach him are countless. This idea also makes Indian spirituality all-accommodative in nature. Indian spirituality does not impress its views on you, it encourages you to experience your own experiences. If your experience suggests that neither the Supreme Brahman nor the atomic soul exists, even that idea would be welcome and not against Indian spirituality as long as it is a corollary of a sincere spiritual exercise. Buddhism, for example, is agnostic in nature and many of its schools suggest that nothing is known or likely to be known about God, the only truth being the cycle of births and deaths in which the spirit is entangled and its only escape from the same is by way of Nirvana. One of the foremost steps to Nirvana is the renunciation of one's desires. Jainism, similarly, is an agnostic faith and also stresses on the release of the soul from the cycle of births and deaths rather than on the presence of one Supreme Reality or Supreme Brahman. And yet, Buddhism and Jainism are considered to be perfectly fitting into the mould of Indian spirituality as they are spiritual realizations and not just intellectual constructions. But the idea of Supreme Brahman, for certain, is extremely strong in Indian spirituality. It is, in fact, domineering enough to stand alone as the sole representative of Indian spirituality without diluting the core of this spirituality even by an

iota. Sri Aurobindo writes, “It (Indian Spirituality) was a living spiritual Truth, an Entity, a Power, a Presence that could be sought by all according to their degree of capacity and seized in a thousand ways through life and beyond life. This Truth was to be lived and even to be made the governing idea of thought and life and action. This recognition and pursuit of something or someone Supreme is behind all forms the one universal credo of Indian religion, and if it has taken hundred shapes, it was precisely because it was so much alive. The infinite alone justifies the existence of the finite and the finite by itself has no entirely separate value or independent existence. Life, if it is not an illusion, is a divine Play, a manifestation of the glory of the Infinite. Or is it a means by which the soul growing in Nature through countless forms and many lives can approach, touch, feel and unite itself through love and knowledge and faith and adoration and a Godward will in works with this transcendent Being and this infinite Existence. This Self or this self-existent Being is the one supreme reality, and all things else are either only appearances or only true by dependence upon it. It follows that self-realization and God-realization are the great business of the living and thinking human being. All life and thought are in the end a means of progress towards self-realization and God-realization.” (Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, Vol.20, pp.182-3).

The form of Supreme Truth, if it at all has a form, the intellectual or theological conceptions of the Supreme Truth and the path of seeking the Supreme Truth never assumed prime importance in Indian spirituality. What is of prime importance is the seeking of the Supreme Truth through harmonization of inner elements of one’s being. Realization of the Supreme Truth is not the climax of one’s spiritual journey...one is required to live in it in consciousness.

The multitude of spiritual ideas to accomplish oneness with the Supreme Brahman, as has been mentioned earlier, are different paths to the same True Consciousness. They enliven the Indian spiritual culture rather than bring to forth its contradictions. Doesn’t matter what your spiritual conviction is – ‘atomic soul is part and parcel of the Ultimate Divine’, ‘the self or atomic soul differ from the Ultimate Divine and the former is a grossly diminutive version of the latter’, ‘God-consciousness and self-consciousness are essentially the same and yet different, the former and the latter are inter-complimentary’... in the ultimate analysis the objective of Yoga or Indian spirituality is the attainment of the Supreme Consciousness. God is omnipotent and omniscient. If you separate God from existence, existence will lose its meaning and thus cease to be.

I close with these beautiful words of Sri Aurobindo that succinctly describe the essence of Indian spirituality – “The Spirit, universal Nature (whether called *Maya Prakriti* or *Shakti*) and the soul in living beings, *Jiva*, are the three truths which are universally admitted by all the many religious sects and conflicting religious philosophies of India. Universal also is the admission that the discovery of the inner spiritual self in man, the divine soul in him, and some kind of living and uniting contact or absolute unity of the soul in man with God or supreme Self or eternal Brahman is

the condition of spiritual perfection. It is open to us to conceive and have experience of the Divine as an impersonal Absolute and Infinite or to approach and know and feel Him as a transcendent sempiternal Person: but whatever be our way of reaching him, the one important truth of spiritual experience is that he is in the heart and centre of all existence and all existence is in him and to find him is the great self-finding. Differences of credal belief are to the Indian mind nothing more than various ways of seeing the one Self and Godhead in all. Self-realisation is the one thing needful; to open to the inner Spirit, to live in the Infinite, to seek after and discover the Eternal, to be in union with God, that is the common idea and aim of religion, that is the sense of spiritual salvation, that is the living Truth that fulfils and releases. This dynamic following after the highest spiritual truth and the highest spiritual aim are the uniting bond of Indian religion and, behind all its thousand forms, its one common essence.” (Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, Vol. 20, p.184).

India's central conception is that of the Eternal, the Spirit here incased in matter, involved and immanent in it and evolving on the material plane by rebirth of the individual up the scale of being till in mental man it enters the world of ideas and realm of conscious morality, dharma. This achievement, this victory over unconscious matter develops its lines, enlarges its scope, elevates its levels until the increasing manifestation of the sattwic or spiritual portion of the vehicle of mind enables the individual mental being in man to identify himself with the pure spiritual consciousness beyond Mind. India's social system is built upon this conception; her philosophy formulates it; her religion is an aspiration to the spiritual consciousness and its fruits; her art and literature have the same upward look; her whole dharma or law of being is founded upon it. Progress she admits, but this spiritual progress, not the externally self-unfolding process of an always more and more prosperous and efficient material civilisation. It is her founding of life upon this exalted conception and her urge towards the spiritual and the eternal that constitute the distinct value of her civilisation. And it is her fidelity, with whatever human shortcomings, to this highest ideal that has made her people a nation apart in the human world.

SRI AUROBINDO, CWSA, Vol. 20, pp. 56-57