

Where lies the greatness of India?

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We can legitimately take pride in the greatness of Indian civilization in several important respects. But where does this greatness really lie?

Pingala, an ancient Indian mathematician, is credited with having first used the concept of *Shoonya* or zero. He belonged to 3rd/2nd century BCE. Ancient Indians also developed the numeral system with the base of 10, and also the decimal fraction system. This was truly a big development in the history of thought, mathematics, and science. The world's first surviving literature, the Vedas, originated from India. The oldest text on surgery and anatomy in the world, viz. *Sushruta Samhita*, also came from India in about 6th century BCE. The text also gave instructions on pre- and post-operative care.¹ Arya Bhatta's pioneering work was completed by about 499 CE, which included '(i) an explanation of the lunar and solar eclipses in terms respectively of the Earth's shadow on the moon, and the moon's obscuring of the Sun, ... (ii) rejection of the standard view of an orbiting Sun that went around the Earth in favour of the diurnal motion of the Earth, (iii) an identification of the force of gravity, ... and (iv) a proposal of the situational variability of the idea of 'up' and 'down' depending on where one is located on the globe.'² It means that ancient Indians knew that the earth is not flat but a round globe. These ideas were advanced much before they came to be known in the West, and shaped the future of science. The science and art of Yoga is also a unique contribution of India. India excelled in sculpture, architecture, and art too. The Kailas temple in Ellora, Maharashtra, was carved out of one huge hill-size monolithic rock from top down to bottom with all intricate details and sculptures. It is a marvel of architecture, without a parallel in the world. Indian silks had a high reputation in the world even in the ancient times.

These outstanding achievements should no doubt make Indians proud of their country. But almost every civilization has made unique contributions of its own. China, for example, developed making paper and gun powder. The western civilisation pioneered mechanisation, engines powered by steam, printing press, and many more innovations which advanced the world civilisation. But there are certain traditional and essential features of our civilization which are unique, about which we should be even more proud, and we have to strive to preserve and further promote them. This will make India much greater still. What are they?

First of all, India's continuing diversity and pluralism within unity is its uniqueness as well as greatness. India has 22 major languages and hundreds of minor mainly spoken languages, apart from English which also India has made its own. The 22 major languages are listed in Schedule 8 of the Constitution of India document. Each of these is rich in literature. All of them are national languages, and Hindi is not the only national language. Europe also has several languages, but it is divided into independent countries based on respective languages. India, however, is one country in spite of having many languages. India is diverse in respect of religions too. It has mothered several religions, and has also absorbed and adopted several religions from abroad. People professing several different religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, Baha'ism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and others – have all been living and enjoying religious freedom without fear of oppression and discrimination. The Constitution of India itself assures freedom of religion. Hinduism, is itself a federation of religions, as Swami Harshananda has insightfully put it.³ There is diversity in skin colour, dress, and culture also, not only between states but even within states of India. No other country in the world has this much of diversity. There may be occasional tensions and strife, but considering the extent of diversity, they are minimal, and people by and large are living peacefully. Indian civilization is in essence a *bahuroopi* or *bahudhaa* civilization, not a homogeneous one. It is how the world has to live in future, taking pleasure from diversity, (- not just tolerating it), instead of trying to homogenise culture and civilization in one mould.

The second unique and traditional feature of the Indian culture is its tendency to resolve issues through dialogue and debate, and accept differences and go on with normal life even where they cannot be resolved. Amartya Sen has highlighted Indian preference for dialogue and debate in his book – *The Argumentative Indian* (2005). An example of this trait is the long journey of Adi Shankaracharya from Kerala to the Himalayas conquering his ideological opponents through debate, making the defeated debaters his disciples. In one of such debates, a famous Meemaamsaa philosopher was his ideological opponent, named Mandana Mishra. Shankara suggested that Mishra's learned wife be the referee. The debate went on for weeks in the presence of several learned persons, and finally the referee announced Shankara as the winner. Such was the objectivity and openness with which debates were carried on. The other Acharyas who followed him later, like Ramanuja and Madhva also had to resort to such debates to spread their philosophical positions. Kings patronised scholars, and other scholars visited such kings coming from far and wide to debate with the kingdom's scholars. The Mughal Emperor

Akbar also had such a scholars' group under his patronage. There was freedom of thought and expression. Even amidst dominating theistic philosophy, there was scope for agnostics and atheists to advance their thoughts. It is only a continued environment of free debate which can promote creativity and progress, and ensure glory and greatness for India. The debate, however, should also be responsible and constructive even while being critical. It should not incite violence, since violence is counter-productive.

Two noble outcomes were made possible from this combination of acceptance of diversity and preference for debate and dialogue in an environment of freedom of thought and expression. The first was our own notion of secularism in the sense of equal regard for all religions (*Sarvadharmasamabhaava*), irrespective of whether they originated from India or outside. Secularism in the Indian sense came naturally to India, and *was not imposed* by the Constitution of India. The evidence of this is in the syncretism present in many places which are venerated both by Hindus and Muslims, as for example in Shri Guru Dattatreya Baba Budhan shrine in Karnataka. The issue is not one of whether originally it was a Datta-peeth or Dargah; the important thing is that it is *both*. The syncretism of the shrine has to be maintained without claiming exclusivity for either Hindus or Muslims, as an evidence of India's equal regard for all religions.

The second outcome is the inexorable love for democracy. India has taken to democracy like fish to water. Our Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, says that India is the mother of democracy. It is very true. Greece had city republics from the 8th century BCE. But India had village republics during the Rigveda period around 1500 BCE! They are mentioned as Vidathas in the Rigveda. There were several Republic states during the time of Buddha in the 5th Century BCE. The village republics came to be known as Panchayats later, which continued even during the medieval and the British period though not very continuously. We have a three-tier democracy now – at the Union, State, and Panchayat levels.⁴ This has spawned hundreds of thousands of local leaders including women and depressed castes, who are committed to democracy and social work. It has also made Indian democracy vibrant, boisterous, and also irreversible. India firmly rejected dictatorship in 1977, when the Emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi ended. Indian democracy no doubt has shortcomings, including particularly corruption. But dictatorship is not a solution. We have to make our democracy substantive, not merely procedural, promoting transparency and open debate on all public issues including quality of governance. To make our democracy substantive, poverty and hunger have also to be totally eradicated. Sadly, we are going slow on this issue, and are behind the world average which is a shame. We have to build an effective welfare state within a democratic framework, reaching its benefits to *all* amidst vast diversity. This has to be our topmost priority. Only this will keep India great and glorious.

The third unique and basic feature of India's civilization is its vision of universalism and attempt to strive for it. It is expressed for example in the following well known statements in its ancient texts:

Ekam sat vipraah bahudhaa vadanti. (One Truth is expressed in many ways by the wise).

Lokaah samastaah sukhino bhavantu. (Let all people be happy).

Vasudhaiva kutumbakam. (The whole world is one family).

These statements suggest inclusiveness, not exclusion; cosmopolitanism, not parochialism.

Of late, there has been a tremendous emphasis on the revival of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). This is intended to promote pride in India, its culture, and tradition, which would act as a source of strength for the country. *I humbly submit that the essence of IKS has to be seen in the basic features which I have outlined above.* We have to realise that any uncritical acceptance of undesirable accretions to our civilization such as untouchability, obsession with caste identities, and superstitious practices which undermine the equality and dignity of women, and regarding them as a part of Indian tradition or IKS, will militate against the strength of our country. India came to have an honourable place in the comity of modern nations, because the ground for it was prepared by reform movements led by Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, and last but not least by Dr B R Ambedkar. They did not advocate blindly going back to Indian traditions, but reforming them in the light of modern values. The framing and adoption of the Constitution of India was a landmark in the long history of India, which is also a part of IKS, though modern IKS. *IKS is not a stagnant pond of water, but is a vibrant dynamic continuing mighty river, gathering waters from several other streams along its way.* That is how Hinduism also developed. And that is also the secret of the strength, dynamism, and continuity of the Indian civilization since four thousand years or more. To identify IKS only with the ancient texts in Sanskrit would be taking a very narrow and blinkered view of IKS as a stagnant pond. C V Raman, Srinivas Ramanujan, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Amartya Sen, and the like are also as much a part of IKS as the Vedas and Upanishads.

If IKS has to be introduced in our syllabi in high schools and higher education, it has to be done in a way which is in conformity with the essential feature of the Indian civilisation outlined above, scientific thinking, human values, and human rights, and not in an uncritical fanatical spirit. Its teaching has to be consistent with the spirit and Preamble of our Constitution. It has to be done with a spirit of openness, without endangering a dialogue between civilizations and dialogue of ideas. I learnt from newspaper reports that NCERT is introducing modified syllabi for 10th to 12th standards which exclude Darwin's theory of evolution from science textbooks, and the Mughal rule from history text books. I hope it is not a correct news and that a better sense prevails with NCERT. But if there is any such plan, it would be most unfortunate. It will deprive the students of an opportunity to have complete knowledge and critical thinking. It will foolishly prevent them from fully knowing and thinking. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes critical and scientific thinking, and evidence based learning. Any emphasis on the study of IKS has to be consistent with it. The study of our history should also be objective and truth-seeking, and not ideologically distorted. Knowledge has an energy and strength of its own, and it cannot be suppressed for too long. An attempt to suppress knowledge may only act against our own interests. It is better to know the truth and be prepared to deal with it in an enlightened

manner. We should remember that our motto from the Upanishadic times has been – *Asato maa sadgamaya* (lead me from falsehood to truth).

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Notes:

1. See (a) Thakur, Vijay Kumar (2001): ‘Surgery in Early India: A Note on the Development of Medical Science’, in Deepak Kumar (ed.) *Disease and Medicine in India: A Historical Overview*. New Delhi: Tulika. (b) Loukaks, Marios et al (2010): ‘Anatomy in Ancient India: A Focus on the Susruta Samhita’, *Journal of Anatomy*, 207(6), December, pp. 646-650.
2. See Sen, Amartya (2005): *The Argumentative Indian*. New Delhi: Penguin, pp. 28-29.
3. He says: ‘Hinduism is not a religion in the sense that is normally understood because it does not have a founder, a [exclusively single] book or a Church or uniform way of life. At best we can call it a federation of many sects, cults, groups, or even religions. However, there is a common thread passing through all of them stringing them together into a beautiful multi-coloured garland.’ (In his “Blessings”, in M V Nadkarni’s *Handbook of Hinduism*, 2013, New Delhi: Ane Books, p. v). Swami Harshananda has authored many books on Hinduism and Hindu scriptures, especially *A Concise Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, in 3 volumes published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Bengaluru.
4. For a history of decentralised democracy in India since Vedic times to the present, see chapters 4 & 5 in Nadkarni, M V; N Sivanna, and Lavanya Suresh (2018): *Decentralised Democracy in India – Gandhi’s Vision and Reality*, South Asia Edition, London & New York, Routledge, pp.65-174.