

**TRADITIONAL
INDIA**



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DOMINANT IDEAS IN THE FORMATION OF INDIAN CULTURE

Franklin Edgerton

We turn now to a consideration of the religious and philosophical base of Indian culture, the essence of the civilization of the Indian subcontinent. We have before touched upon the variation in climate, daily life, language, and so on, that the subcontinent exhibits. Yet it must be emphasized that underlying this variety there is a strong unifying force that allows us to speak of Indian culture in the singular: the complex of custom and belief which shapes the lives of the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent.

Nor are the ideas discussed by Professor Edgerton in this next selection exclusively "Hindu"; they are rather more truly Indian, a product of the total environment and the possession of the over-all culture rather than of a single religious group. For the principles of *Samsāra*, *karma* and *mokṣa*—Buddhist *nirvāṇa*—are at the center of all Indian religious systems. A Buddhist monk of the old Brotherhood of the Buddha's time and a Jain monk, equally with the Hindu ascetic, are following what Edgerton terms the *extraordinary* norm. Indeed, the three major religions of India (excluding Islam which is a latecomer and not within the scope of traditional India) can be said to differ more in detail than in substance.

With regard to Islam, it must be said (at the risk of offending some of my Muslim friends) that like the early Aryans, it has not escaped "Indianization." True, the Qur'ān, monolithic and unalterable, remains untouched and at the center of the religious world of some fifty million Muslims in the Republic of India (and another hundred thousand and more in Pakistan). Yet in their daily lives the Muslims of the subcontinent could not escape the influence of

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Indian culture, and scholars can and do speak of "Indian Islam." Furthermore, one suspects that only in India could have arisen the Mughal emperor Akbar's somewhat syncretistic *dine-ihahi*, "religion of god" (note god with a small *g*, as opposed to Allah, "The God"). But Islam is beyond the scope of this volume; it has been brought in as a good example of the force and pervasiveness of the basic elements of Indian culture.

Indian culture is the norm of human life approved or accepted generally by the civilized inhabitants of India (Hindus) since roughly round about four or five hundred B.C. Its classical expression is found in literature from about that time on, in the Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit languages, and later on in other languages, some Indo-Aryan, some Dravidian (especially Tamil and Telugu). It may properly be spoken of as approximately a unit in some important respects, and in most of these respects it is still the dominant cultural pattern over the greater part of India. It was, however, preceded by at least one earlier pattern of which we have a good deal of knowledge. I shall call this latter the Vedic culture. It was rather different from "Indian" culture in some of these important respects. The word *formation* I take to mean historic origin.

In short, then, I shall suppose that I am asked to pick out words and phrases which, in my opinion, have been regarded by Indians since some centuries B.C. as specially important in their bearing on the conduct of human life, viewed as a norm; and to suggest how I think they were related to earlier words and phrases, or to the same words occurring in earlier phrases and perhaps bearing different meanings.

At the very outset, this quest is complicated by a striking dichotomy in Indian culture. There are two radically different norms of human life and conduct, both at least tolerated, indeed in some sense accepted and approved, each in its own sphere. I shall call them the *ordinary* and the *extraordinary* norms. One strange thing is that one of them seems to involve a complete negation or rejection of the other as an acceptable norm.

The first is the only one possible for the great mass of mankind, short of some future spiritual regeneration of the entire race. In this ordinary way of life, Hindu texts constantly speak of three broad aims, or aspects of the cultural norm, all of which are normal and acceptable, and which include everything that a normal man can, or at any rate ought to, aim at. These are, in Sanskrit,

dharma, *artha*, and *kāma*; they are called the Group of Three, *trivarga*.

Dharma is propriety, socially approved conduct, in relation to one's fellow men or to other living beings (animals, or superhuman powers). Law, social usage, morality, and most of what we ordinarily mean by religion, all fall under this head.

Artha is profit, worldly advantage and success. It includes personal advancement in wealth, politics, business, professional and social activities of all sorts.

Kāma is love; success in dealing with the opposite sex.

In each of these three departments we have many extensive treatises called *śāstras*, at the same time practical and scientific (systematic) in character, and all treated with great respect as authoritative in their several fields. Their professed purpose is to lay down rules for successful prosecution of the aims of *dharma*, *artha*, or *kāma*, respectively. The field of *artha* is particularly varied; it includes all the professions, arts, and crafts, and in many of them special handbooks were composed. The theory is that man should, or at least may properly, cultivate all three—social propriety, worldly advantage, and love—but in a duly balanced way, so that activities in none of the three departments should violate the domains of the others. In actual practice, I know of no ground for supposing that people were apt to be reproached for overemphasis on *dharma*; while the *śāstras* or textbooks devoted to *artha* and *kāma*, especially the former, seem to us sometimes to recommend the violation of the precepts of *dharma*.

In this three-fold norm of Indian culture for the ordinary man, there is little that is startling to us in principle. Nor is there anything essentially new as compared with the older Vedic culture. Details of practice vary, naturally. Some peculiarly Indian institutions have left their mark. Thus the celebrated system of caste (*varṇa*, *jāti*)—originally merely a hardening, a rigid systematization, of occupational differences combined with rules of social intercourse, the like of which are found more or less all over the world—eventuated in a theory of quasi-biological differences inborn in men, which are supposed to make different men fitted by nature for different specific occupations and modes of life, which it is perilous to try to avoid. Even so great and independent a man as Gandhi still holds to this view, though he is careful to say that caste does not "confer privileges"; it only "prescribes duties."

It is more especially in approaching the other, "extraordinary" norm, that we must be prepared for surprises. The background of it involves some metaphysics, of a mild and simple sort.

Belief in some form of life after death is very common all over the world, and existed in Vedic culture, which was pre-"Indian" in the sense of my definition, though it was located in India. There, as commonly among ourselves, postmortal life was placed in some unearthly world or "heaven" (*svarga*). At least for the man who conformed to the approved cultural norm, it was expected that this life would be happy; nor does it appear that any end was assigned to it—at first. But in the later Vedic period of the texts called Brāhmaṇas, we begin to hear a great deal about "re-death," *punarītyu*, which it was feared might end that postmortal life, and which people sought to avoid by religious or magical methods.

With the dawn of what I have defined as "Indian" culture, in the early Upaniṣads, this effort has come to be regarded as vain—for the ordinary man. Further, for him, life after death is now regarded as not different in nature, and not necessarily different even in location, from earthly life. Man is entangled in an indefinite series of lives, essentially like the present life, and ordinarily lived on this earth, though they may take place in some fancied other world. One may be reborn as an animal, as a man low or high in the social scale, even as a superhuman being, a *deva* (a "god" with a small initial letter—not to be confused with God; see below). But all such lives end in death, and are followed by other lives. It is an endless chain; the Sanskrit term is *saṃsāra*, "course, migration," and so "transmigration."

The relative excellence of any new birth is rigidly determined by the net balance of good and bad actions in previous births. This is the famous law of "karma" (Sanskrit *karma*, "action, deed"). It is a law of nature and works automatically; it is not administered by any God or superhuman agent. It is man's relation to propriety or morality, *dharma*, which alone determines. This provides a powerful drive in favor of *dharma* in the cultural pattern, tending to counterbalance the natural man's preference for the interests of *artha* and *kāma*. For more than two thousand years, it appears that almost all Hindus have regarded transmigration, determined by "karma," as an axiomatic fact. "By good deed a man becomes what is good; by evil deed, what is evil," as an early Upaniṣad puts it. It might seem, indeed it has seemed to some Westerners, that this belief ought to have comforting and reassuring effects on those who

hold it. It not only explains the ills of life as just results of past misdeeds, but further seems to make man master of his own future fate. If it leaves no room for divine mercy, it also never cuts off hope; there is no eternal hell, and the lowest being can rise to the status of a "god" (*deva*) simply by doing right.

But the attitude of thoughtful Hindus has been almost unambiguously the opposite. They have regarded the chain of transmigration as a chain in the other sense, a bondage (*bandhana*, or a synonym). Even the life of a "god" is at any rate transitory. All pleasures come to an end; this knowledge poisons their enjoyment, and after they are gone their remembrance makes life doubly bitter. Death is an unavoidable misery, not less dread because it must be undergone over and over again; we saw that belief in, and fear of, "re-death" was older than the theory of rebirth. No human, at least, is free from disease, old age, separation from loved ones, and other ills. The fleeting pleasures of life by no means compensate for all these evils. In short, life is fundamentally bad (*duḥkha*, "misery"); that transmigration makes it inescapable means that we are imprisoned in an eternal dungeon.

Or is it necessarily eternal? Is there any way of cutting the Gordian knot of transmigration under "karma"?

For the ordinary man, say the Hindus, there is none. So long as one does nothing better than follow the pattern above described, performing various acts for the purposes of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*, these acts must have their "fruit" or result (*phala*), good or bad, for the doer; and that (even the good act and its result) means continued existence in birth after birth. Since all births are evil, even the best and highest, which is the most that the ordinary man can hope for, is still evil.

There is, however, a possible way out. Few can attain it. It involves rejection of ordinary human aims; a denial, in theory at least complete, of the generally accepted cultural pattern. This is what I have called the *extraordinary* norm. In spite of variation in details of method, its several varieties agree substantially in the end to be sought, and in their attitude towards the ordinary way of life. And, significantly, its followers have received, even from those who cleave to that ordinary norm, the homage of reverence, implying a recognition of its superiority, though it may be regarded as unattainable by the generality of mankind.

We meet it first in the early Upaniṣads. Even before them in Vedic times, people sought freedom from death and other ills. And

in later Vedic (Brahmana) times the favorite method was by *knowledge* (*jñāna*, *vidyā*), especially knowledge of the mystic, esoteric *identity* of the object of the quest with something under the control of the seeker. The possession of such knowledge conferred automatic, magic control over the end sought by the knower: "Knowledge is power," in a direct magical sense. This is a very ancient notion, clearly present in the oldest Vedic texts. I traced its relation to Upanisad thought in my presidential address before this Society, published in the *Journal* in 1929 (Vol. 49, pp. 97-121).

Seeking to control the entire universe and thus their own destiny, the Upanisad authors boldly declared that their own self (*ātman*), than which nothing could be more obviously under their control, was identical with the fundamental principle of the universe, most often called *brahman*. (The reasons for the choice of this term cannot be discussed here; see my article just mentioned.) One who *knew* this mystic truth (*ya evam veda*) thereby *became* identical with the One, and so free from death and from any ill. By this knowledge of the supreme truth he automatically attained "freedom, release" (*mukti*, *mokṣa*) from the evils of mundane existence, especially from continued subjection to death. He possessed "immortality," *amṛtātva*.

In later times, different formulations of the supreme truth developed. And the somewhat crude magical theory became softened and refined; it came to be no longer felt as an operation of simple magic. But the fundamental way of controlling one's destiny continued to be *knowledge*; knowledge of the ultimate truth about the real nature of the world and of man's soul, his true self (*ātman*, or *puruṣa* "the man"). It was this, first and foremost, which gave release from the *samsāra*, transmigration, and from the effects of action, *karma*. Whoso knows is saved.

Even the earliest Upanisads stated the obvious corollary that the ordinary norm was unworthy, and its cultivation only painful in the end. "What is other than That is miserable," *ato 'anyad ārtam*, they said repeatedly. From this the inference was easy that the seeker for saving "knowledge" should completely renounce normal worldly life. Not only, they said, because it was worthless, but because it was distracting. It impeded the attainment of the higher goal by involving man in mundane interests. Thus arose the ideal norm of the wandering monk (*sannyāsin*, *bhikṣu*), the homeless ascetic, living on alms, cut off from family ties, possessions, and all worldly life. He stood outside of everything, even of caste; a mem-

ber of any caste, or of none, might become a truth-seeking mendicant. All monks were brothers, and to them all was one. The truly enlightened man regards a learned brahman and a despised outcaste, a noble bee or elephant and an unclean dog, as all one.

This supreme knowledge was only for the rare elect. Ascetic life (*tapas*) was popularly regarded as its outward sign, and sometimes confused with the inner reality, a fact of which hypocrites could and did take advantage to seek undeserved popular respect. At times the ascetic life, originally only ancillary to the search for knowledge, tended to obscure that goal, and to be thought of by the vulgar as the direct way to salvation. In later, but still fairly early times, other methods were cultivated as aids to enlightenment, and they too sometimes tended to displace it and to be thought of as primary ways of salvation. Noteworthy among these was devotion (*bhakti*) to a (usually) monotheistic and personal God (the usual term is *īvara*, "the Lord"; not *deva*, "god"), often identified with Brahmā, a masculine, personalized form of the neuter Brahman, the originally impersonal First Principle of the universe. God's grace (*prasāda*) could grant salvation to his devotees as a reward for their personal devotion—originally, but later on not invariably, through the medium of a bestowal of the boon of true knowledge.

A still different aid to, or even substitute for, saving knowledge is taught in the celebrated Bhagavad Gītā. It points out that normal worldly action is motivated by desire or craving (*kāma*, *trṣṇā*). It is not what one does, but the motive of the act, that produces the binding effect of the law of karma. Accordingly, says this text, it is not at all necessary to renounce mundane life and activity, and adopt asceticism. All that is needed is to act with pure selfishness, not caring what happens to oneself. Disinterested action, (*karma-yoga* or "discipline" (in action), does not bind to continued rebirth. The Gītā is still the most popular religious authority in India, doubtless for this reason, that it allows salvation for the man who remains in worldly life, provided only that he is selfless.

But what is this salvation or "freedom" (*mokṣa*), the goal of the extraordinary cultural norm in all its forms, whatever their variant methods of seeking it? They all agree that it is complete and permanent freedom from transmigration, and from the law of *karma* which regulates it. That means freedom from life, or rather from empiric existence as we know it. The favorite term is *nirvāna*, occurring first in such texts as the Bhagavad Gītā and in Pāli Buddhist texts; the genuine Upanisads do not contain it, though they

have roughly equivalent expressions. It, or the *Brahman* which is a semipersonalized expression for it, is sometimes defined as real (*sat*; not nonexistent), conscious (*cit*; not inert), and blissful (*ānanda*). Otherwise it is called "the supreme station (*parama pada*), than that which there is nothing better (*nihīsvayasa*)," or the like; or, in monothestic texts, "becoming" or "going to God." Clearer positive descriptions hardly exist. It is utterly unlike existence as we know it—on a totally different plane. Indeed, at times the texts say that only negative statements about it are possible; *neti neti*, "No, no," a very old Upaniṣad says several times. All one can say is that anything one could say is false.

The word *nirvāna* means literally "extinction," as of a flame. It is not, however, extinction of existence; only of empiric existence as we know it. Originally, indeed, it seems to have meant extinction of the flames of desire, which is often compared to a consuming fire, and which leads to action, which leads to continued rebirth. It is therefore their "extinction" which constitutes salvation (*mukti*, *mokṣa*), the goal of the extraordinary norm.

Note that morality, or even morality combined with traditional religious observances (*dharma*), does not lead to this goal. Herein lies a great difference between Hindu and Western cultural norms. In the West there is no such dichotomy. Here relatively few people retire from the world to live religious lives; but even if they do, their aim and their ideal remain essentially the same as those which are enjoined on the ordinary man who would live virtuously. In India, not only *artha* and *kāma*, but even *dharma* exists primarily for the ordinary norm only. To the seeker of salvation, it is important at most in early stages. The morally impure cannot, of course, even begin the hard quest. But when the goal is reached, one is beyond good and evil. For him there is nothing to do, good or bad.

Yet in spite of this sharp distinction, the profound (if often uncomprehending) veneration which ordinary Hindus seem usually to have felt for the rare exponents of the extraordinary norm can hardly have failed to have some effect on their lives. Even if I had the time, I could not attempt a full discussion of this question. But before closing I should like to mention a single feature of Hindu practical morality, a very important one, which seems to me to owe much to the influence of the extraordinary norm.

The "Golden Rule," that one ought to treat others like oneself, is as important in Hindu ethics as in Christianity. It is even carried farther, for it applies to animals (which like men are involved

in transmigration under "karma"). It is summed up in the doctrine of *ahiṃsā*, "no injury" to any living being.

Now in Christianity this doctrine rests, so far as I can see, simply on its natural appeal to thoughtful men. In Hinduism it has a metaphysical background; it is a logical deduction from the Upaniṣad doctrine mentioned above (which has always been widely accepted in India), that the soul or real self of every man is identical with that of the universe (*at tuam asi*, "That art thou"). It follows, since things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other, that one must identify his own self with all other selves. If he harms others, he harms himself. The Golden Rule is thus proved, in a logically irrefutable way, if you accept the premises. That is why the supremely moral man, even while he lives by the ordinary norm, "identifies his self with the self of all being" (*sarva bhūtat-mab hūātman*, as the Gītā says), and "delights in the welfare of all beings" (*sarva bhūtāḥite ratāḥ*).