

DARBARI SETH
MEMORIAL LECTURE
Series-1

THE ESSENTIALS OF INDIAN CULTURE

Prof. S.K. Ramachandra Rao



Bharathiya Vidya Bhavan
Race Course Road, Bangalore - 560 001

The Goorg Foundation
Pollibetta, Kodagu

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Prof. S.K. Ramachandra Rao

ESSENTIAL VALUES OF INDIAN CULTURE; The text of
Sri Darbari S. Seth Memorial Lecture by Prof. S.K. Rama-
chandra Rao at the Bhavan on 9-6-2001.

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Foreword

In a manner of speaking, this part of the book is rather redundant. Prof. S.K. Ramachandra Rao does not need any kind of introduction.

Small though the volume might be, it deals with an awesome topic : the great Bharatavarsha and its culture which evolved highly thousands of years ago when only wild beasts roamed most parts of the globe.

In his own inimitable style, Prof. Rao has handled so complex a subject with consummate ease. What is India's culture? What exactly is dharma, a word that we commonly use in our day-to-day lives? Your quest for answers to these questions ends with a perusal of this volume.

We are thankful to The Coorg Foundation for instituting an endowment in memory of the late Sri Darbari Seth, Chairman Emeritus of Tata Coffee Limited, whose motto was "Give till it pinches." He lived by the ancient Avesta message contained in the Tata Crest—Humata, Hukhta and Hvarshta, meaning good thoughts, good words and good deeds.

This is the first Darbari Seth Memorial Lecture. Bhavan proposes to bring out in book from every yearly lecture in future. We trust the public will find them of immense help in bettering themselves.

- N. Ramanuja

*Chairman
Bhavan's Bangalore Kendra*

Introduction

I am happy to respond to the Bhavan's invitation to me to deliver the First Darbari S. Seth Memorial Lecture. I have chosen to speak on Indian culture, because, I find that it is widely misunderstood or not effectively understood. To be an Indian in reality, one must recognize and appreciate the values that this culture has upheld all along the country's history. This is relevant all the more now, in view of increasing globalization in all walks of life. I trust that my analysis will contribute towards this end.

It not only pleases me greatly but makes me feel greatly honoured, to accept this invitation to deliver the first lecture in memory of Sri Darbari Seth, arranged by the Coorg Foundation in association with the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bangalore. By all accounts, Sri Seth was a remarkable soul, at once versatile and perfect in all his undertakings. He was aptly described as a 'Karma-yogi' who answered to the prescriptions in *Tsopanishad* :

कुर्वन्नेवेह कर्माणि जिजीविषेच्छतं समाः॥

("By engaging in useful work alone should one desire to live a hundred years"), and

तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथाः मा गृधः कस्य सिद्धनम्॥

("Enjoy life in the spirit of service, and desire not what belongs to others")

He was a technocrat who was also an entrepreneur, a financial engineer of uncommon skill, and his name is inseparably linked with Tata Chemicals and Tata Tea. Well-known to his friends, colleagues and subordinates were his zest for life and passion for work. He had "fire in his belly" and

so could lead in business. More importantly, he stood for values relevant for all time and in all places, for he had "light in his heart". His whole life was an attempt to give out good thoughts, good words and good deeds.

It is indeed a privilege to be asked to speak on an occasion that is devoted to the memory of such a personage. The Coorg Foundation, which he started to secure the welfare of the people in Coorg, has now instituted this lecture-series in his memory. And I am sure the great man will continue to live in the work of this Foundation. It is my proud privilege to be associated with this Foundation, thanks to my friends in the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bangalore.

I am grateful to Shri Mattoor Krishnamoorti for having thought of me in this context, and to my friend H.N. Suresh for all the co-operation extended to me. My thanks are also due to the Coorg Foundation, which instituted the endowment, and to Sri N. Ramanuja, Chairman, Bangalore Kendra of the Bhavan, for his kind words about me in his Foreword.

- S.K. Ramachandra Rao

THE ESSENTIALS OF INDIAN CULTURE

PROF. S.K. RAMACHANDRA RAO

1

Culture refers to the man-made part of the environment (like buildings, dams, machines, language, art, administration, means of conveyance and communication and so on). It is distinguished from nature, which is given to man (like land, air, water, weather, rivers, mountains, trees, rains, birds and animals and so on). The human beings, living continuously in a large stretch of land, together and over a great period of time, tend to develop a specific cultural milieu, in keeping with the natural details (like climate, fauna and flora, geological details, forests and deserts) in order to help individual and collective survival. They meet the challenges of nature adequately, and adapt their ways of living to the pressures of nature.

It is but natural that cultural characteristics vary in accordance with the peculiar pressures and challenges, facilities and conveniences presented by nature in a particular land-mass. Not only the life-styles but the thought-systems and the world-views become specific to the framework of nature prevailing in land-masses. We are here concerned with the culture that evolved in the particular land-mass familiar to the Indians themselves as

Jambu-dvīpa (South Asia, comprising of the present day India, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria and Corinth). Within this stretch, India identified itself as Bharata-varsha, an old nomenclature found in the Hāthigumpha epigraph of Khāravela (1st century B.C.). The Bharata after whom the land-stretch was named was the son of Ajanābha, who in turn was the son of Agnidhra and grandson of Priyavrata, who ruled over the Ajanābha-varsha. The Bharata tribe finds mention in **Rgveda** itself, as ruling over the land on the banks of the rivers Parushṇi (Rāvi) and Vipāśā (Beas). Kautilya names Bharata-varsha as the land that stretches from the Himālayas to Kanyā-kumārī; he called it Chakravarti-kshetra. The Purāṇas also give the extent of Bharata-varsha as stretching from Kailāsa to Kanyā-kumārī.

It is important to note that all the ancient records point out that from the very beginning the country was multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-lingual. There were Bāhlikas (the Balks), Kirātas (hill-tribes), Bhoṭas (Tibetans), Hūṇas (people from Jungara), Sakas (Scythians), Pārasikas (from Persia), Airakas (from Iraq), Yavanas (from the Hellenic orient), Maidas (from Media) and Kambojas (from Cambodia) in this land-mass even during the early years of the dawn of Indian history. The **Rgveda** hymns repeatedly refer to the composite character of the society, and to the pluratistic population, nearly ten thousand years ago.

The history of India reveals that from very early times racial and social amalgamations in varying degrees have occurred. Risley's account of racial characteristics of the Indian population provides an interesting aspect of the composite nature of our people:

Turko-Iranian (the frontier provinces);
Indo-Aryan (Punjab, Kashmir, Rajasthan);
Scytho-Dravidian (Madhya Pradesh, Saurashtra, Coorg);
Aryo-Dravidian (Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar);
Mongolo-Dravidian (Bengal, Orissa);
Mongoloid (Nepal, Assam, Himalayan Regions);
Dravidian (South India, Madhya Pradesh, Chota Nagpur);
Negrito (Kadars and Mala-pantarans of Kerala);
Proto-Australoid (tribes).

About 500 years before the birth of Christ, the Persians, Greeks and Sakas (Scythians) came to India. In the early centuries, before the present era, the nomadic Kushāṇas from Central Asia arrived here. By about the first century, the Spanish Jews landed on the Malabar Coast and since then an ancient Jewish pocket has survived in the extreme South. In the fifth century, the wild Huns, in the eighth the Arabs, and in the sixteenth the Mughals invaded India; they came, conquered and settled down. By about this time, the Portugese made Goa their home, the Mongoloid Shans had come into Assam, and the Mongolians had begun to inhabit the mountainous tracts of the North.

This continuous influx of outside people has rendered Indian culture not only complex but colourful. Incidental to admixtures, amalgamations and assimilations of people, the varṇa-classification of the society (the so-called caste system) came into being, and has survived to this day. The process of amalgamation and assimilation can be seen even now : the Bhils, the Bañjāras, the

Gonḍs, the Baigas, the Korku, the Manipuris and the Toḍas are seen entering into the mainstream. Whatever, the role of the four classical varṇas (brāhmaṇa, kshatriya, vaiśya and śūdra), there are at present about three thousand castes in India (2,378 of them were enumerated as early as 1901), making little compromises as units in the social fabric. But, all of them come within the orbit of Indian culture.

2

Varṇa no doubt became an important detail in the country's culture. And the general guidelines for the conduct of the social classes were attempted to be provided by dharma-śāstra manuals. These manuals dealt not only with the caste system, (varṇa) arrangement of stages in individual life (āśrama), the rites of admission into a class or stage (samskāra) but also about marriage regulations, food taboos, duties of royalty, civil and criminal laws, punishments and expiations. It is wrong to imagine that these dharma-śāstras were either uniform or mandatory. No single author of a dharma-śāstra ever claimed to be an undisputed law-giver; and no dharma-śāstra (there are in fact several of them) has ever been binding or universally accepted. They are little more than chronicles, but they are attempts to define the culture that was ideally suited to the people.

The early dharma-śāstras (of Gautama), Āpastamba and Baudhāyana) date back to about 500 years before the birth of Christ, and they came to be expositions of dharma as visualized

in the Vedic corpus in the distant past (about ten thousand years ago). Now, dharma is the core-concept of Indian culture. The word was used in dharma-sāstras in the sense of duty, obligation, responsibility, ordinance. Derived from the root 'dhṛ', which means "to uphold", "to bear", "to nourish", the word signifies whatever supports the universal order and also the individual life in society. Such support was not arbitrary, casual or capricious, but immutable (dhruveṇa dharmaṇā) and time-honoured (sanāta dharmāṇi). The ordinances detailed in the dharma-sāstras were meant to protect this dharma (dharmasya goptā).

The dharma-sāstra corpus was not only an attempt to ideologically organize the society that was in fact multiple and complex in character into manageable classes, but to focuss on the concept of dharma as the basic value in life as well as in transactions (social, religious, secular and vocational). Its significance and relevance consists only in this, and not in the prescriptions it contained, which were never universally approved or accepted. The operative dharma that the dharma-sāstras expounded was obviously an extension of the dharma that the Veda propounded. It should be borne in mind that Vedic scripture was not the sole authority for the dharma-sāstras. Our medieval law-giver Manu makes a remarkable statement : "The proper conduct must never be decided entirely on scriptural injunctions. If there is absence of reasoning in such matters, the dharma would surely be endangered."

केवलं शास्त्रमाश्रित्य न कर्तव्यो विनिश्चयः ।
युक्तिहीनविचारे तु धर्महानिः प्रजायते ॥

That is to say, the dharma-sāstras depend more on reason than on intuition which forms the foundation for the scripture, (*viz.*, Veda), and therefore, they are liable to be improved upon, to be amended, to be discarded or ignored. But, scripture is the source of dharma, not the normative or socially relevant dharma, but dharma as the very law of life. **Chāndogya-upanishad** (2, 23) describes the duties in the three stages of life as “offshoots or branches of dharma” (‘trayo dharma-skandhā’) : totality of obligations and privileges of a householder, hermit and student. More specifically, the dharma-sāstras deal with varṇāśrama-dharma with reference to conduct and custom (āchāra). In fact, the manuals themselves (like **Smṛti-muktā-kalāpa**) say that custom has a greater hold on people than prescriptions and injunctions, and customs derive from the area where one lives (deśāchāra) and on the family in which one is born (kulāchāra). The conduct of the elders, *viz.*, the superior members of the community or society, must provide role-models (sishtāchāra).

This dharma must also be in the background of the three other normal human purposes : acquisition of wealth (artha), enjoyment of pleasures (kāma) and liberation from worldly ills (moksha). The four objectives of life are together termed ‘purushārtha’ which expression literally signifies whatever is sought after by human beings (‘purushaiḥ arthyate iti’). It may be noted that these objectives are common to all people, whatever the class (varṇa) or

stage of life (āśrama); and hence called 'purushārthas', and not 'brāhmaṇārtha' and so on, nor 'gr̥hasthārtha' and so on. The concept of 'purushārtha' is of universal import, even as the very idea of dharma (sāmānya-dharma) is.

The dharma that gets included in the 'purushārtha' group is characterized by common human values like truth, generosity, compassion, sympathy, self-restraint, forgiveness, non-enmity, friendliness, absence of envy and rectitude in conduct. The manuals even provide a simple prescription : "Attend to this, the essence of dharma : do not do to others what you would not do to yourself" (Devala). The epic **Mahābhārata** counsels : "Put yourself in the position of others ('ātmaupamyena') and then act. This in brief is dharma" (Anuśāsanaparva, 113, 8, 9). Dharma is, in other words, the inner light of clear conscience, mindful of the welfare of all, and minimizing ego-involvement and selfishness in institutional behaviour.

Further, the purushārthas originally, primarily, and universally are only three : wealth (artha) and pleasures (kāma), guided and restrained by the dharma. They form one group; hence, called 'tri-varga', by Gautama and Manu (2, 224). Liberation from phenomenal ills (moksha) is entirely optional, and outside the group of three (hence called 'apavarga'). It is not included among the normal human aspirations, and not confined to a varṇa or an āśrama. In fact, one who opts for this so-called supreme objective of life is outside society and beyond the stages of life (atyāśrami); his conduct does not fall within the scope of dharma-sāstras. **Mahā**

bhārata (*ibid*, 3, 18-19) speaks only of the three (tritaya) as “effects in life” (jīvite phalam).

3

The foundational dharma (the primary purushārtha) is closely linked with the idea of original human indebtedness (ṛṇa) or inescapable obligation. The expression ‘ṛṇa’ (according to Pāṇini, the past participle form of ‘ṛ’, “to go”) signifies something lacking, some deficiency. A human being has debts, even when he is born. **Taittirīya-samhitā** (6, 3, 10, 5) speaks of three them as basic (jāyamāno vai...tribhir ṛṇavā jāyate’) : the debt that one owes to the ancestors (pitṛ), the debt that one owes to the sages (ṛshi), and the debt that one owes to the gods (deva, “the shining ones”). The text also suggests that by study and understanding of the cultural context in which he is born, one discharges the debt to the sages, that by continuing the family line by having children of his own, one discharges the debt to the ancestors, and that by honouring, worshipping the elemental and environmental forces like air, water, sky, earth, rivers, mountains, plants, etc., (which in fact are the ‘luminous ones’, the devas in **R̥gveda**), one discharges the debt to the gods. **Satapatha-brāhmaṇa** (1, 7, 2, 1-6) adds a fourth indebtedness, the debt that one owes to the fellow-beings, hospitality, and says : “The man who does all this has done all that needs to be done. He has achieved everything, conquered everything.”

The concept of indebtedness (ṛṇa), is in fact the source of dharma, which shifts the focus from desire-gratification to duty-fulfilment. The dharma-sāstrās insist that the fulfilment of these obligations must be the first aim of the human being; that makes his life meaningful and worthwhile. Manu, the lawgiver, even goes to the extent of prohibiting one from seeking the supreme value of life, (*viz.*, moksha), until he has discharged the three obligations enumerated above; the risk would be “falling headlong downward” (6, 35). It is in this sense that art, austerity, penance, creativity and entertainment are considered “surplus” or “extra” (uchchhisṭa), in **Atharva-veda**. They become valid and relevant, only when the debts are discharged, or as forms of discharging the debts.

It is well-known that in India sculpture, painting, music, dance and drama are regarded as religious activities, and are directly or indirectly linked to the acts of worship. The artist by his creativity seeks to discharge his debt to the ancestral sages, who have brought into being the cultural context in which a whole group of people lives. The traditional artisan and craftsman considers his work as a discharge of the debt that he owes to his ancestors (pitṛ-ṛṇa). Public service (building temples, constructing dams, laying out gardens, excavating tanks and wells, etc.,) is towards a debt one owes to his fellow-beings. Even poets and philosophers when they composed their literary works, concluded by invoking the welfare of all the people (‘sarveshām svasti bhavatu’). Any creative activity is an act of merit (punya), by the power of which the good of all is secured.

The fulfilment of the three purposes of life (dharma, artha and k̄ama) acquires meaning only in the context of felt obligations; otherwise, the human being remains only a creature of animal instincts and passions. The humanness itself is a surplus (uchchishṭa), in the language of Atharva-veda. Man is not only an animal, but he is more than an animal : he can reach towards the divine. Indian culture insists that he must reach towards the divine. We find in **Rgveda** (8, 1, 6) an admonition : “Man, you must reach upwards, and not go down below!”

उद्यानं ते पुरुष नावयानम् ॥

4

The Vedic corpus (especially the **Rgveda**) is sometimes regarded as the source of Indian culture. Even if it does not mark the beginning of culture in this country (for the **Rgveda** itself represents a mature stage of an already existing culture), it has doubtless contributed light and nourishment to Indian culture. Much of what is significant and magnificent in Indian culture can be said to have flowered out of this ancient pool of wisdom that the word ‘veda’ really means. The cultural elements of our present day life in India appear to be continuation from the Vedic times. Much of our present has its background in that distant past. Ours is the only ancient culture in the world that has survived uninterrupted till our own day. Religions, philosophy, subjects of traditional study, art, architecture, literature, mythology and values of life have all stemmed out directly from the **Rgveda-samhitā**.

However, the ancient and ritual-oriented votaries of the Vedic corpus, the Mīmāṃsakas insist that the only significance of the Vedic corpus consists in its definition and crystallization of the idea of dharma ('dharmo vedārthah'). This is correct when the word is taken in its original, general and etymologically valid sense, but it would be an error if it is taken to mean ritualistic prescriptions, as the Mīmāṃsakas are generally inclined to take. When the expression 'dharma' occurs in **R̥gveda**, it is always in the sense of what is right, what is capable of supporting, what is immutable, and what is pervasive. It is synonymous with 'ṛta', the word for cosmic law and order. Like 'dharma', 'ṛta', signifies a course, an orderly occurrence.

The **R̥gveda** looks upon the human being as the child of the sky and the earth (dyāvāpṛthivī), the sky is the father and earth the mother. He is related to all creatures on earth by his source, constitution and character. If he chooses to be selfish and indifferent to others around him, what he eats will only be sin ('kevalāgho bhavati kevalādī'). **R̥gveda-samhitā** (10, 191, 4) concludes very significantly enough :

समानी व आकूतिः समाना हृदयानि वः ।
समानमस्तु वो मनो यथा वः सुसहा सति ॥

"May our resolutions be the same, may our hearts be united, may our minds think alike, so that we may all live here well and together!"

In fact, what the **R̥gveda** tells us is relevant to all mankind and for all times. There is nothing that is partisan or parochial in it. It is this universal appeal that has made Indian culture open, broad-based and all-inclusive. The dharma that is espoused by **R̥gveda** is meant to contribute to common human order and universal welfare. The frequent prayer is for the welfare of all bipeds, (*viz.*, human beings) and all quadrupeds, (*viz.*, animals) (sam dvipade = sam chatushpade’).

R̥gveda uses the word ‘addhā’ (meaning “truly”, “verily”, “in this way”) as a synonym of ‘right’, ‘correct’, (*e.g.*, 10, 117, 1; 10, 129, 6; 10, 85, 16). The word, derived from the root ‘at’ signifies both right conduct (gamanam) and correct knowledge (jñānam). **Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa** (10, 3, 5, 13) makes ‘addhā-vidyā’ the knowledge of the truth hidden in the heart of every one. **Aitareya-brāhmaṇa** (7, 91), **Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa** (6, 3, 1, 24; 6, 3, 3, 4; 6, 4, 4, 4 and 6, 4, 4, 14) and **Kātyāyana-śrauta-sūtra** (16, 2, 14) employ the expression ‘anaddhā-purusha’ for the man characterized by the absence of ‘addhā’. The expression is significant. It refers to someone who lives-in-vain, someone who is good for nothing, man without purpose or personality. More particularly, it represents the individual who is selfish, self-centered. He lives only for wealth (artha) and pleasures (kāma), with no thought of the composite character of ‘trivarga’ (inclusive of dharma). He has no notion of his indebtedness (ṛṇa), which is three-fold (*Taittīriya-samhitā* 6, 3, 10, 5) or four-fold (**Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa** 1, 7, 2, 1-6); and therefore, he has no sense of duty or obligation. In **Aitareya-brāhmaṇa** (7, 91; 32, 8), we read :

"Who is this anaddhā-purusha? One who has no regard for the gods above (na devān), no concern for his own ancestors (na pitṛīn), and no interest in his fellow-beings (na manushyān iti)".

In other words, such a one is not a real man, a true man (anaddhā), but only a man in appearance (a facsimile or Ersaltz-man); he is empty and inactive.

The purpose of culture is to transform the animal-man into a human-man. The Indian word for this transformation is 'samskāra' (literally meaning "making well", "rendering wholesome"). This process involves removal of defects that are there (doshāpanayana) and infusion of merit that is not there (guṇāntaropajanana). Man is born an animal, filled with instincts and natural predispositions,. He is selfish, and unconcerned with the surrounding. He is indifferent to family and averse to society. If he grows up with these defects, he becomes an 'anaddhā-purusha', incapable of contributing to the welfare of others around him. The purpose of education (called in the text 'addhā-vidyā') is to eliminate these natural defects, and to transform the natural person as one who is useful to himself and to the society.

Included in the 'addhā-vidyā' (the right education, the correct knowledge, the proper understanding) is knowledge concerning the self, the spirit that is independent of the psychophysical structure that we call the body and the matter. This Vedic wisdom of the one reality which is all important (ekam sat), manifesting itself in all forms of the phenomena, recognized by many names

and functions, and hidden in the heart-caverns of all beings, finds its crystallization in the Upanishads which are collectively designated as 'brahmā-vidyā', (brahman or ātman standing for the one real, 'ekam sat'). All the different philosophical systems in the country are rooted in the Upanishadic lore. Kumārila-bhaṭṭa (about 600 A.D.) rightly points out that even the so-called heterodox Buddhism and Jainism are derived only from the Upanishadic source (**Tantra-vārtika**) :

विज्ञानमात्र क्षणभङ्ग नैरात्म्यादि वादानामपि
उपनिषद् प्रभवत्वं, विषयेषु आत्यन्तिकं रागं
निवर्तयितुमित्युपपन्नं सर्वेषां प्रामाण्यम् ॥

The purpose of all philosophical systems and religious approaches, according to Kumārila-bhaṭṭa, is to help withdraw man's passionate interest in worldly objects and affairs, and to this extent, he points out, all the philosophical systems and religious approaches are valid and authentic.

Here we have a clue to the spiritual orientation of Indian culture, and its reverent and tolerant attitude to other cultures. Ashoka (272-132 B.C.), the first emperor of all India, spoke of man's indebtedness (ṛṇa) to parents and elders, and called upon people to live in accordance with the principles of dharma (or ancient usage), and not interfering with the natural order (ṛta). In one of his edicts, he points out that the practice of dharma is not possible for a person devoid of good conduct. In an other edict, he proclaims that religion consists in achieving self-control and purity of thought.

“However, even if a person practices great liberality, but does not possess self-control (sayamabhāva), purity of thought (śudhi), gratitude (kitranatā) and firm devotion (drīḍhabhatita), he is quite worthless.” With Ashoka, the word ‘dharma’ is synonymous with culture; it is the same as the sāmānya-dharma of the dharma-śāstras. It has been the enduring paradigm of Indian culture.

The two great epics of the country, **Rāmāyaṇa** and **Māhabhārata** are primarily meant to emphasize the role of dharma in individual life as well as collective existence. Vālmīki describes Rāma again and again as the very embodiment of dharma:

रामो विग्रहवान् धर्मः ॥

The entire story of the epic illustrates the need to subordinate artha and kāma to dharma. And this is how the epic-poem provides the role-model for all classical literature in the country, and it is rightly regarded as the mirror of Indian culture. The other epic contains a detailed disquisition on dharma in theory and in practice; it dilates on the challenges that dharma faces from artha and kāma in personal and public life, and how real dharma is sabotaged by surrogates and counterfeits.

The most popular and exquisite philosophical poem, **Bhagavad-gītā**, which technically forms part of the great epic, **Mahābhārata**, deals, according to Samkara (632-664), with dharma as explained in the Vedic corpus (vedokto dharmah), especially in its twin aspects of approaches and aversions (pravṛtti-

nivṛtti). This text emphasizes the quality of living in the transactional world, based on the main plank of spirituality. The spirit of man lifts itself above the cares and worries, agitations and anxieties, temptations and uncertainties of life, and soars high, only when it relies on 'the beyond' (sāmparāya), and recognizes the spirit abiding within the heart of every being. This faith in the Supreme Spirit, called by whatever name and visualized in whatever form, is the most important and enduring detail of Indian culture.

There is in the country a revised version of the Vedic tradition from the middle ages, which positions itself on the theme of dharma in specific relation to man's approach to the 'beyond', mentioned above. This is what is known as Āgama, especially concerned with worship in temples, procedures of icon-making and temple-building, religious observances and practices, yoga, mantra and tantra. It deals with man's relationship with 'the beyond', and has many branches: Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Buddhist, Jaina and Śākta. The Māhayāna division may indeed be regarded as derived from the Āgama orientation. It is this popular version of the Vedic tradition that has prevailed in the country for over a thousand years now.

And this has contributed significantly to the Indian culture in the recent past. Art, literature, drama, architecture, entertainment, sport and folklore are all directly derived from this Āgama tradition. The Āgama ideology it is that has given a syncretic flavour to Indian culture. It has also inspired numerous Siddhas, adepts and saints, who have lived and moved with the

masses, trying to turn of the attention of the common man to 'the beyond', to the ever living presence of the Supreme Spirit. Any chronicle of Indian culture cannot forget the significant contribution of these medieval saints, many of whom have been bards, poets, minstrels and magic-workers in the countryside. They have rendered Indian culture rich in variety, broad in appeal, pervasive among the people and composite in character. There is still a large number of these saints, working among the people, in all parts of the country. They are in fact keeping Indian culture alive and intact.

It is to be remembered that in India there never was any central agency or organization to diffuse cultural values among the people. This was always done at the grass-root level by saints and bards, many of them exotic and outlandish, itinerant and unassuming. Right from the Vedic times there were the Vrātyas who were the forerunners of the siddhas, yogis and yatis. They were, according to Patānjali, of different castes (nānā-jātiya), of uncertain vocations (aniyata-vṛttayah), and given to dangerous living (utsedha-jīvinah). They were regarded as 'fallen' from Vedic orthodox ('sāvitrīpatitāh', 'veda-vrata-chyutāh'), but highly revered both by the elite and the populace. Indeed, such non-conforming but extraordinarily eminent savants have been the living torch-bearers of Indian culture.

Let me conclude by recalling a verse from **Bhāgavata** (which incidentally extols such exotic saints), where culture is described as the primordial tree (ādi-vṛksha), which has but one direction

(ekāyana), but two fruits (dvi-phala), three roots (tri-mūla) and four flavours (chatūrasa).

The one direction refers to prosperity (abhyudaya), which is both material and spiritual (nihsreyasa). The two fruits are pleasures (sukha) and pain (duhkha). The former is characterized by approach tendencies (pravṛtti, iṣṭa-prāpti), while the latter involves withdrawal or aversion (nivṛtti, aniṣṭa-nivṛtti). The three roots represent the three-fold indebtedness (to the gods, to the ancestors and to the sages, ṛṇa), to discharge which is the primary purpose of life. It is therefore, that they are described as 'roots'. The four flavours are the four objectives of living (the puruṣārthas : wealth, pleasures, the sense of obligation and restraint, and liberation from phenomenal ills).

Such is the great tree under which we have lived for thousands of years, generation after generation, and day after day. There have been attempts from the outside to mutilate this tree, uproot it; and there have been diseases from within, threatening to make the tree dry up and die. But, this is the tree of life, with an uncanny power to renew itself and remain for ever. It helps us move from falsehood to truth, from darkness to light, and from death to undying life.

असतो मा सद् गमय ।

तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय ।

मृत्योर्मा अमृतं गमय ॥